Kiss First and Pray You Live

by AppleGrenade

Summary

Their first time. Slow burn ahoy.

Notes

Disclaimer: I don’t own The Lone Ranger. I don’t own anything, not even my tenuous grasp of reality.
Chapter 1

By the time the 1930’s rolled by Tonto the wise, noble savage had become such a skilled storyteller he once successfully convinced an entire town that his crow was still alive and required their constant feeding.

It was a small town, quite removed from civilisation in general and the train lines in particular, but still.

In fact, if Tonto’s tales were to be believed, he once escaped from being marooned on a deserted island by roping himself a couple of sea turtles using nothing but the hair from his back, lashed them together and made a raft.

It wasn’t that he was a liar, or that he was fond of scattering embellishments the way he scattered birdseeds. More often than not, he was simply not able to distinguish between what actually took place and what took place only in his head. This wasn’t always the case; broken mind notwithstanding, he was blessed with enough sense not to scar his listeners for life, especially the young ones. Case in point, when he recounted a seventy-year old tale on the birth of The Lone Ranger to a boy, telling him that adventuring with Dan Reid as opposed to his younger brother would’ve been much easier, or that he would’ve preferred someone else to ride with him for justice.

Not the part where he called John Reid a halfwit wet brain in front of the noble spirit horse, though. No, no; that was a sentiment he held true. Having the older Reid as The Lone Ranger? Sure, it would be less complicated. Him preferring someone else for a companion?

Not so much.

John Reid was a fool. A non-violent, righteous, obliging fool.

And for over half a century - Tonto often fondly recalled - that masked lawman was his fool.

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Since John started riding with Tonto dispensing justice where the law fell short, he had been shot at, punched, fell off trains, pistol-whipped, nearly executed by hanging, thrown off horses, nearly executed by firing squad, dragged through mud, shot at some more and generally all the things he wasn’t supposed to go through as a respectable County Prosecutor had the Sun risen on the correct horizon the day he returned home to Colby which would mean no Butch Cavendish, no dead Dan, no magic horses, and no Tonto.

Of all the aforesaid experiences, by far the worst of them was getting his shoulder punctured by an Indian arrow. He knew he screamed like a girl the first time that happened but truly, whoever it was who designed arrowheads must’ve known that that exact shape, made out of that exact material, shot at that exact velocity would hurt its target so agonisingly, he could die twice over and still suffer the excruciating pain.

John Reid was a Spirit Walker. He ‘cannot be killed’. That’s not the same thing as ‘cannot get hurt’.

This was why right then he had to grit his teeth and bit his lips: to keep himself from screaming as another of those blasted Flying Metal Projectiles of Death and Malice ended up buried into his right thigh. He twisted in his saddle as Silver continued to gallop away, fired his gun once and disarmed the archer (a Comanche scout in the employ of a corrupt rancher), trusting that Tonto would take it
He still can’t pronounce the word, just knew that it had a heartbreaking lilt to it instead of a wrathful twang. ‘Betrayer’, Tonto had translated for him, but more accurately ‘he who had forgotten the love of his people’. It’s a terrible feeling, whenever he had to leave Tonto to deal with one of them - an ally turned enemy, once a brother but no more. As it is, the Indian population was dwindling at an alarming rate due to innumerable massacres and exploitations. To encounter one (or ten, or twenty) of his own riding for the other side must’ve been devastating for his faithful friend.

John could certainly relate.

Silver slowing down to an amble did nothing to ease the throb in his leg and he had to grip the reins tightly for fear of falling. His vision swam in the sweltering noon; even the blood dripping down his trousers felt like it was scalding his skin. He steadied himself as another jolt of pain assaulted his body and he could feel himself weaken. He urged Silver to renew its stride, glad when they finally reached his and Tonto’s current shelter. It was a hollow on the side of a canyon wall with a river running close by; simply arriving at the entrance to the cavern and getting out of the punishing heat took the edge off the sharp ache.

Or perhaps he was mistaken. Perhaps it was not that the pain was eased so much as he was losing consciousness. Because firstly, he didn’t get off Silver, rather, fell of it. Secondly, his vision was decorated with bright sparks in shades he didn’t know existed. Thirdly, he couldn’t command his fingers to either pull out the arrow still buried in his limb or untie the bandana around his neck to knot it around his thigh to stem the blood flow. The thigh that had started to grow numb.

It should alarm him, that the numbness had started spreading to his knee, then the rest of that leg, then the rest of the right side of his body. It should alarm him, except forming thoughts became increasingly difficult by each passing second.

*Tonto,* was all he could manage before the dazzling flashes converged into a brilliant, overwhelming nothingness.

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In the stories he’d relate to his captivated audience, Tonto was fearless. Nothing fazed him - not Wendigo, not White Man’s gun, nothing.

(Except for cats, but that fear was absolutely reasonable and legitimate.)

As for the great weight that slammed into his gut the moment he caught sight of the fallen scout’s quiver, specifically the arrows housed in the said quiver, more specifically the substance the arrowheads were smeared with?

It wasn’t fear. It was… It was…

“Kemosabe!”

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TBC
“Wake up, John.” The voice was as soft as spring breeze, as indomitable as a whirlwind. “Wake up. It’s not your time.” A gentle hand dabbed at his face with a damp cloth - wiping away the dirt from his skin, the guilt from his conscience.

“Look at you, city boy. Why would you ever wanna come back?” No, take away the question mark at the end. It was not a question; it was a statement. One that was said warily, almost admonishingly, like he should know better.

He didn’t.

He should, but he didn’t - which was unfortunate because nine years was a long time to nurse a broken heart, a long time to harbour remorse for coveting his own brother’s wife.

Oh, who was he fooling? He did know better. It was just that he ran out of ways to try and forget. He ran out of places to which he could flee, and coming back to Colby - coming home - was his last-ditch effort to force himself to move on, to start over.

So here he was, somewhere surrounded by a whole lot of nothing as far as the eye could see. Even after Dan died and they both accepted that fact. Even after Rebecca had said “not today” as they galloped away from Latham Cole’s doomed train. Even after she had stood there during the ceremony in her beautiful dress, looking up at him with eyes full of promises and dark lips uttering words laden with invitations.

John Reid was moving on. John Reid was starting over. Tonto was a convenient excuse. The pursuit of justice was a justifiable justification. Over these past months, he had grown exceedingly fond of both.

Anyway, he once insisted to Tonto that it just wasn’t done.

That wasn’t the only thing that just wasn’t done. Something’s wrong. Something was… off.

It was wet, warm, and callused, and it was clamped at the skin of his upper thigh. Then a strange feeling followed, one with which he was distressingly unfamiliar. It felt like suction. It felt ticklish. It felt like something awkward wrapped around something discomfiting wrapped around something flustering.

Whatever was happening to him, it wasn’t right. It was quite far from being right.

Then all of a sudden there was pressure which quickly grew intense, and John wished dearly for the ability to scream because there couldn’t possibly be another way to cope with the incredible barrage of pain that had started to ravage his person.

“Stay still, Kemosabe.”

“Tonto…?” That wasn’t Rebecca, because Rebecca had said that he was not the ‘wrong brother’ so it couldn’t be her because she wouldn’t call him-

“Hold on. Must rid you of evil.”
Evil? And there it was again: the wet, warm, callused thing pressed to his right thigh where he had been pierced by-

“Oh! Oh, Tonto it hurts!” John didn’t know his voice could ever sound that hoarse, that frail.

“Just a moment longer, Kemosabe. Bear with it a moment longer.”

John wanted to struggle, wanted to bash his head against a rock so he could be knocked unconscious. Something was holding his body down that prevented both - Tonto’s arms.

Slowly - excruciatingly - John regained consciousness and his vision swam into blurred focus. He was sitting up against the cave’s damp wall. His suit jacket, waistcoat and shirt had been unbuttoned and pushed off his shoulders to pool haphazardly around his waist, still cuff’d at his wrists. And his trousers were… somewhere… not exactly on him.

There was also the oddest sensation blanketing him, an unfamiliar mix of intolerable pain and intolerable…

“Tonto?” The Indian was bent over his right leg. His right thigh. His lips hovered close above John’s skin, a viscous trail of something blacker than sin marred a chin covered in white face paint.

“Tonto, what are you doing?”

“Getting venom out, Kemosabe.” Tonto spat something away from them, then took a large gulp from his waterskin, gargled, then spit that away too.

John was delirious. He was hot, he was sticky, he was aching everywhere. “Why is my shirt off?”

“Need to see how far venom spread.” Tonto’s mouth was once again clamped to his thigh. There was that suction again. John could not hold back a tortured whimper - Tonto’s lips burned painfully against his skin.

“Why are my trousers gone?”

Spit. Gargle. Spit. “I pulled them off. Need to get to your wound.”

“OH.” There was that odd sensation again. That unfamiliar mix of intolerable pain and intolerable… Something.

Tonto ran his fingers over the wound. John flinched, but was too weak to muster anything more.

“Am I dying, Tonto?”

The human and the dead crow’s faces turned up sharply towards him, haunted eyes adorned both. “Not today.”

“Feels like it.” John rasped, his throat clogged with equal parts sand and sadness.

“You’re not.”

“Why are you so sure?”

Tonto turned away from him to reach for something. John couldn’t tell what it was, his parfleche probably. “Because I won’t let you.”

I believe you, John may or may not have whispered before his world was drenched in nothingness
once more.

The hollow was unnervingly silent.

After he had applied some salve to the wound and bandaged it up, Tonto had poured a healing potion down John Reid’s throat. Then he pulled his clothes back on (he would insist on describing the process as ‘yanking’ and ‘wrenching’). He laid down the quivering body towards the back of the cave before bundling it in some blankets. Afterwards, he situated himself at the hollow’s entrance – still close enough to be able to pay attention to the Ranger’s condition but far away enough that he was prevented from endlessly fussing over him.

*John Reid was a Spirit Walker - he cannot be killed,* Tonto repeated every time he caught himself checking up on his companion (which was every time he groaned or a trembling fit racked his body).

When the sun went down, Tonto started a fire near the unconscious form. He then applied more salve to the wound and re-bandaged the injured limb. After force-feeding him more of the healing potion and some water, Tonto bundled him up in all the blankets they had in their packs.

When he returned to his position at the hollow’s mouth, he made himself swear to keep it together and just leave the Ranger be. It was easier this time around: the constant shivering had subsided. But sitting still wasn’t serving Tonto well at all – the day’s events kept replaying in his mind on loop and he ended up too strung out. So he decided to keep busy by getting Silver and Scout watered and fed (even though the horses normally go for it themselves), sharpening his knives (even though they were still razor-like from being whetted the night before), inventorying their food supply (even though he knew they had more than enough stored for a week) and just generally avoiding glancing at his resting comrade.

John Reid would never know it, but Tonto was a mess.

It took a while, but Tonto finally managed to stop fidgeting. Lying down on the other side of the fire, he turned his face to the right, towards the mouth of their shelter. It was long past midnight - he could see the Comanche moon hovering silver-bright in the cloudless sky. The horses sat by the entrance, doing what horses do when resting after a long day of serving justice.

Then he turned to the left, where his companion laid still.

Too still? Forgetting his earlier oath, Tonto got up to check on the Ranger. He hesitated before sitting down beside the prone form; his fingers went to smooth out the tangled brown hair instead of palming his forehead to gauge his temperature as per his original intention.

When John Reid stirred all of a sudden, Tonto immediately pulled his fingers back and scurried away. He didn’t get too far; the body went still again.

Tonto nearly laughed at the absurdity of it all. He was not doing anything wrong! John Reid’s skin was sallow even in the warm glow of the fire - that was cause for worry. For hours he had been tossing and turning, his breathing shallow and laboured. Now he was motionless - what if he’d suffocated? What if Tonto didn’t get all the poison out? What if he’d made the wrong remedy, what if he misremembered the recipe? What if his companion wasn’t asleep, what if he was-

A scowl, a growl, and a heavy slap to his own face brought that line of thought to a screeching halt.

Tonto cautiously scooted back towards John Reid; this time, he did place his hand over the man’s forehead. The skin there was clammy and warm but not so much so as to be running a high fever. He
grabbed a cloth from his parfleche and wetted it with the water from his waterskin, pressing the damp material over the Ranger’s face and neck. When the cloth dried, he repeated the process (because Tonto wanted to bring down his temperature). He did so eight times (because Tonto couldn’t stop touching him).

To cool down his body further Tonto poured water onto the crown of his head, rinsing off some of the sweat and dust that was matting his hair in the process. There was no blood this time. Tonto’s fingers traced a scar that extended across his left temple from his hairline all the way to his eyebrow. That had been from four moons ago. That time, there was blood, plenty of them.

John Reid would never know it, but Tonto was a mess then too.

“Tonto,” the whisper was so quiet that the Indian almost missed it. Tonto schooled his face into his usual expression as the Ranger’s eyelids struggled to open.

“Go back to sleep, Kemosabe. You rest.”

“Water. Please.” Tonto immediately brought his waterskin’s mouth to rest against cracked lips, tilting it at a mild angle so that the liquid would trickle gently. The gesture turned pointless as John Reid gulped down like the Noble Spirit Horse gulped down bottles of Red’s Whiskey.

“Slow down. You choke.” Right on cue, he coughed and spluttered. Tonto let go of the waterskin - contents sloshing - in favour of supporting his head and stroking his back until he stopped gasping for air. When John Reid’s breathing became regular again, Tonto laid him back down and pulled the blankets snugly around him.

“Sleep, Kemosabe. Will feel better.”

“Thank you,” John Reid’s eyes fluttered shut before Tonto could respond. He ended up staying put for the rest of the night.

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John didn’t dream of Rebecca, or Dan, or Butch Cavendish, or the hundred other images that would normally torment him in his slumber. Instead, he dreamt of big, black wings.

It was the strangest thing. Enormous, its feathers were so shiny that each quill had slivers of rainbow reflected on it. He was completely enveloped in their folds - the plumes were brushing his skin, fondling him, his face, his hair, his everywhere.

It hurt. That discomfited him.

John would have squirmed except he found it was impossible to move any part of his body. Whatever it was that’s hurting him right then, it was more agonising by about tenfold than that one time he was flung off a train rushing to its demise at 70 miles per hour.

The wings didn’t belong to a bird, however; John knew this because birds have beaks instead of lips. And this winged creature had lips instead of beaks; John knew this because he could feel them pressing on his skin, caressing him, his face, his hair, his everywhere.

It tickled. That discomfited him more.

Then those lips arrived at his injured thigh and they wasted no time working at his skin - scraping roughly at the edges of his wound, followed by a warm tongue licking erratic trails all over his limb.
“Stop.” The tongue didn’t, instead it morphed into blunt teeth nibbling at the juncture where his hip and thigh met. John’s discomfiture grew into full-scale distress.

“Stop. Please.” He didn’t mean for his voice to be void of command. He didn’t mean to plead. This time, he tried to wriggle away even though it felt like his limbs were manacled to a Jupiter locomotive laden with raw silver.

It was futile. The wings tightened around him and those lips descended onto his-

John’s eyes flew open, his body convulsed at the sudden onset of sensations pouring torrentially over him. There were sounds trying to escape his throat. Panic befell him as he noticed his limbs were constricted by something – the wings still got hold of him!

A warm palm was pushing against his chest, keeping him lying down. John struggled wildly to get up. “Don’t move,” another palm was placed against his shoulder, stilling him.

John knew that voice; he didn’t quite recognise the tone.

“Tonto-”

“Hush, Kemosabe,” said Tonto in a soothing tone. The second palm on his chest was rubbing at him gently, pacifyingly, until John felt his thundering heartbeat slowed down. “It was dream. You are safe.”

“Safe?”

“Yes.” The hand ceased stroking his chest. John immediately recognised that he didn’t want it to stop, but not why he felt that way.

“What time is it?”

“Very late. Or very early.”

_Oh, bird cannot tell time even with huge gold pocket-watches._ “How long have I been unconscious?”

“The sun came and went twice.”

_Has it been that long?_ “You’ve been here this whole time?”

“I keep you safe. Keep evil away.”

_How can you keep evil away when we keep going after it?_ “You should rest, Tonto.”

“You were restless. Called out names.”

_Not again._ “Well, lack of oxygen can cause the brain to hallucinate. Everyone knows that.” Then he started wheezing and coughing because yes that was indeed a ridiculously-long sentence for someone in his current condition to articulate and why was he defending himself anyway he didn’t even know of what exactly was Tonto accusing him! The hand started rubbing at his chest afresh. John immediately recognised that he wanted it to stop, but not why he felt that way.

“Talk no more, Kemosabe. You still ill.”

“I’m fine,” John insisted. It wasn’t convincing - he couldn’t even move away from the palm that was stroking his torso. Tonto _was_ physically stronger, but he was no silk scarf. He boxed in law school!
“Stop, Tonto. I’m all right. I can breathe fine.” The hand stilled, John noted gratefully, but an unreadable expression gracing his Indian companion’s face caused a great weight to slam into his gut for some reason. He didn’t have long to contemplate his vacillating emotions; Tonto got up and walked away to where their packs lay but returned a quick moment later with a jar of something - a liquid in the vilest shade of green known to man.

“Drink this.” Tonto unscrewed the lid and pressed the container to his lips.

“What is that, Tonto?”

“Comanche healing potion. Help you sleep, get better.”

He sniffed suspiciously at the jar. “Comanche Comanche, or your Comanche?”

Another unreadable expression passed over Tonto’s features and he felt another great weight, this time slamming into his whole body. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.” He braved a sip of the concoction. It was viscous, thankfully tasteless, and cool on his tongue. After downing whatever number of gulps Tonto deemed was needed, the container was set aside. A roughened fingertip ghosted across his lips, catching the remnants of the sticky remedy there.

He did not blush. The hollow was just unnervingly warm.

“Sleep, Kemosabe.”

I really should. All right. He thought, not entirely sure if this whole exchange was not just another dream.

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The evening was hot and humid, like the sky was on fire or maybe it was the earth beneath him, and it made Tonto feel wilted and tired. He disliked heat. In fact, he hated heat. Anything that made him feel less alert irked him terribly. The very restlessness of it all agitated him.

It’s just his luck, then, to be stuck here so far down south where everything was either yellow or brown or grey or the other dismaying shades in between.

You would think he was used to it, having lived there most of his life. That is, until you recall that he was not born there, or grew up there, in the vast plains of stifling heat. His band prospered on the banks of a wide river that flowed swiftly from somewhere magical to somewhere he had yet been. The air was cool down where he used to live, with gentle breeze to soothe the ache of one’s burning soul.

Above the heat, he hated sleeplessness more. He hated that very much - it seemed like such a cruel joke to play on someone who needed sleep.

Four days had passed by with John Reid swimming in and out of consciousness. Four days during which he alternated between conversing lucidly (although his normally warm, brandy voice sounded like it came out of a sandpapered throat) and rambling incomprehensibly about lawyers, lawmen, and the merits of some Latin words with which Tonto had never made acquaintance (still in a voice that sounded like it came out of a sandpapered throat).

That was all fine. John Reid was recovering. It was ‘par for the course’ (Tonto had heard him spoke that expression before so he knew he was using it correctly). There was one thing that was decidedly not fine, however. That is, throughout all this, Tonto had to endure something he never thought he’d have to endure: the sight of John Reid lying on his back, squirming and writhing; the sounds John
Reid would make while in the Great Beyond, moaning and whimpering, sighing out names. Dead brother, Dead brother’s wife, Dead brother’s son, Not Wendigo with Pocket-Watch, Silver, Scout, Flesh-Eating Not Wendigo…

Tonto’s name did not come up.

He was not disappointed. He was not.

He turned on his side to face away from the sleeping Ranger.

Maybe he was, a little.

It had started as friendly concern - it really wasn’t possible to spend this much time together doing what the two of them do and not develop a bond, a fellowship. For Tonto, it developed into something else. Something John Reid would label as ‘inappropriate’. Something that ‘just wasn’t done’.

Over these past moons, Tonto had grown exceedingly fond of his companion.

Well, ‘exceedingly fond’ was one way to put it. He longed to lay a finger against John Reid’s eyebrows and trace the word ‘taabe’ across those lovely cheekbones. He needed to press the flat of his palm insistently into the small of John Reid’s back. He yearned to take the Ranger’s mud red bandana and bind his wrists together. He yearned to run his hands all over an exposed, glistening torso.

Wanting does not make his current state of wakefulness any better.

Tonto imagined his hands disappearing under his friend’s somehow immaculate shirt, caressing the dense muscles of his chest and deceptively curvy hips. John Reid was desirable, regardless of his effort to be anything else. One gets that sense, that he’d prefer respect to desire. He's so intellectual, so meticulous, so proper. He would straighten his hair when he thought no one was looking. His clothes too, somehow successfully working away the creases courtesy of whatever shelter Mother Earth was leasing them. Tonto found it ensnaring; fingers that move so deftly over a lapel can close over a trigger and disarm someone who’s standing on a moving train 200 yards away, all the while bouncing around on a horse.

It was a captivating memory, and Tonto couldn’t stop thinking about it. Which then brought into mind images of John Reid riding a horse. Which then brought the recollection of them escaping from Red’s brothel that first time, him riding the Noble Spirit Horse behind the masked lawman, and how now he wished that it was under a different circumstances altogether, something else way more enjoyable.

Tonto contemplated his newfound preoccupation with the Lone Ranger. He wasn’t sure he enjoyed it; John Reid was an annoyance, a halfwit, a wet brain. Certainly he was the fount from which freedom sprung, but he was John Reid. John Reid who insisted that Tonto believe in people’s best, who scrutinized him for partaking in life’s simple pleasures. John Reid, who never made sense with his remarks on Tonto's traditional practices (how can there be so much that the white men don’t know - they think the Earth is just a dead thing they can claim and they can’t even paint with all the colours of the wind) or dubious choices (why can’t the people ever just jump off the trains themselves?) or questionable strategies (never mind that they work perfectly absolutely all of the time).

Actually, John Reid was delightful. He’d make dry little comments that was difficult to catch unless you have read and committed to memory the writings of John Locke or Thomas Jefferson or any
number of thinkers whom he adored so much, writers who wrote about the proper way to govern men. Tonto secretly thought them interesting - these academic comments unheard of in these dusty outbacks were like pearls before pigs.

Sharp eyes and a sharp wit. An array of emotional nuances constantly laid bare across his face, blatant even when blatant was the worst course of action.

It was still strange to look at John Reid and notice his lower lip - peach-coloured, slightly-weathered, plump like grapes, shaped like a sliced apple. John was ‘faithful friend’, John was chivalrous. John wasn't his type.

Naturally Tonto couldn't possibly be attracted to beautiful, smart, honourable men.

He huffed a sigh, rolled over on the ground to lie flat on his back, crossed his arms behind his head and decided to ponder John Reid’s eyes. His eyes were kind, and always gentle, even when he was cocking his gun to make an impossible shot. His eyes twinkled when he smiled; his amusement was always genuine, his laughter mirthful.

Tonto could only think of one way to describe the colour of John Reid’s eyes. It was the same colour as the surface of the river of silver, with the deep, soothing green of century-old trees reflected thereon.

He could have lost himself in the rough blue waters of those orbs.

It was difficult not to think of him bending backwards with his face contorted in ecstasy, it was too easy to think of his eyes halfway closed and his head tilted, to imagine his chest expand and then contract with a sigh of pleasure.

Tonto wasn't sure he liked this preoccupation, but he wasn't putting a great deal of effort into making it go away.

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John dreamt of big, black wings again. Intense, overwhelming, consummate wings just devouring him inside and out, bringing him soaring over, sideways and under, until his world is turned upside-down.

He (thought he) stopped minding by the third episode.

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TBC

Chapter End Notes

Comanche as far as I can tell:
* Taabe = Sun
On the noon of the fifth day, Tonto reentered the hollow after collecting more firewood to keep them warm later that evening (if the Sun did not decide to roast the occupants of this rock as it attempted to do the night before, that is) only to be greeted by the sight of John Reid awake and struggling where he had been laid down.

“What are you doing, Kemosabe?”

The Ranger didn’t look up his way, seemingly caught up in his attempts to untangle his long limbs from the folds of blankets Tonto had wrapped him in. “Just trying to get up. Don’t worry about it.”

*Lucid, at last. Thank Big Father.* “I’m not, but you should not. Must keep still, body not yet healed.”

“It’s fine, Tonto. I’m not going far.” John Reid continued squirming; Tonto kept himself rooted where he was standing instead of pushing those shoulders to the ground to keep him lying down because that would mean Tonto would have to touch him and that would mean something else would happen or nothing would happen but Tonto’s reaction to whichever outcome would not be appropriate.

“Where is this place you are going that is not far?”

“Just outside. Right there.”

“Outside is such a vast place, Kemosabe. And ‘right there’ is, how you say, not at all specific.”

“Look, it’s the river all right? I’m going to the river to wash myself.” Before Tonto could voice an objection, the Ranger continued in a placating tone. “I’m sticky, covered in dirt… at the very least I have to shave my face.”

Tonto was disinclined to admit it, but if John Reid had widened his eyes just so, he would’ve yielded. The Ranger probably never did it intentionally; all the same, that had gotten him to acquiesce to his requests in the past.

Be assured that those make interesting stories, even if he would never narrate them.

“Stay.”

Before he could protest, Tonto had gotten up, grabbed their largest waterskin, and made his way towards the mouth of the cave. “Wait, where are you going?”

“If he try to get up, sit on him.” That was addressed to both Silver and Scout, who, to his satisfaction and from the looks of it John Reid’s complete chagrin, whinnied their agreement.

He returned with a brimming waterskin to find his companion watching Silver and Scout warily, the horses staring back at him insolently as if daring him to ‘go ahead, make their day’. At the baleful look directed his way, Tonto not only stopped himself from laughing at the ridiculous sight, he also turned a reproachful expression towards the horses who neighed in disgust at his treachery. *Can’t please them all,* Tonto shrugged inwardly. He set the container against the wall closest to where John Reid was lying down before reaching for their packs. It didn’t take a lot of rummaging for him to
uncover the leather pouch in which his friend kept his straight razor and shaving paraphernalia.

After the tumultuous week he’d had, some fun was more than due to him, Tonto reasoned (not that reason played any part in that decision-making process).

Having seen John Reid do this enough times (because Tonto spent an inordinate amount of time just… watching him do things), his hands were sure in its movements: wetting the badger-hair brush, churning the soap to form a lather at the exact consistency he knew his companion liked, but foregoing the ceramic hone and leather strop because the blade was still sharp enough. He then helped the Ranger sit up; judging by the grimace that marred the dear face, the Spirit Walker was most likely thankful he didn’t proceed with his plans to go to the river himself as it would’ve been even more torturous than that time he was thrown off a train while trying to prevent Butch Cavendish’s first escape.

Once he was upright and leaning against the cavern wall, the Comanche waited for his laboured breathing to ease before brushing the lather all over the hairs hiding the chiseled jaw and cheeks. Taking the straight razor by its polished-wood handle, he rotated the round-point blade out of its scales; the shank was marked with a stamp reading ‘Sheffield, England’. The article’s fine workmanship meant that it was a token of the Ranger’s previous life in the big city.

With his thumb on the side of the blade near the middle and the rest of his fingers secure on the tang and the jimps, he pressed the razor against one still pallid cheek and began moving in even, downward strokes, taking care to maintain a slight angle as he had seen John Reid do, his other hand palming the clammy skin to allow a taut surface. His favourite moment came when it was time to get the hairs on the Ranger’s upper lips; Tonto pulled himself nearer still, enjoying the close proximity between them disguised as a need to concentrate on his delicate task.

When all the whiskers have been shaved off, he cleaned the razor and put aside the shaving kit, then grabbed the washcloth John Reid kept in his satchel. He poured some of the contents of the waterskin onto the flannel, letting it soak through the roughened material, before bringing it up to his companion’s face. The Ranger must’ve realised what he was planning on doing and began protesting that he could clean himself up. Tonto placed the damp washcloth on one high cheekbone and started rubbing in small, circular motions, ignoring the objections and the uneasy look slowly making appearance across the Spirit Walker’s face.

After the accumulated dirt there had been rubbed clean leaving flushed skin in its place, Tonto rinsed the flannel and started on the other parts of John Reid’s face: his other cheek, the proud forehead, the dainty nose, one sculpted jaw then the other, and finally those lips - peach-coloured, slightly-weathered, plump like grapes, shaped like a sliced apple. Spurred by the same whispers that convinced him he could jump off one speeding train and land safely onto the silver-laden wagon of another, Tonto paused to press his index finger against the dampened skin. They parted oh-so-slightly in response, warm breath ghosting at his fingertip. The daylight from the hollow’s mouth was hitting John Reid’s face from an angle, illuminating the left side of his nose, casting a shadow against his cheek - in the dim cavern his eyes shone like pools of melted turquoise.

It’s not that Tonto was easily impressed, it’s not like this was the first time he had his face mere inches from that of his companion’s. And he had seen many a beautiful thing in his life: the Sun setting over Dead Horse Point, leaving behind fiery streaks of amber and Aztec Gold; exotic girls draped in exotic slinky silks swaying in an exotic seductive dance; a whole bison roasting on a spit… But this? This redefined breathtaking. This was what people meant when they say something looked divine.

John Reid looked divine.
It took more than a few moments for Tonto to realise that he’d stopped moving, just like the rest of his world had stopped moving. It was a while still before he remembered to pull back his finger. Somehow managing to put on a straight face, he scooped some water and rinsed off his companion’s face before massaging in a clear concoction from a bottle labeled ‘Yardley’ that smelled intoxicatingly of rum, doing so thoroughly so as to give his fingers an excuse to linger upon the supple skin. It occurred to him that John Reid only stared at him in response, not saying anything, not doing anything; he just looked at Tonto with an expression that, for once, was unreadable, was not blatant.

It was the Ranger who broke the awkward silence. “Thank you, Tonto. That feels a lot better.”

“A lot of water still left. Want to clean the rest of you?” Say yes because you like being clean and I like being close to you and getting to touch more of you.

“I’ve inconvenienced you enough-”

“It is not inconvenient.”

Another unreadable, not blatant expression materialized across the Spirit Walker’s face. “If you really don’t mind-”

“I do not.” Tonto blurted a little too hurriedly. Not giving him the chance to change his mind, the Comanche reached for the buttons on his shirt. Realizing at the last second what he was trying to do, the Ranger told him to stop. “I’ll do it myself,” he insisted when Tonto gave him a questioning look.

The Indian sat back on his heels, allowing John Reid to undo his own shirt but not moving away either, and when his stiff, shaky fingers failed him after only the third button he was quick to take over. He was silently glad that the Ranger had chosen to look away; unreadable, not blatant expression having morphed into discomfort and embarrassment. If he had not, he would see that it was Tonto’s turn to have shaky fingers.

Tonto didn’t want to have to explain it. Couldn’t have explained it. He wasn’t the one with Comanche deadly poison coursing through his bloodstream.

The shirt was finally pushed off the Ranger’s lean shoulders. Tonto moved in closer to help pull off the sleeves trapping the slim wrists, deliberately bringing their bodies flush against one another in the process. John Reid’s breath hitched noticeably. While he was the one with Comanche deadly poison coursing through his bloodstream, Tonto entertained the thought that it was the sudden contact that drove the air out of his companion’s chest.

Wetting the flannel anew, Tonto brought the dripping cloth to his neck, rubbing away the grime to reveal flawless skin. It always mystified Tonto, how living under the wild Texas sky still allowed the Ranger to retain a complexion not unlike that of a young maiden’s, his currently sickly pallor only amplified Tonto’s fond memories of its normally golden hue.

John Reid made no indication of wanting him to stop and so the Comanche continued with his delightful chore. Movements grew into a routine: wet the washcloth, wipe away the dirt, then rinse off the dirty water. Take time to openly admire the lightly muscled flesh. Repeat. Shoulders, collarbones, arms, the small hands with their long, slender fingers he couldn’t get enough of (why were there only 10 of them Tonto ran out of fingers to play with far too soon for his liking), chest and nipples (Tonto wasn’t completely sure but was the Ranger’s heartbeat thundering beneath his palm?), and the lean stomach (Tonto was completely sure that a full-blown blush was chasing away the paleness of the Ranger’s cheeks).
The blankets John Reid was wrapped in had pooled messily around his waist when Tonto sat him upright earlier. The Indian knew he was bare underneath; he had not pulled on the Ranger’s trousers when he redressed him all those days ago because it allowed him to rebandage the injured leg easily that way. Tonto rearranged his face into an expression he hoped would not raise alarm in his companion as he reached to pull the blankets away. He maintained eye contact, noting that an objection was forming in those limpid eyes but (fortunately) not yet his lips.

“Your wound need cleaning. Put more salve. Feel better.”

“If you think it’s best.” There was a tremor in the still hoarse voice, unmistakable. Some reassurance wouldn’t go amiss, then.

“It is. I got all the poison out, but if not careful, wound would fester, Kemosabe.” Tonto added that last word after a brief pause, figuring that it would ease the Ranger’s no-doubt blossoming reservations. *I’m not doing anything untoward; I am only a friend trying to help*, it implied.

“All right.” Tonto tried his best to hesitate before proceeding to pull back the blankets so as not to seem eager. Not that he could maintain the charade for long - those legs had been haunting him for months. He has had such pleasure imagining all the ways he could toy with the long limbs. Spread apart (maybe even bound), wrapped around his waist (with heels digging into his back), or thrown over his shoulders (so he could use his fingernails to tease the skin of the Ranger’s inner-thighs). ‘Legs that go on forever’ he had heard those words being said of some of Red’s girls. Those fools; if those girls’ legs indeed went on forever than John Reid’s went on to eternity and beyond.

“Tonto?”

Snapped so suddenly out of his reverie, the Indian still managed to recover quickly. “I get fresh bandage. Remedy too.”

“All right.” His voice was calmer. Tonto couldn’t decide whether he was glad for it or not - while a newly-composed John Reid meant he would be a cooperative, trusting patient, Tonto had liked hearing the anxiety in his tone. Coupled with the rasp that still plagued him, Tonto could imagine his companion giving permission for all sorts of things. Something untoward. Something inappropriate. Something that just isn’t done involving twisting limbs and glistening torsos and shouted pleas.

*Better not make him too nervous. Could end things too soon,* Tonto reasoned (not that reason played any part in that decision-making process).

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Whether things were going well or not for John depend purely on the observer’s point of view.

See, from John’s perspective, he was mostly clean. His body still ached in a thousand places, but at least he’s no longer sticky and covered in dirt.

But see, from John’s perspective, he felt unclean. His body may no longer be sticky and covered in dirt but it’s now covered in... something else. As for the aches? On top of the ones he still had it had developed... somewhere John would prefer not to say.

Again see, from John’s perspective, Tonto was acting strangely. Fine, more strangely than usual. Was he sitting a little too closely? Was his face constantly a little too near John could feel warm breath ghosting over his skin? His fingers lingered a little too long and his palms pressed a little too firmly? And was there a glint in his eyes that made John feel like he was being preyed upon by a creature of big, black wings? Except that that only happened when he was dreaming and so it
couldn’t be because he was awake now, or was he?

On the other hand see, from John’s perspective, all this could just be in his head. Lack of oxygen can cause the brain to hallucinate. Everyone knows that. And he’d been injured and poisoned it’s a small wonder he wasn’t seeing Captain Fuller juggling apples while riding a hi-wheel, what more this?

John had been mostly unconscious. He could not be sure whether he remembered many things or nothing at all. There was a dreadful moment when he couldn’t recall whether it was Butch Cavendish who ate Dan’s liver because Butch Cavendish didn’t wear big, white hats but he, John, did. There was also a confounding instant just before he awoke when he couldn’t tell whether Dan had indeed asked him to take care of Rebecca and Danny for him because why would Dan ask him to do it if he was the one who ate his liver? For the most part, he was only vaguely aware of things throughout however long it had been since his ordeal began, the one exception, he just came to realise, being Tonto’s perpetual presence.

He was certain of Tonto hovering over him, then moving away, then lingering close by, then going away again, then seated resolutely right beside him like it was finally decided that that was where he belonged. Of Tonto’s arms, supporting his head and feeding him water or the Comanche healing potion. Of Tonto’s hands fussing over him.

Of Tonto’s fingers stealing across him, his face, his hair, his everywhere.

Stop thinking. Stop fretting. Tonto was just helping him wash, like he wanted. Tonto was just helping him clean his wounds, like he needed. He wasn’t doing anything untoward; he was only a friend trying to help.

It was a mistake, thinking of Tonto not doing anything untoward. Somehow that made him think of Tonto actually doing something untoward, something inappropriate, something that just isn’t done involving twisting limbs and glistening torsos and shouted pleas. John would insist that the thought came out of nowhere, slamming into him like a train that’s just reached the end of its line and had nowhere to go but to crush through him. John would also insist that Tonto was at fault; sitting a little too closely, his face constantly a little too near, his fingers lingering a little too long and his palms pressing a little too firmly, his eyes glinting in a way that made John feel like he was being preyed upon by-

No. No. He was awake now, he’s sure of it. No way he could still be asleep with water being splashed on his face, with his rum aftershave being massaged into his skin.

Then came the moment when Tonto made an offer John now desperately wished he had refused. It was one thing not being able to handle a straight razor in his current condition, but having Tonto basically undress him was quite another. His insides felt like a confused mush. When Tonto brought the washcloth to linger over his breast his stomach flopped and his heart did that stupid thing when it beat a little faster. It was a strange cavalcade of sensations. Conflicting feelings and clashing emotions, all swarming over him, making him breathless. It was a rush, like a waterfall that’s lost its battle with gravity. Yet at the same time it was unhurried, languid, like a river streaming somnolently by because the ocean’s not going anywhere.

Nine years was a long time to nurse a broken heart. But he was moving on, wasn’t he? He was starting over? Was Tonto a convenient excuse, or a reason? What about the pursuit of justice? Was it in fact a justifiable justification, or was that actually the convenient excuse? Over these past months, he had grown exceedingly fond of both, but was his level of fondness for both equal, or did one outweigh the other? Was it even mere fondness to begin with, or had it developed into something else? Something ‘inappropriate’? Something that ‘just wasn’t done’?
John couldn’t imagine Tonto’s hands disappearing under his shirt, wouldn’t imagine them caressing his chest and hips. Tonto was admittedly, in his own unique way, desirable; it’s annoying how much he’d flaunt that desirability in every which direction on the compass. John couldn’t be sure what Tonto would prefer, having people be mystified by him or having people desire him. He's so masculine, so numinous, so eccentric. He treat the crow atop his head like it still occupied the land of the living, yet he seemed cognizant of the bird’s lack of life judging from his constant straightening of its broken neck. John found it perplexing; mind that seemed to teeter between being intact and broken could still utter strings of Comanche wisdom (he was learning that not caring whether such wisdom was genuine or not did wonders to their companionship).

John contemplated his newfound preoccupation with his Indian friend. Tonto was outlandish, a pervert, with questionable morals. Certainly he believed in justice and freedom, but he was Tonto. Tonto who had no qualms with resorting to violence, who partook in various forms of debauchery. Tonto, who wouldn’t stop with his feeding of the very dead crow (it’s becoming really unnerving) or dubious choices (how could he insist children just jump off speeding trains themselves?) or questionable strategies (they work perfectly maybe 2/3 of the time, if John was being generous).

And so it was strange to look at Tonto and notice his eyes - penetrating, slightly-mad, dark as midnight, shaped like those of a predator. Tonto was Red’s regular client, Tonto was bizarre. Tonto wasn't his type.

Because naturally John could only be attracted to the beautiful, smart, honourable sorts. And such types of people would not have grabbed a fistful of blankets that was the only thing protecting his modesty and slid the material off of him with an expression that could only be described as ‘borderline lascivious’.

So how was it that he gave Tonto permission anyway?

Stop thinking. Stop fretting. It’s all in your head; your mind’s playing tricks on you. The Comanche poison and maybe even the Comanche remedy affecting you. Lack of oxygen can cause the brain to hallucinate. But you’re not suffering from lack of oxygen. And it’s not the Comanche poison or Comanche remedy but the Comanche man!

John’s insides no longer felt like a confused mush, rather, it was now a nervous pudding. It was to his utter relief when Tonto rose and left his side, making his way to where their packs were heaped. The respite did not last long - barely two moments during which he could collect himself passed when his companion returned with his parfleche, the one that contained his healing kit.

Say no. Tell him you’d do it yourself. And then he’ll ask why and you’re going to have to explain to him that you don’t trust him and bring ruin to what friendship you two have developed. Or just be honest and explain to him that it’s you yourself you don’t trust. And then-

Warm palms on his right knee and calf yanked John out of his internal panic. Tonto gently placed the injured limb onto his lap; the Indian was now sitting between his spread legs. He tried to not make a sound but gasped anyway. And when Tonto began unwrapping his bandages (fingers skimming lightly over his exposed thigh), then spreading more of the cool salve over his wound (fingers skimming less-lightly over his sensitive skin), John was blanketed with the oddest sensation. An unfamiliar mixture of barely tolerable pain and barely tolerable…

Need.

Tonto then wrapped his leg in fresh bandages, his motions slow - almost sensuous, the texture of the gauze just as course as the Indian’s fingertips, and they made John tingle all over. He didn’t realise he had started breathing hard until he heard himself panting. Not in pain, or perhaps in pain, but a
different kind of pain than what would normally result from being shot with a poisoned arrow. When Tonto was done he didn’t move John’s leg back to its original position, instead he turned his head to face John fully, eyes glittering obsidian in the darkened cave.

He was no longer holding him, no longer touching him, but John felt trapped all the same.

Tonto leaned nearer; the cave wall was made of boulders rather than ice so it could not melt away to allow John escape. And then Tonto was too close and John accepted that he would not scurry away even if the wall behind him did melt and they kissed for the first time. It was abrupt, with uneven force in the beginning that slowly became more balanced as they both succeeded in meeting halfway. They fumbled for a while; Tonto tugged John closer and made the kiss intimate and wet. He tried to pull back and gasp for air, but the Indian wouldn’t let his mouth free for long. Tonto tasted like silver. Tonto smelled like the wind.

It’s not in your head; your mind’s not playing tricks on you. You’re not suffering from lack of oxygen and your brain is not hallucinating. It’s not the Comanche poison or Comanche remedy but the Comanche man and Good Lord this feels so good!

John felt his right leg drop to the cavern floor when Tonto twisted to face him fully, their bodies were flush against each other and he heard himself moan into the Comanche’s mouth. One warm palm was pressed against his shoulder while the other was rubbing insistently against his heaving chest, then lower, and lower still. A sense of dread rose from the tips of his toes all the way to his muddled head, ringing all kinds of alarm that only got louder the lower Tonto’s palm traveled, until-

“Don’t, Tonto. We can’t do this.” John somehow pulled his lips free of Tonto’s overwhelming ministrations; the Indian’s fingers a hairsbreadth away from wrapping around his-

“Why not?”

Yes, John, why not? “Because!” It clearly wasn’t enough of an explanation for the Comanche, who just stared at John with eyes that burn like molten lava. Still, he found the strength in him from somewhere to push Tonto back. “Look, this… this just isn’t done, all right? You wouldn’t understand.”

“Because I’m a savage.”

That made him snap back to reality - After all they’d been through together Tonto had no right to throw that at him. “Don’t ever say that again. You know I don’t think like that.”

“Fine, but you don’t want me to stop.”

“No, I do want you to stop.”

“Your eyes don’t. Your body, too.” The Indian closed his fingers around John and he sobbed in frustration, but not because he could not convince Tonto of his refusal. “See?”

“Take your hands off of me, Tonto.”

“No.”

“Now!” John had never shouted at the Comanche – yelled, screamed, roared, hollered, bellowed, but never shouted. The shock of it was probably why Tonto let go of him and sat back on his heels. He couldn’t quite feel bad right then; he was too busy trying to calm his frayed nerves and scattered emotions. “Thank you for helping me get clean. I’d like to rest now, I’m sure you agree I still need to.”
His companion didn’t reply, didn’t say another word. He simply packed his healing kit, helped John pull his shirt back on then lay back down, and wrapped the blankets around him before silently heading towards the hollow’s entrance.

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It was another sleepless night for Tonto.

He spent hours focusing on the Ranger’s sharp cheekbones. He thought of blue eyes burning like the bottom of a flame instead of calm like a peaceful summer sky. He imagined the deep, smooth voice cracking as it moaned his name. His mind wove lewd images of white teeth biting pinked lips to hold back a scream, of pinched eyebrows and muscles twisting. Tonto would make the Spirit Walker cry out, make him whimper, make him howl ‘jaa’* interspersed with his name. He pictured ropes - or maybe John Reid’s whip, yes, definitely the whip - wrapped around those slim wrists. He saw glistening skin too sensitive to touch. Heat and lust that only became more by the moment, until at last, arcing backs, a dark blonde head thrown back in rapture.

“Kemosabe,” it was choked out of his throat, a hoarse whisper that no one but the Big Father would hear, In the middle of his orgasm he laughed once, almost out of exasperation, but mostly from pleasure, “John.”

Afterwards, sleep still refused to come to him but he no longer minded. He was occupied by many more crucial thoughts: strategies, plans, methods.

His mind was made up. Tonto spent a quarter of a century hunting his Wendigo; John Reid was a much easier prey.

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TBC

Chapter End Notes

Comanche as far as I can tell:
* Jaa = Yes

Boyfriend is a Gilette-using pussy, so my knowledge of straight razors and shaving with one came courtesy of artofmanliness.com.

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