

Jonathan Penny:

His search for Life's Elusive Truth

A young Union soldier sorts through life's options as he faces the horrors of war.



Jonathan Penny:

His Search for Life's Elusive Truth

By
Tom Gnagey

This novel is intended for
adults and young adults 16 and older.

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On the way to fulfilling its purpose,
this novel
includes explicit depictions of the horrors of war,
and the author believes
those are things readers younger than sixteen
need not be exposed to.

The portrait of a young, Union, Private,
shown on the cover
was provided by
The National Archives

The events and characters in this story are fictional.

CHAPTER ONE

Clearly, I Wasn't Who I Thought I Was!

April 1, 1863

Like most of the young men in my battalion, it was to be my first encounter with battle. Walking twelve hours a day to find the enemy had been considerably more strenuous than standing behind the teller's window in my father's bank in Peoria. My city boy's feet and legs ached, and my heels and the tops of my toes wore raw inside my new boots. For several hours, the sounds of cannon and rifle fire had been growing ahead of us as we moved south. The sweat from my palm made slippery the wooden stock of my rifle. It dampened my collar and trickled down my spine to my belt. The louder it became the more that unfamiliar tightness grew across my chest.

After leaving the train depot in south eastern Missouri, we had walked two days deep into the hills of North West Arkansas. They were the first real hills I had ever seen – gently rolling and offered what must have been a hundred hues of greens and uncountable shades of browns and reds, and blacks – the forests and the outcroppings of stone.

Central Illinois had no hills; it was where I had lived those first 17 years of my life. It was there where recent, irreparable, events had precipitated my feelings of helplessness and despair and self-loathing, and which had subsequently led me to that

dusty road heading south into the Confederacy. With no serious thought, I had taken the oath to give my life for my country if necessary, had acquired the blue uniform, rifle, and single stripe that marked me as a private in the Union Army, and had been trained to kill the enemy in ways so gruesome and grotesque I became sick each night after lights out.

Unlike the others, I supposed, I welcomed the pain of the march and the anxiety surrounding the experiences that would soon unfold before me. It was no more than I deserved. I was impatient for us to press on and join the battle. My plan was straight forward. I would drop my rifle, stand there in the center of the fray, extend my arms to my sides, and wait for some sharpshooter Reb to get me in his sights and launch a flame-hot ball into my chest. I was told that all boys my age from the Ozarks were keen shots. My how I hoped that was true – clean, neat, accurate, providing the instant, final, solution to my miserable life.

* * *

Mary Lou had been my girl since the lower grades. Our friends and family assumed we would one day marry and that would set our course for life. When the time came, I would take over the bank, manage it well, and support her and our children in the fashion to which I had become accustomed – rich and privileged, wanting for nothing, and excused from the war when father paid a needy family for their son to take my place. That was how it worked in 1863 America. The progeny of the educated and well-to-do must survive to carry on the traditions and move the country forward toward greatness. The sons of the poor were expendable. I had known those things as fact for as long as I could remember.

Several months before, *Martin's Department Store* was sold to a man named Bennington from Kansas. It was a sad day for Peoria when the old name came down and the new one was lifted into place. Bennington had a son my age – Bradley. I didn't really know him. All the girls threw themselves at him – tall, handsome, wealthy, a charmer. It took no more than that for my friends and me to hate him.

He took a liking to Mary Lou and she became smitten with him. One night, I went to confront Bradley and tell him to back off, that he must not have gotten word she was my girl and we were going to be married someday. I had carried my father's rifle to

make myself look more fearsome than I was – I certainly had no intention of using it. I had arranged the meeting for the stable behind his family's home so there would be privacy.

We had words. Civil words led to angry words. Angry words led to shoving. Shoving led to fists. He threw the first – the only – punch, causing me to fall backwards onto the ground. As I fell, my rifle discharged.

Unbeknownst to me, Mary Lou had gotten word of the meeting and she was waiting there in the shadows – probably hoping to keep things under control between Bradley and me. The shot from my rifle hit her and she died.

Earlier, I had made no secret about my dislike for the boy and may have even spouted a threat or two as boy's my age will do. The judge did not accept my version of the events believing instead that I had intended to shoot Bradley, but Mary Lou somehow got in the way. Bradley would not support me in the truth of the matter and the judge found me guilty of her murder. The law in that jurisdiction required I be hanged.

The judge and my father were former schoolmates, so he made me an offer: avoid the hanging by joining the army and fighting the Rebels.

I was so distraught, I opted for the hanging and requested that it be made a priority. My father intervened, and a week later I found myself at the military training facility at Springfield, Illinois.

It was short on formality, spit and polish, and things like precision marching, and long on killing and survival – longer on killing than survival. The sergeant said our goal should be to kill three Rebs before they killed us – that ratio would assure a northern victory. Several of my fellow trainees puked right then and there.

* * *

There were 600 of us in the Battalion and we were spread three-across the road, stretching back over a quarter mile. It made for a cloud of dust that undoubtedly had given up our presence long before. I supposed that couldn't be avoided. I had fallen in near the front – impatient to get on with it. I could see the Captain on his horse in the lead not a dozen rows ahead of me.

Interesting, I thought; as we drew closer, my mood improved remarkably – depression waning and optimism growing.

I stood taller. I found myself more alert. The strength and fearlessness of my early teens revisited me. That had not been how I had envisaged things. Perhaps it was better, though, facing death without trepidation. Maybe an essential part of the process, in fact.

We had been following a flat valley with steep hills rising on each side. It suddenly narrowed considerably – *Wilson Pass*. We had been told to expect to engage the enemy just beyond it. Captain Blake slowed, turned in his saddle, and raised his arm. The sergeant raised his arm and called for us to stop.

“Fix bayonets,” he shouted.

It had been my least favorite part of training – taking on the enemy at close quarters in that way. In fact, that had been the first time it had come home to me that I would be close enough to look into the eyes and feel the breath of the boys I was killing. It was a thoroughly repulsive concept and I had puked over it more than once as I couldn’t but let it linger in my mind. I was relieved I would not have to be a part of that. I figured pulling the trigger on a Reb across a fifty-yard expanse would be one thing but up close, driving my bayonet into his gut like that, seemed different. I didn’t want to see the anguished face of my victim or hear him scream out in pain and terror, or watch the life drain from him into a steaming, red puddle in the early morning chill. I didn’t want our eyes to meet even for those few seconds while, as boys, we silently shared the ultimate question – why?

During training, we were allowed ten seconds to free the knife and affix and lock it in place at the end of the barrel. I always made that with time to spare. Up until training, I had little experience with guns of any kind but always ranked in the upper ten percent on firearms drills. I was surprised at what a good shot I was from all distances. I hated guns, but then, I hated Brussel sprouts, too, but always ate them under mother’s watchful eye. Perhaps, I was better at following unpleasant orders than I figured.

With a nondescript, guttural signal from the Captain, he pointed his arm forward, and we headed out again. He drew his sword and set a slower pace – we all noticed that. The sergeant motioned us to spread apart – as much as the narrow road would allow. The maneuver wasn’t pretty, but it was immediately effective. I was on the outside, right, so hugged the high grass at the base of the hill. For the first time, I felt like a soldier. I didn’t

understand that.

In my mind, I imagined unshouldering my weapon, taking one knee, aiming and firing. We were equipped with the latest rifles – the ball and powder all contained within one paper packet. It increased our ability to fire from two to three times per minute with the rod and powder models, to six or even eight times. I held my battalion's record with nine.

Within the pass, the sides suddenly closed in and rose sharply. If three of us had held hands, we could have touched both sides. The road curved severely off to our left. At the point I could first see the valley beyond, all hell broke loose. The Rebs were positioned high on the steep hillsides above us. For them it was like shooting fish in a barrel. Captain Blake was the first to fall. An astute move on the part of the Rebs, I figured. Without command, the army should fall apart.

I rushed to where he lay and set my rifle aside. I dragged him into the grass behind a boulder and checked to see how seriously he was wounded. It was his upper leg – broken by a ball – hardly bleeding. There was not time to consider that, as four Rebs, rifles clearly empty, jumped from the hill running toward us, bayonets at the ready. I relieved the Captain of his two sidearms and cut them down before they reached us. There was no thought or emotion involved. It was as if I had routinely done it many times before. As I had heard more seasoned soldiers say, in battle, it comes down to them or me. It certainly *had* been in that instance – that first instance.

“Get me back on my horse, son.”

“No disrespect, Sir, but you'll be no good to anybody until I get that leg in a splint. I'm very good at this.”

Not waiting for an answer, I took my hatchet to two, slender saplings within easy reach, cut them into four proper lengths and tied them in place around his leg with rolls of cloth from a medical kit his horse carried. I worked fast and it was all over in five or so minutes.

“Let me pull you to your feet, Sir.”

I placed the side of *my* right boot against the toe of *his* left boot and pulled. It was a move I'd learned on the playground as my friends and I had engaged in rough and tumble activities. He was tall and heavier than he looked. He was soon standing. His

horse had remained with us seeming undisturbed by the sounds and smells of the battle – seasoned in the experience, I assumed. I gave him a hand up onto his horse and secured his bad leg in the stirrup with more cloth strips. He had not allowed so much as a wince. He gained my respect for that. Later, I would have to ponder, why.

I voiced an observation.

“Sir, the men are shooting straight up the hill on their side of the road. They could be far more accurate if they shot across the road at the opposite hill.”

“Yes. Give that as my order to the sergeant and pass the word down the line.”

I turned to leave.

“You may find that rifle useful, son. Take it along at least.”

I felt embarrassed. The first rule we had been taught was to never get separated from your rifle. I nodded up at him – sheepishly. He may have offered the quick indication of a smile.

“Your name, private?”

“Penny, Sir, third company.”

Forgetting to salute, I located sarge and we began the run down the line. The direction of fire changed immediately. I came upon the drummer boy just standing in the middle of the road, frozen and lucky to have survived those first five minutes.

I picked him up under one arm and hurried with him to a depression in a large rock outcropping back from the road. I told him to stay put. Small chance that he'd not take my advice. The boy couldn't have been older than twelve and I figured his drum weighed as much as he did.

Down there on the road, we had shrubs and trees and the tall grass for cover. The Rebs up on the hill had no cover. As a result of our quickly revised battle plan, it was all over in twenty minutes. We had casualties but nothing compared with theirs – hundreds of red-soaked gray uniforms filled the ditches alongside the road. If the wound hadn't cut their life short, the fall certainly had. I handled it like I handled most things related to war, on my knees in the brush, puking my guts out.

I had forgotten my plan – the stand-up-and-wait-for-a-bullet, plan. Instead, I had killed a dozen – more than a dozen – of the enemy. I felt part of myself withering away inside me. I had

really done it – I had killed other boys – lots of other boys. It was a hollow, sickening feeling I had never before experienced from *any* cause – from any fantasy, even.

There were tears, as I returned forward searching for the drummer kid. I found him where I'd left him, on his side, shaking uncontrollably, terrified. I sat on the ground beside him and pulled his head up onto my lap. I brushed back his long, black hair and stroked it, gently. He began sobbing – the first normal reaction I had seen from him. He scooted even closer and wrapped an arm around my waist. War was no place for a kid. I had to wonder what fool had decided that was a good thing. Undoubtedly, the same old man who was shamelessly willing to promote the slaughter of young men for some benefit he felt necessary.

The burial detail took care of our dead. The chaplain said his prayers – they soon became all quite meaningless. It was like souls just waited around for prayers before releasing to heaven. Another tenuous ritual to contemplate later. The medical wagons headed back with our wounded. I called out to Captain Blake as he passed.

“Can we send this child back with the wounded – he has been forever traumatized, you know.”

He stopped and looked down from his horse.

“We need a drummer boy. We need the cadence.”

“I can't for the life of me see why, Sir. Nobody pays any attention to it and it just alerts our enemy to our presence.”

He grew silent and eventually spoke.

“Okay. You see to it on my order. You're Penny, right?”

“I'm Penny, yes, Sir.”

He nodded and rode on making ready to continue our journey south. He had just demonstrated his good heart. How could he lead boys into battle ordering them to kill other boys and be killed, themselves? But then, I had a good heart and I had just committed atrocities against the very thing I had always held as most sacred – human life.

“You do piggyback?” I asked the boy, leaning over. “What's your name, by the way?”

He had not yet spoken to me, but he got to his feet and climbed aboard dangling his drum beside him.

“Brock Cavanaugh, Sir.”

“Where you from?”

“Branch Creek. It’s up in Missouri. All the Cavanaugh men have been soldiers back generations. So far, I’m not carrying on the tradition very well, I guess. I’m scared like I’ve never been scared before.”

“First, so am I. Second, you’re not a man. The Captain says you can go home with the wounded.”

“Oh, no. I can’t do that. My grampa would be very upset with me. No, that is not a possibility. Please don’t make me. I will run away and come after you.”

I understood he was serious – can’t disappoint grampa. They would both live out their days in shame.

Why me?

“Aren’t you assigned to somebody – to look after you and tend to your needs?”

“The bugler and the carrier of the colors. I think they both got killed. I guess it’s you and me now, private Penny.”

Like I said, why me?

The sergeant came by, saying we should use the bushes if we needed to and catch a hurried bite from our back packs. We would be underway in a half hour.

“The kid here doesn’t have a backpack, Sir. What is your suggestion?”

He removed two cans from his own pack and tossed them to him.

“Make do with that. When we bivouac tonight, eat at the mess tables and ask the cook for a week’s food supply to carry – on my authority. Don’t waste any. You need water. Get a canteen from the quartermaster.

Another good-hearted guy who spent his life ordering boys to go get killed. In my experience, people were either good or bad. Suddenly, my life was filled with good people doing evil things. I didn’t understand.

We each downed a can of beans, buried the trash, and secured Brock a canteen, blanket, and well-loaded backpack. Waiting ‘til dusk for those things made no sense to me. A list of the names of our casualties was posted on the back door of the

officer's wagon. I didn't look. It was as if I didn't know they were dead, they'd still be alive.

By noon, we were back on the trail. Brock marched along beside me, drumming his young heart out. The fact that only I stepped in time with him didn't appear to bother him. From time to time he looked up and we shared smiles. I worried for his wellbeing, but his constitution seemed unflagging.

I determined it was not a good thing to have such a responsibility – a kid depending on me – another kid. What happened to him when something happened to me? I say 'when' rather than 'if'. I had seen my first battle; it became clear the proper word was 'when'. I could come up with no good reason why I wasn't laid out in one of those shallow graves. The luck of the draw. That's what survival in battle was all about – not good planning or good training or quick wits; it was just the luck of the draw – pure chance. No Reb was out to shoot any specific Yank – they just shot; whoever was in the way died.

We traveled on uneventfully until six o'clock. The remaining Rebel troops had retreated fast and far. Our scouts saw no sign of them. Still, the Captain maintained twenty-five percent on alert guard duty. Each company stood three hours at a time around the periphery of the encampment. Mine was on second watch – ten o'clock to one – across the midnight hour.

After Broch and I ate from the mess tables, we found a spot to bed down and managed a short nap and a long talk.

"Tell me about your town, Brock."

"Only four hundred souls – four-fifty if you believe dogs and cats have souls. Mainly, we have grain elevators along the railroad. Grampa used to work there. He's sick now and mostly stays at home."

"And do you live with him?"

"Yup, since I was a pup. My ma and pa died of the chills not long after I was born. I had a grandma back then. She died when I was six. I run errands for the bank and the telegraph agent – a nickel apiece. Lots of wires to and from the head men at the granary. It keeps us in groceries, you know."

"How is your grampa managing with you away like this."

"I won the drumming contest, so I got to come be a drummer boy. I got paid a hundred dollars. Grampa will do just

fine on that 'til I get back – just got a one-year hitch.”

“You have friends back there, I suppose.”

“A few. Branch Creek’s mostly old people – not many kids. We’re a track town.”

“I guess I’m not familiar with that term.”

“The rich families – the ones who own and run the grain business and the store owners – live north of the tracks. The rest of us live south of the track. Always been that way as far as I know. Most of them work the fields during the plantin’ and harvestin’ seasons. I figure I’ll do that. A good worker can make eight or ten dollars a week. I will be a very good worker.”

“I’m sure you will be. Do you go to school?”

“Yup. I just passed my seventh-grade exams. Don’t know if I’ll do eighth when I get back or not. I read and write and spell real good. I like social studies but only scored about average, I guess. I hate math. I like to write stories. Miss Crocker says I show promise – she’s my teacher. We think she’s sweet on Gus, the telegraph operator.”

“Good for you – showing promise.”

“Your turn, now. About you.”

“Well, let’s see. I finished high school last year. I pretty much like and don’t like what you do.”

I didn’t mention I had been valedictorian – the first boy valedictorian ever in my school. He wouldn’t have understood the meaning and my home frowned on boasting. I continued.

“I just started working in a bank.”

“Cleanin’ up and such, huh?”

“Yes, things like that, I guess. I’m lucky to have a mother and a father.”

Brock commandeered the conversation, again.

“I sleep on the couch next to the fireplace – about the best spot in the house – three rooms. Grampa sees to things like that for me. He was sorry to see me leave but told me to do my duty well. I promised I would. Another reason I couldn’t go back. They’d probably take the money away from him if I didn’t stick it out.”

I figured the talk could continue later.

“I need to catch a few winks – go on sentry duty in a little over an hour. I imagine those legs of yours can do with some shut

eye as well.”

He nodded. We spread our blankets – his closer to mine than felt comfortable, but I didn’t mention it. He was immediately asleep. I was soon to follow. I was surprised about that when I awakened – the ease with which sleep had come.

Brock and I had certainly been spawned from different ponds – I never wanted for anything and he only knew life as one struggle after another. I had a loving family and never once had to doubt that everything was going to turn out fine. How could I say it? I was privileged and Brock was not – anything but. My friends and I had spent our share of time looking down on his kind – going so far as to make fun of them. It was just how life was set up. I had no explanation. Kids did what kids did. At that moment, I felt ashamed.

I seemed to have changed in remarkable ways that last two months – well, that last twelve hours to be fully accurate. I couldn’t state all the particulars, but I knew I’d changed – for one thing, I was still alive and apparently okay with that. I wondered if my father would approve of the changes. That would probably not matter – my chances of ever sharing my changed self with him seemed slim to none. I figured I’d have to take solace in the fact he would be proud of me for dying in the service of my country – *that* had been my plan, after all – having been denied the noose, I had been ready – eager – to settle for a Reb bullet. And yet, when I had the chance, I hadn’t taken it. Hmm? Suddenly, there were so many things to re-think. I wasn’t who I thought I was.

I

CHAPTER TWO

Four-leaf-clover kind of luck

A few hours later, at 9:45, I was awakened by a poke in my side – the toe of a boot or a rifle barrel, perhaps. Wasn't severe. Wasn't gentle. As my head cleared from the deepest sort of sleep, I saw the poorly defined figure of a man, silhouetted against the mostly dark, night sky and leaning on a crutch. Not understanding, I scrambled to my knees and reached for my rifle.

“Easy, son. It's Captain Blake. I understand you are about to go stand guard.”

I looked at my watch – not something most of the privates carried.

“Yes, Sir. I didn't expect to be awakened by you, personally, Sir. Sorry about how I reacted.”

“A natural response – necessary, in fact. I should have gone about it differently. First, I wanted to tell you Doc says your splinting was so fine he didn't have to change a thing. Second, I have something for you.”

By then I was standing, my rifle relaxed toward the ground.

“I don't understand, Sir.”

“At this time, I have no medals for saving your Captain's life or for cleverly redirecting the battle plan, but there are these. The quartermaster's tent will affix them for you. I don't believe I thanked you. Thank you.”

There in the darkness, he placed something soft into my palm. He closed my fingers over it, turned, and hobbled himself into the night.

I held it close to my face – corporal's stripes. The *last* thing on my wish list. I hadn't wanted to be entangled with the military with *one* stripe. I certainly didn't want to be even more deeply entangled with *two*, particularly when they seemed to be a straightforward reward for doing what I'd done – killing and making a suggestion that allowed us to kill so many others. I wondered if I could return them – get out of corporaling.

I arranged Brock's blanket to better cover him, rolled mine neatly to fit atop my pack, checked the load in my rifle and the contents of my ammunition box, and left for the assembly point. I found myself stewing – angry – about the stripes and that necessarily included unreasonable, strong, dark, feelings directed at the Captain. Any way one cut it, I was a terrible soldier – well, except in that one way, my apparent willingness to slaughter the boys who I was told were my enemy. I wondered how many of my comrades felt the same way. I wondered how many of the Reb boys felt the same way.

What constituted an 'enemy'? For those of us on the battlefield, it had nothing to do with being opposed in values or needs or objectives. It had nothing to do with disdain or hate. Plain and simply, the enemy was that other soldier, for me conveniently dressed in gray, so I could easily select him for a shot to his chest or head or back and confirm one more fallen Rebel body was out of the fray. During the chaos of a battle, I was not fighting for a cause. I was killing them to preserve my life – clear, simple, full stop. It was not for the survival of the Republic – it was for the survival of Jonathan Penny.

I had heard the patriotic speeches back home about right vs wrong – that holding to causes of the Union was right and that holding to causes of the Confederacy was wrong. It had seemed so clear – right vs wrong – how evident could it be? The people I grew up respecting said so.

My grandfather said the war was being fought to preserve the Union. My Uncle said it was to free the slaves – I couldn't tell if he believed that was good or not. The old man next door said it was to support President Lincoln's political ambitions. What ambitions could a politician have beyond being President? My

father said it was about money – he said war had always been about money. Young men died and old men got rich. I had no fact-based opinion and why should I even seek one – the men I admired the most could not agree.

We moved into position, replacing the first contingent on watch.

“Anything I should know, soldier?” I asked before he left.

“Seems quiet out there. I heard a single shot from the west some time ago. Don’t have any idea what it was about. Haven’t heard. Sometimes scuttlebutt comes down the line. Seemed to me that sitting back on my legs was the safest position – low profile and quick to stand or kneel if necessary. Private Stanley is to your right and Billingsly to your left. I’m Smith, by the way. Good luck.”

It had been the essential conversation between the lowly one and two stripers whose lives the military command shamelessly valued least of all – sharing suggestions about staying alive and understanding that depended mostly on the belief in the four-leaf-clover kind of luck.

I took his suggestion and sank to the ground, sitting back. There was tall grass that flattened into an unexpected and welcome softness. There was but a slip of a moon – enough to allow shadows but insufficient to determine what was making them. Wave after wave of stringy wisps of clouds floated across the moon causing the faint images in front of me to alternately fade and return. The moon and clouds, like they were, presented a good news/bad news thing. In the darkness I wouldn’t be seen by the enemy, but neither could I see the enemy.

In its own way, the silence and the fickle darkness was more frightening than the battle had been – there, at least you felt a sense of being in control – you saw the enemy and could plan and execute your moment to moment strategy. Here, the enemy remained invisible – if it were even out there. It was all in *their* hands. We were there only to react – a helpless feeling knowing it was them who would take the first, clean shots.

We’d been trained in nighttime combat. With knife at the ready, slip up behind the enemy soldier, aggressively cover his mouth to silence him and control his struggle, then slit his throat. We had practiced on melons.

‘Follow through. Make it quick, deep and long – side to side. Push the body forward and be on your way.’ I could still hear my trainer’s voice. For him it seemed all quite straight forward and matter of fact. For me it had been the stuff of nightmares – toss, turn, and sweat through it, sort of nightmares.

I moved my hands to my neck, sensing how fully vulnerable it was. I remembered as a thirteen-year-old discovering my suddenly bulging Adam’s Apple, with some vague sense that it was responsible for my deepening voice. The thought was irrelevant to anything about my situation.

I tried to remain alert to noises and moving shadows. I even took to sniffing the air with nothing substantial inspiring it. My own four-day stench would undoubtedly block any scent short of a displeased polecat.

We were deployed some ten yards apart. There in that rolling terrain, even such a short distance didn’t guarantee we could see each other. Islands. We were each a vulnerable island.

The order had been that come eleven o’clock, we were to move forward twenty-five yards, extending our perimeter. No reason had been given, so I had nothing but the order to go on. Essentially, the first thing a recruit learned was to obey an order immediately and without inquiry or consideration of any personal consequence. One and two stripers were not encouraged to think. Try that another way; one and two stripers were discouraged from thinking.

I watched the hands run those final three minutes toward eleven. I stood, bent low, and moved forward, where I again assumed the suggested position. I had done it quickly and quietly and gave myself good marks for that.

There was something – out front – movement, maybe, close along the ground – an almost imperceptible moan – a groan. Perhaps it was an animal – an injured animal, maybe. I raised up onto my knees and held my weapon at the ready, moving it in slow arcs from side to side. I did my best to see something out there in the darkness, alert to any break in the shadows.

There it was, again – some closer, it seemed. I got to my feet, crouching. How was I supposed to react? A shot would give away our presence. I removed my knife from its sheath, setting aside my rifle

The clouds cleared. I detected movement. Suddenly, I could see it – a body dressed in gray, clutching at the ground to pull itself forward. The corporal in me had no idea what to do. The boy from Peoria in me knew exactly what to do. Maybe it would be enough to lose that new stripe.

Foolishly, I'm sure, I slid my pack to the ground. I crawled the five yards to it – him – the soldier – whatever. His gray uniform was in tatters. He had no hat above his shoulder length hair and was barefoot with filthy strips of cloth wound around his feet to protect them. I put my hands on his shoulders and rolled him over onto his back. He groaned. Our eyes met. His face reflected his terror. I clapped my hand over his mouth and tried to reassure him in a close to his face whisper.

“You're okay, now. Here's the arrangement – you behave, and I'll try to help you. You misbehave and . . . well.”

He stopped struggling. At first, I thought he had died. I was not yet experienced with closeup dying. He opened his eyes – sunken eyes on a gaunt body. The boy was starving. I had heard rumors that among the Rebs there was often little food, no boots, debilitating dysentery, and seriously infected, untreated wounds. A patch of darkening blood soaked the lower right side of his coat. I cut away the buttons and lifted his shirt, so I could get a look. His flesh was laid back – jagged, star shaped, shredded at the edges. There was a ball in there, I was sure. Bad news. It might have been related to the shot the first sentry had spoken about.

He couldn't have had more than six months or a year on me. His hair was matted in blood. There was a wound in his scalp. I leaned close to examine it – deep to the skull and wide but contained to the flesh. I dragged him back to where I had stationed myself.

Before she married, my mother had been a nurse, so I figured I knew a lot more about treating the sick and wounded than I did. She had encouraged me to attend many first aid classes. I think she hoped for a doctor in the family. With that additional, one day of first aid training in camp, I guessed we'd see what I knew.

I retrieved my pack. I sensed there were two things necessary to save his life: get him medical attention and feed him. We carried only minimal first aid supplies. With a length of cloth bandage, I wiped the blood from his eyes and cheeks. I tore his

shirt from his body and folded it into a compress for his belly wound, holding it in place with his belt. He was wearing a belt *and* suspenders – I had to wonder. His eyes followed me. His mouth remained silent.

I placed my pack behind his head and shoulders and offered him a biscuit. He frowned but accepted it without hesitation.

I began speaking, again, in a soft whisper.

“My name’s Johnny. We seem to be outfitted in different colors. Need to figure how that won’t get in the way of taking care of you.”

He didn’t respond, having assumed a protective posture about the biscuit – at that moment more frightened animal than boy.

I offered water from my canteen.

“With a belly wound, you can only have one little swig at a time.”

He kept me in sight over the container as he drank. He returned it, having kept to my admonition about the single swig. He lay his head back.

“Rakes. Private, Jimmy Rakes,” he managed.

“Well, Jimmy Rakes, it is my pleasure to meet you. As soon as my replacement arrives, I’ll arrange to get you to help. I suppose we have two ways to go about that. I can carry you south until we come across your comrades who can see to your needs, or I can arrange for you to get to our aid station back in camp. We have a surgeon and a half dozen well trained orderlies.”

“Please don’t make me go back. Ya can’t imagine how terrible things is.”

I offered him another biscuit. That time he acknowledged it with a nod and an almost smile. Much of the tension in his body went limp. Again, I hoped he was relaxing and not dying.

“Were you up on the hills at the battle earlier?”

I was thinking about his head injury.

He hesitated as if it might be a trick question that could affect his wellbeing. My question had been ill-conceived. I ignored his silence and continued.

“I was down on the road. I’m sorry about your losses.”

“I’ve heard a lot a things about yank soldiers but nothin’ like all this. You crazy?”

“Maybe. I know I hate everything about this war.”

“Yeah. Me too. Everythin’.”

He eyed the canteen.

“Finish the biscuit first, then you can have another tiny swallow, okay?”

He nodded.

“I like your kind a crazy, Johnny. Thank you. I’m supposed to kill you first chance I get, ya know.”

“And me, you, if you give me reason. Please don’t give me reason.”

He offered a weak, smile.

“Doubt if I could, da you?”

I met his smile and raised it a nod.

“How bad off am I – you know?”

“The head wound is minor – they always bleed like a stuck pig. I have the idea the belly is quite a bit worse – probably won’t be pleasant – getting it fixed up. The ball seems to still in there.”

“I doubt that. Back hurts as much as my stomach. Will you take a look?”

“Give me your word you’ll behave while I do that?”

He nodded. I supposed that was as good as his word – the southern gentleman thing I’d heard about. I turned him onto his right side and lifted his jacket. He’d been right – the ball had exited his back taking a good-sized hunk of flesh with it. I figured that made it more a side wound than a belly wound.

“I think that’s good news, Jimmy. The ball went clear through and the pressure from being on your back like you are is keeping the blood seepage to a minimum. Now, we just have to pray doc gets to it before infection sets in.

“By the way, how did you get wounded?”

“Me and the Yank come on each other all of a sudden in the dark. I was carryin’ my rifle shouldered by the strap and was distracted, blottin’ at the blood from my scalp – an injury earlier in the day. By chance, when we bumped, he had his rifle pointin’ into my gut. Before I really understood what was goin’ on, he fired, and I fell. I felt myself passin’ out on my way down. I guess he left me

for dead.”

“I guess.”

I pulled his coat up tight across the wound and rolled him onto his back repositioning him against my backpack.

“How long ‘til your guy comes to relieve you?”

I looked at my watch.

“A little more than an hour, I’m afraid. You understand I can’t leave my post.”

“But you *can* leave your rifle?”

“Oh. No. I’ll get it. A guy could get court marshaled or something for that. I have already had one reminder about that, today. Hate guns.”

There may have been another smile.

“I’m really tired, Johnny.”

“You have reason to be, but from what I’ve heard, with a head injury like you have, you need to stay awake.”

“I heard that, too. You believe it?”

“I’d rather believe it and keep you alive than ignore it and have you die.”

“You *are* a strange one. Did I thank you?”

“Did I say you’re welcome?”

It had been an exchange that I would not have expected to have in a million years. I hated war so much I could taste it. I spat. It didn’t help. I needed to keep to my duty as an alert sentry. I needed to keep him engaged in conversation to make sure he stayed awake. First, I offered him another swig, figuring the new information about the wound would allow it.

He nodded and licked his lips. For the first time I noticed how parched they were – dry, scaled and bleeding. He was severely dehydrated, I assumed. I wished I could offer more water.

His stomach growled – maybe associated with the wound – maybe because of his hunger or from receiving the biscuit. It made me think his stomach was intact – based on nothing at all.

“How long since you’ve eaten?”

“Two days. The Captain said you’d have food, and when we beat your sorry asses in the pass, we’d have a feast. That set a fire under us, I can tell you that – even the ones sick with the fever. It didn’t work out that way. I lost my best buddy – went all

through school with B.L. I cried over him. I'm not much of a soldier, I guess."

"I'm sorry about that. I'm a loner or I'd probably have lost somebody close as well. I didn't even have reason to check the casualty list."

I hoped that shot had not come from my weapon – the one that had killed his friend. I wasn't sure why that mattered. Dead was dead. His story helped explain the recklessness and the furry on the faces of those first four that rushed the Captain and me, having to know their knives would be no match for my revolvers. They were starving. My god, I hated war. So many ways to die: bullets, knives, starvation, infection, sickness.

Earlier, my drummer boy, Brock, had gone to sleep sucking his thumb. Perhaps I should try that.

"I really hurt, Johnny."

"I imagine you do. I'm sorry."

"I think you mean that, and I can't understand it."

"What do you mean?"

"I hate you. I'd never help you out. If I'd a found you in the condition you found me, I'd a stuck you – ended it for you – happy in the fact I'd found a new pair a boots. My sergeant would a approved. I'm a Reb. You're a Yank. Why don't you hate me?"

"I don't know you. How can I hate you? And you don't know me. I can't understand how you can hate me?"

"You're a Yankee. We all hate Yankees."

"Why?"

"Ya done freed the blacks *and* you're *Yankees*."

"I didn't free them. I suppose I would have if I had the power, though. What is it about black people that make them deserve to live as slaves?"

"Cause their black. Don't you get it?"

"I guess not. My God tells me I shouldn't hate anybody. What does your God tell you?"

Silence.

More silence.

"Got another biscuit?"

"I think so. I'll need to get into my pack. That'll cause you some discomfort."

He shrugged and did his best to help by leaning forward.

We managed it – a biscuit *and* jerky in light of his story. He seemed hesitant to take them – like having second thoughts. I flattened out his palm and placed the food in it – at least one good thing I'd learned in the army – from my Captain earlier that night.

Avoiding my previous question to him, he continued.

“I reckon you're the first Yankee I ever met.”

“I've known some southerners – didn't dislike a one of them. I enjoy listening to the accent – soft and easy.”

“Ain't *us* who got a accent. It's *Yankees*.”

That was clearly a fact to him, and he resented my implication.

“Interesting. My teacher says perspective is the basis of reality.”

“I have no idea what you're talkin' about.”

“Sorry. Let it go. I guess we've been raised to believe different things.”

“I guess.”

Silence, as he went to work on the jerky. I set the canteen against his hip. He caught my eye and nodded. I wondered if our encounter had confused him or just confirmed to him how wrong I was about things. Somebody once told me that allowing confusion was the sign of an open mind – the need to argue, the sign of a closed mind. I doubted if he was confused.

I suddenly realized how powerful a parent's influence really was – filling children's minds with ideas about right and wrong well before their minds were mature enough to evaluate them – accept or reject them rationally. I supposed that was an unavoidable part of life. Confusing. See, what did I say? I'd chew on *that* revelation for weeks.

I figured it was better to change the subject. I continued to focus my attention out into the darkness – I was a sentry, first.

“What do you want to have happen to you, now?”

“Just don't send me back. Prison, I guess. That has to be better. What you know about Yankee prisons?”

“Nothing, really. I assume they are humane.”

“Hu-what?”

“Humane. It means they will treat you well – at least they

won't hurt you. Honestly, I guess I don't know that for a fact. Real life and military life are based on different premises – they have very different outlooks on what life should be like. Real life can allow lots more freedom, relaxation, ease, and kindness, I guess – personal choices. Real life lets us make mistakes and learn from them. Military life depends on control and discipline and strict rules and such. It doesn't allow mistakes and depends on punishment to maintain order. A soldier's leader has the power of life and death over him. My family runs on love and respect. Understand what I'm saying?"

He nodded. I couldn't be sure what that really meant – I had rambled on for so long.

He took a drink – just a small one – he looked at me as if for approval. I imagined he had been a good soldier – did what he was told and stayed out of trouble. I imagined that was comfortable for him – knowing the rules and abiding by them so he'd get along. I supposed I did the same thing, the difference being I had the idea he accepted and found comfort in it and I didn't – I tolerated it, but I most certainly didn't accept or find comfort in it.

Eventually, my replacement arrived. Only upon my insistence did he help me lift Jimmy, so I could carry him in my arms. Five-ten, and he couldn't have weighed much more than a hundred pounds. I wondered how I'd be received back at camp. I had done what I believed was right. I supposed that was 'civilian' right. I'd stand the response, whatever it would be.

"Who goes there?"

"Corporal Penny with a wounded prisoner."

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CHAPTER THREE

How many wings is one Corporal expected to have?

We remained there in camp for most of a week awaiting orders. That meant taking to the perimeter and standing watch on regular shifts throughout each day and night. It gave Jimmy a chance to recuperate and gain strength and a little weight, while he awaited transfer to the Holding Station for POW's – a sanitized name for a prison, I figured. I had asked around about them. It saddened me. I got the idea Doc had done all he could to put the transfer off.

I visited him every day – sometimes more than once. It bothered me to see him tied to his bed so he couldn't escape. I didn't mention that. Every time I left him, he thanked me. I could tell that Doc and the medical staff had taken a liking to him. He had a wonderful smile and spoke easily in a soft, direct, manner. He was polite and seldom had requests of them. I asked Doc to make sure I was alerted before he was taken away.

By the fifth day, his temperature was down, and they had him up and moving around every few hours. On the sixth day some soldier, on some other soldier's authority, came in a jail wagon to pick him up. There was paperwork. There was always paperwork. Doc sent written orders related to his necessary care – it was pinned to his shirt. It was also clear Doc had no faith they would be followed once he entered that jail cell on wheels. My faith in the Union prison system waned.

Although he was barely more than an acquaintance, it was hard to say goodbye. I think he had the hardest time of it – leaving

somebody he was supposed to hate before he had time to explore why he really didn't – if that makes sense. If there were tears – we saved them for our private times, later on.

I had seen to it that he got new boots – one thing the army collected before bodies were buried. I couldn't understand why everything wasn't collected, but I was a corporal, so nobody asked for my opinion on the matter.

Earlier in the day, the Captain and I passed each other in the compound. I saluted. He returned it, stopped and offered a comment.

“I see there is still just one stripe on your shoulder.”

“Oh, yes sir, Sir. I have been quite busy.”

“So, I understand – father to the drummer boy and brother to the Reb soldier you brought into the aid station.”

“I guess it might appear that way, Sir.”

“There is a tradition in the army that corporals wear *two* stripes. It facilitates on the spot command decisions by the officers. Have those stripes in place by mess. That is an order, corporal. Understood?”

“Oh, yes sir, Sir. If there is one thing I understand, it is orders, Sir.”

There had been nothing unpleasant or even testy about the exchange. I thought he liked me. I liked him.

“I see you remembered your weapon today.”

“I'm doing better about that every day, Sir.”

He offered a brief smile.

“May I inquire about your leg, Sir?”

“Doc gives me no hope that I'll ever run again. I guess my fate will be either to stand and fight or ride like hell into the nearest hills.”

I could tell he had intended it as humorous and wondered if he shared such remarks with just anybody. I doubted that. I felt taller somehow after the exchange. I offered a smile and saluted again. He returned it. I did my best about face and was more pleased than seemed reasonable that I hadn't fallen on my face in the process. I headed for the Quarter Master's tent. With every stitch, I became aware of the weight that second stripe was adding to my life.

The order came down that we would break camp on Saturday – two days hence – and set a course straight south toward a river town named Fort Smith. We were to meet up with a large force commanded by a general. Generals were generals – all quite interchangeable as far as I could tell – I made no effort to remember their names. That seemed fair, since I was sure they wouldn't remember mine.

Early Saturday morning – well before the sun had awakened for the day – I felt something shaking my shoulder. I had bedded down near the edge of camp and had been sleeping on my side facing Brock, so could see it wasn't him needing to visit the weeds. I rolled onto my back. It was a familiar face – a southern boy I had once met under the strangest of circumstances.

“Jimmy!” I whispered, pulling him down closer to the ground so he wouldn't easily be seen. “What the heck?”

“I decided prison life probably wasn't going to be for me, so I took advantage of a nighttime stopover and sort of escaped. Yankees are too trusting ta make good soldiers – guards, anyway.”

“Why did you come back *here*?”

“Ta complete my duty.”

“To kill me?”

“Goodness no. Ta protect ya. I know these hills from Pea Ridge ta Texarkana. They'll eat *you* alive. I can see that doesn't happen – my duty ta ya for savin' my life.”

“You owe me nothing for that.”

“That ain't your decision. We need ta get that straight right here an now.”

“Okay, I guess. I thought you hated me.”

“Eh! Things happen, ya know. Bedrest has a way a settin' a guy's brain straight.”

“You have thought about how this will work?”

“Sure have. I'll shadow your regiment during the day, an we can get together at night.”

“There's something called sleep that I believe your plan leaves out.”

“And, there's naps. We'll make it. This is gonna be so

great.”

Despite his unexpected – and, perhaps, unexplained – enthusiasm, I had to wonder.

“I see you have acquired a rifle and backpack.”

“Yup, I have. They was just layin’ around seemin’ ta be doin’ nobody no good, so I invited ‘em ta join up with me – not a word a reluctance from neither one a them. Also, got a new gray uniform. You like it? Pretty good fit – better than my first one. So?”

“So? It doesn’t seem I have any say in it all.”

“I s’pose not. Ya like me okay, don’t ya?”

“Yes, up to the point you decide to *stick me* – I believe that’s close to a quote at least in intention.”

“You do talk funny, Jonathan Penny. I been ponderin’ what I said to ya – pained by it. Consider it behind us. We can revisit that later if you need for us to.”

“The sticking or the pondering?”

He offered his wonderful smile but no other response – I figured *he* figured *my* question had been rhetorical – that would not have been his word, of course. I could just hear him: ‘*rewhatical?*’

“Why a Confederate uniform? Why *any* uniform?”

“I figure if we’re out together and get come upon by Union soldiers you claim me as *your* prisoner an we move on. If we gets approached by southern soldiers, I’ll claim you is *my* prisoner an we move on. Safe and sound either way. Anyway, any boy my age here in the south who’s out a uniform can count on bein’ conscripted – signed up on the spot and sent off ta do who knows what or where. I’d rather keep more control over my future than that.”

He made sense and for some reason that bothered me.

What had I gotten myself into: a determined drummer boy under one wing during the day and a meddlesome, deserter-Reb-kid-shadow under the other one at night – not to mention that dratted second stripe? Life was suddenly complicated. In school, I’d been voted most likely to succeed. I hadn’t figured that would include *anything* like this.

Jimmy left as quietly as he had arrived. Before he left he removed three pair of stockings from his pocket and handed them

to me. Stockings were like gold to soldiers.

* * *

Jimmy said it was about sixty miles to Fort Smith. I shouldn't have asked him in case his loyalty to the South led him to pass on troop movements. I would be more careful in the future. Scuttlebutt was, that we would take two days to cover that ground – 30 miles a day was essentially a lark for troops, assuming we didn't run into enemy resistance. Jimmy said there were high hills that would slow us down.

Humorously, I suppose, I checked my rifle load at the thought. It seemed like I was becoming a better friend to that rifle every day.

After morning mess, we broke camp and were on the road by seven. We picked up travel rations and water as we moved into formation. I figured Jimmy was out there somewhere watching, making plans, and keeping up. I hoped his stated purpose was honest – to stay close to me for the sole purpose of looking after me. If he were to be caught passing on information, he'd be shot for sure.

Broch was right there at my right side drumming up a storm. That day, I was well back near the middle of the column – still on the right – for some reason that felt safest – my four-leaf clover. The road was largely hard packed gravel. That eased wear and tear on the feet and ankles and minimized dust, although we kept our mouths and noses covered with bandanas – common sense, not orders.

The Captain set a moderate pace, knowing time was not a big concern. Two, well- armed aides rode beside him – perhaps a lesson learned from our previous encounter. They also wore two stripes. Word was that our camp for that night had already been scouted – apparently on a wide terrace halfway up a hill overlooking a river. I hoped we were allowed to bathe. I was neither used to, nor pleased about, going a week without bathing. We smelled like week-old, wet, leave behinds in a locker room.

I used the time to assess my situation – my frame of mind. Since I had never intended to get so far as to have to be a real soldier, I had not set my head to the undertaking. I had been too involved with learning the ropes to have time to ponder my new life and its ramifications – to *accept* those ramifications, perhaps.

My mood had certainly changed during that past week – from morose, suicidal, depression to something more functional. I wasn't sure how to characterize it. It certainly wasn't happiness or contentment – blunted resignation to my life on hold, perhaps. Although I hated it, I found some sense of security and even purpose. That day, my purpose in life was to walk and think – simple, straightforward, helpful, even. It was still an open question as to whether I intended to leave it – head out on my own – with Jimmy, maybe. My mind had only briefly flirted with that idea – Jimmy and me off on our own away from the killing – both AWOL from our respective commitments and responsibilities – both fodder for firing squads if captured. Thoughts like that certainly took the positive edge off bugging out.

I wondered why my plan had changed so quickly that first day as the battle got underway in *Wilson Pass*. Why did I retaliate against those charging Rebs? It appeared to be the ideal answer to my wish. Maybe because it involved not just my life but also the Captain's. Maybe because it was not me who was in charge – it didn't fit my picture of how it should be – me choosing the time and place. Maybe it was the anticipation of the agony of the bayonet rather than the swift result of an accurately placed bullet. Anyway, I had changed.

I had never thought of myself as a quitter – a potential deserter. Although the short-term, freedom-seeking, strategy held great appeal, the stigma would follow me the rest of my life. Brock had brought that into pretty clear focus for me. Jimmy had already chosen it – maybe. The nature of his situation was unclear – confusing. I wondered if he even understood it.

In most ways, I was eager to get to know him better. I had always been the careful type who worked hard at being liked and seen as responsible and capable – very capable – grades, athletics, social standing. My conception of Jimmy was pretty much the opposite. In all fairness, I should wait for more evidence about that. I believed my very first impression of him had been inaccurate – more a rascalion than a compliant private.

Plainly, we were worlds apart socially and educationally and, probably, in most other ways. I believed I was more thoughtful, and he was more impulsive – perhaps there were things we could learn from each other in that area. The evidence up to then suggested we were the perfect *mismatch*. I guess I

wasn't even sure what I meant by that.

My grandfather had admonished me never to try and change another person to be like me in order to make a friend. If I couldn't live comfortably with him like he was, I shouldn't pursue the relationship. I figured that was good advice. Grandfather's advice usually was.

I also had to figure out what to do with drummer boy. I hadn't been able to tell if the Captain's comment about me becoming his father had been an observation, an assignment, or a warning. I could just see it; 'Hello. I'm Jonathan Penny and this is my son, Brock Cavanaugh.' *That* would raise eyebrows! It would have also made me a father at five.

My self-examination had gotten sidetracked, although it was all mingled together. Life had become complex, filled with new, unanticipated, tasks and responsibilities and people and relationships. I hadn't had time to sort all that out – to organize it into some sort of . . . well, *organization* – the bigger picture – fitting all the parts together meaningfully. I wondered if that ever really happened in life – having all its parts fit together meaningfully.

A lieutenant rode up beside me and dismounted, walking along side.

"New color bearers and buglers arrived last night, so Drummer Boy needs to join them up front. They're older and have been put in charge of the kid. Thanks for helping out. He mounted up and offered Brock a hand up behind him. I boosted his drum up into his waiting arms. They rode off. Brock looked back. I detected tears.

Problem solved.

Problem compounded.

Why me? I seemed to be asking that frequently.

I hadn't asked for Brock to be added to my life. I hadn't asked for Jimmy to be added to my life. I hadn't asked for that second stripe to be added to my life. I hadn't even asked for Captain Blake to be added to my life. He may have represented the worst of it – I respected him and believed he respected me. That implied to me that I had to be a good soldier – to keep his respect and not disappoint him and only in that way was I to keep my respect for myself. *I really* didn't like that. It was like I had given up all control over myself. I hated it. I wondered what Jimmy

thought about that. It was interesting that his opinion mattered to me.

I remembered the advice that old man who lived next door gave to me the day I left home for Springfield. He said that to be a good soldier you had to understand you were just a cog with a job to do. You didn't dare think of yourself as a person anymore with needs and preferences and ideas – just a cog. Of course, I hadn't understood that even ten weeks before. Since then, it had become my way of life – Private Cog and later Corporal Cog. I hated it.

Maybe, if I really understood what the war was all about and could agree that I was on the right side of good, I'd be able to accept it. But should I accept it? After ten weeks a soldier, I was more confused than ever. At that moment, a sense of helplessness set in, because I couldn't really even be sure what I was confused about. I supposed cogs didn't get confused – they just performed their cogger and ignored the rest. Was that how I was to survive?

Long before dusk, we were settling in halfway up that hillside the rumor mill had promised. Sentries were posted and we bathed in shifts. My that felt good. Not until I approached my uniform to get dressed, did I realize the stench was incorporated into the fabric for the duration. Oh, well, I knew I was clean. I looked forward to the day I could take a brush and soap to that coat.

I also realized it was the first time in my life I had only one set of clothes. Back home, there was a closet full and a dresser full and a trunk full – fancy clothes, church clothes, school clothes, play clothes, work clothes – even go-to-bed-in-them clothes. I wondered how it had been for Brock and Jimmy. I wondered how it had been for the boys surrounding me there on the riverbank. We all looked pretty much the same standing there in our skin, waiting to air dry.

My life of privilege had certainly not prepared me for the life into which I had been thrust. Was that a good thing or a bad thing? Had my parents done me a good service or a disservice for providing so well for me? Why did I keep asking myself questions that had no answers?

I purposefully chose a bedding down spot near the outer

circle of the camp – to make it easy for Jimmy to find me. That, of course, also made it easier for night-creeping-rebs to find me – to rob me of my supplies and stick me – most likely *not* in that order. What was it about that Reb deserter boy that had made me willing to risk my life and wellbeing? *That* one, I most certainly could not answer.

Even at an easy pace with several breaks, the ten-hour march had been tiring. Like Jimmy had indicated, the hills were killers. Once I finished with supper, I rolled out my blanket and planned to sleep until the bugler roused me for sentry duty. That was nearly eight hours away. I figured Jimmy would interrupt that at some point, but not knowing when or if, I went on as if it were not a consideration.

I awakened on my own just before three – the hour set for my watch. Two things struck me: Jimmy had not approached me, and, snuggled in close to my back, was Brock – sound asleep, thumb sucking, Brock. Even when things were over, they were not over.

It surprised me that I was concerned Jimmy had not shown. I sat up and took a long drink. I munched a biscuit and got to my feet just as the bugler sounded muster. The temporary bivouac covered far less ground than the camp had, so the same number of sentries put us closer together – four yards, maybe – easily seen in the light of the growing moon. It suggested a safer arrangement. I doubted if Jimmy would chance a meeting under those circumstances. He didn't.

Coming off watch at six in the morning had its advantage: first in line for chow – sliced beef in white pepper gravy, beans and biscuits. That probably indicated lunch would be biscuits, beans, and white pepper gravy on sliced beef. There was always coffee for those who could stand it; I was not one who could – stand it.

The rest of the day was spent in drills: maintaining our weapons, hand to hand combat practice, loading our weapons, pulling ourselves along the ground with our elbows. We also went through weapon manipulations – shouldering, unshouldering, preparing to fire, and firing, except we didn't really get to fire – had to conserve the ammunition. Understandable if unproductive. Union soldiers were kept busy. It left little time for worrying – a good thing I figured.

We were given triple the usual ammo supplies. That filled each box and seemed to signal an extensive and most likely extended battle was anticipated. The Sergeant asked if there were questions. I had one:

“What do we do if we run out of ammunition?”

His answer was neither helpful nor reassuring.

“You should be so lucky.”

I figured that meant we shouldn't assume we would live long enough for that to occur. Clearly, he knew things we didn't. I had never liked that man. I had already decided the answer was to confiscate ammunition from the boxes of my fallen comrades - also an uncomfortable thing to ponder as I looked around from boy to boy.

That evening we had a battle briefing. The Captain outlined the plan. The enemy was expected to be marching a large contingent – perhaps two or three thousand men – west, south of the river, from Little Rock. Reconnaissance suggested they were probably on their way to meet up with a large force coming up from the south along the eastern border of the state. Their mission was to clear the northwest quadrant of the state of Union soldiers. It was essential that didn't happen. At most, we had half that many men but would have the advantage of surprise and position and superior fire power – nearly three to one over their older style rifles. The matter of canon power might be another thing – we had none – they were known to have at least a half dozen. Any of that may or may not have been true. The saying among us lowly pawns was, ‘listen to everything – believe nothing until it happens’.

I was sitting in the grass next to Old Winston. He was a talker – had an under his breath comment to everything the Captain had to say. His face was scarred and pitted from the pox. I guessed him to be in his sixties – he looked older – a career soldier – still a private or, a private once more. He said that the kind of soldiers who lived through battles never worried about being killed – worrying about it only kept your attention away from being able to fight smart. I figured that meant obey the orders but act on them intelligently. I also figured that after one more battle, I'd have a much better collection of experiences to help me understand how one went about doing that – fighting smart and surviving. My goodness, it appeared I had developed an optimistic

take on things.

I did hope those in charge had enough sense to keep the kids with the flag, the bugle, and the drum away from the focus of the battle – up on the hill side, maybe. Somehow, I doubted that. If I were the heartless leader of the enemy troops, I'd take them out immediately, right after I'd taken out every man riding a horse – no flag to offer hope, no beat to power the forward movement, and no bugle to offer directions.

I shuddered as I sat there in the grass. What was taking place inside me? Those were terrible thoughts. It came to me, to be a successful military leader one had to be willing to harbor and act on simply terrible thoughts. The same might be true of successful rank and file soldiers. *That* was frightening.

I wondered what that meant – being a successful soldier – racking up a high kill count or coming out the other side alive. Maybe they went together. What was that soldier saying: Kill them before they kill you? My stomach churned and my saliva began surging. I swallowed repeatedly and kept it all under control. Was that a mature reaction or did it prove my values and expectations had slipped – deteriorated. I wondered the oddest things, sometimes. I supposed I was glad I did. Odd wonders opened up a person's mind.

Winston had offered one other piece of sage advice: You mustn't think of it as killing other men, you must think of it as hitting your targets. He followed that with an observation. Every dead enemy was just a hash mark on a general's wall that indicated how close to victory he was. If, in the end, that one general was the only man left alive on either side, he had won the battle and that's how the history books would record it.

The facts were clear: In war, *life* was not important; it was really only *death* that was important. The winning side could have one man or one thousand men who lived through it, but the single important measure of the outcome was how many dead enemies were left on the field.

How had I become a part of such a horrific undertaking? Oh, I remembered. That had *also* been horrific – Mary Lou, Bradley, the stable, the accidental discharge, the judge, my father's intervention, my apparent reluctance to die.

I wondered how Mary Lou's family was doing. They were

good people – the best. They were devastated. I'm sure they hated me. Once, they had loved me. I understood. / still hated me, also. And there was the matter of Bradley. I hated him on two levels: taking Mary Lou away from me when he knew of our relationship and lying at my trial to leave me with nothing – not even my life. I wasn't sure if I still had revenge in my heart toward him. I had all quite purposefully kept myself busy, so I wouldn't spend time thinking about it – her, him, me, the families.

I had taken time to establish one thing: his intention had been evil. Way too late, I heard the scuttlebutt – he had no serious intentions toward Mary Lou. His plan was to break her heart in a twisted plan to get back at my father – through me – for denying his father a loan for the purchase of a second store.

I supposed I respected the Rebs more than I did Bradley. At least they truly seemed to believe in the righteousness of their cause. He hadn't. The Rebs were patriots, I supposed. He was evil, personified – evil knew no loyalty beyond itself.

Gradually, I had grown to believe that when I killed a Reb soldier, it was to preserve the Union – it may have, also, been many other things, but in the least, it was to preserve the Union. I could believe that was a good thing. At that point, it seemed to me I was a good person driven to commit evil acts for a righteous purpose. I wondered if that was true. There was no vengeance in my heart toward them. It was more love for my country – the desire to preserve it and later have the chance to grow it and improve it. I supposed if revenge was not my motive on the battlefield, I should harbor none toward Bradley – it is what church had taught me. I probably wasn't there yet.

I had been taught that good always wins. I could envisage no way that in my case, good had won. Regardless of anything that might come about in the future to hold Bradley accountable, he – evil – had already won. Look at Mary Lou. Look at me. I needed to spend time on that one. It made me wonder how many other things I'd been taught that were every bit as wrong as that – that *good* always wins – triumphs. Hardly!

Regardless of how much truth there was in Winston's view – that, in battle, I wasn't killing other boys, I was just hitting targets – accepting that point of view eased my guilt a good deal. I suspected someday it would *bury* me in guilt, but during the coming battle, it would not be 'someday', it would be 'thisday'. I

had to survive in *my thisday*, didn't I?"

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CHAPTER FOUR

Idiots in charge!

After the general session that evening, there was a session for corporals. I was surprised there were so few of us. I guessed the two stripes really must have meant something. One of the sergeants led that meeting.

It was the first time I'd really been instructed in how to corporal – to learn the role of that rank. It was considerably more than a stripe. When a corporal received a battlefield order, it was his job to see that it was passed on to, and understood by, the privates assigned to him – most everybody there on that hillside was a private. When situations arose that needed decisions – move up the hill, follow the stream, fire, hold fire, charge, retreat – the corporals were to seek direction from the sergeants. When they were not available, the corporals had to make the judgments that held promise of moving the battle in a positive direction – often on the spur of the moment. The privates' lives would be in my hands. I had not thought it through like that before.

It petrified me, but I did my best to appear mature and calm about it – as if the information I was hearing was old hat – second nature. I *knew* I hated that extra stripe. What business did a seventeen-year-old boy, only weeks out of basic training, have, making life and death decisions for other boys? I would find that in reality, the privates usually heard the orders from their sergeants at the same time the corporals did, so the chain of

command was not as important as it seemed at first.

Someday, I would have to prepare a new manual about such things – one based in logic and the facts of human capabilities.

My grandfather would have chuckled at hearing that. As a kid, I was always reorganizing things, believing I knew best about most every one of man's endeavors. My efforts to restructure the Sunday School system in my church had been met with a harsh rebuke from the Bible-yielding minister. My unrestrained stance against corporal punishment (hmm?) in school, got me ten stripes with the paddle (double hmm!). When I stood before the city council meeting and pled for representation from citizens eighteen and under, I got patted on my head and chuckled out of the room.

My English teacher had become a mentor – a good friend – and he counseled me to keep my penchant for improving things to my writing, at least until I came of age. He presented it as a way of practicing, of honing my ideas for later application in the real world. He made it make sense. I loved to write and had been lauded for it. I tried his suggestion. It wasn't the same, but was clearly safer, and caused my father and mother far less grief from those institutions I had been repeatedly needling. Even though I was convinced 'they' remained 'wrong', I managed to keep my opinions – well, most of them – to myself. I also saw my ideas mature as I wrote about them. Odd, since I had been convinced, they were perfect the way I had first conceived them.

The sergeant had asked for a show of hands from those of us who had experience with explosives. I had assisted my uncle who used them to clear land on his farm. I raised my hand. I had become so military, I couldn't even refrain from what amounted to volunteering for something which, on the surface, posed additional personal risk. I seemed to have accepted the fact it was a cog's duty to come forward and expose the true extent of his cogness.

It was the opinion of those who mattered, that the enemy, in order to remain undetected, would stick to the slower path through the narrow valley south of the river, rather than use the easier to navigate, but more visible, broad plain to its north. I figured some general would lose his braid over it if our side would come out on top.

We needed a major victory. Word was that the Union was

not doing well. The southern troops fought with a fervor not seen in the Yankees. I supposed that was reasonable – it was their cause – their grievance – they had initiated the conflict. They were fighting on their own soil. Word was that the southern command seemed willing to sustain large casualties in order to win even the smallest battles to accrue bragging rights that might frame the belief that the balance was trending in their favor. It seemed a reckless strategy. Certainly, an inhumane practice. Winston said it was essential to their strategy of overwhelming the Union forces quickly and sending us packing sooner rather than later. A long war would have devastating economic consequences for the South. I didn't have the necessary facts to agree or disagree but had to wonder – the war was being fought to save the southern economy and yet the war, itself, was devastating to the southern economy. Idiots in charge?

The next day was longer and more grueling than any of us expected. Not only had we crossed the final thirty miles at a good clip, but we had moved some distance on east of the town and set up on the hill above the valley – spread out along a mile or more – positioned to rain down the ambush of all time.

I had considerations about that. It was probably a brilliant military configuration on the Union's part. Once the entire contingent of troops had entered the narrowest portion of the valley to the east, explosives would be used to close the pass behind them. Other charges would close it in front of them. From our protected positions on both sides above them – lots of boulders and natural depressions – the boys in the valley had no chance. It didn't seem fair, but then I was coming to see the force that won the battle was usually the one who was the least fair – the most devious. 'Unfair' was always the winning strategy.

I supposed I didn't know what 'fair' meant in terms of warfare. The concept probably didn't even exist. 'Advantage' was the concept of concern.

In history class, I had read some about modern military strategy and it typically differed little from the old way – forces marching up to engage each other and firing – all out in the open. I had heard recent accounts of civilians crowding hill tops to watch a battle unfold below.

The revolutionary soldiers had learned from the Indians that a greater advantage went to those who fought from hidden

positions. I figured the strategist for the plan at hand had taken lessons from them. It certainly made sense to me. Many generals still believed such tactics smacked of cowardice. Again, it was confusing – to maintain the appearance of bravery was more important than saving one's own soldier's lives? The military mind was fully unfathomable to me. Individual human life held no value.

In sports, games were played on an even field – the advantage going to the team with the most skilled and best trained athletes. There were rules that must be followed. There would be none of that in the upcoming battle. With the enemy packed shoulder to shoulder, trapped in that narrow valley, any shot fired down on them was clearly destined to produce a casualty.

The anticipation of such a slaughter sickened me. I wished I'd be moved to puke over it, like I had in the early days when killing had remained personal and fully repulsive to me. In the short time since, I had already become so callused to it all, my gut remained calm. I hated that – I hated the person I had become. Check that, I hated the soldier – the cog – I had become.

Night came. We slept in shifts. Scouts provided updates and we two-strippers passed the word along the line. It became clear that two-strippers got considerably less sleep than one-strippers. It was a wonder that generals got any sleep at all.

I was on the south hill. A runner approached me and asked that I follow him to the lieutenant. It was an assignment – nothing voluntary about it. There were three of us to be involved – three of us who had raised our hands about having experience with explosives. I wondered if, having done that, by itself, suggested how poor our judgement was.

“You will change into these Confederate uniforms – keep your Union issue at hand. Your mission is to mix in at the rear of the Confederate column where the cannons will be. You will have sacks of black powder – fused. At the moment you hear the explosion closing the pass behind the column, you will light them and slip them down into the cannon barrels. The confusion of the first explosions will provide a distraction that should give you the advantage you need.”

There was that word, again – advantage.

We carried the packs of explosives in gunny sacks over our shoulders and made our way toward the east where we paused to

await the troops.

Our generals had been right about the troop movement. They came into sight and offered up virtually no sound. Just shadowy figures inundating the floor of the valley like some murky, slow moving, flash flood, heading west.

With great caution, the three of us moved down the slope. The Reb uniforms had been a good beginning. The rest would be up to our own cunning. I wondered how we had been selected from the dozen hand-raisers – randomly or on some basis of merit? It didn't matter, of course. Still, my preference was merit. That was still part of who I was.

We had been given landmarks to look for close to where the explosives had already been set. We remained ten yards west of them – inside the valley. The configuration of the terrain allowed us to get within a few yards of the valley floor before exposing ourselves. We crouched, waiting. I wondered if my two comrades' hearts were tearing at their chests like mine was. I supposed they were. I didn't even know their names. Cogs didn't need names.

The column seemed to go on forever. Then, there they were, bringing up the rear, the big guns on wheels. Without comment, we moved forward together and mingled as ordered – sticking close to the cannons. There were seven – I suddenly understood the reason for the several extra powder sacks – just in case provisions – good thinking on some officer's part. I dropped back, setting my sights on the three furthest to the rear. The others seemed confused. I pointed at the first boy and then at the two big guns, up front. In a similar manner, I directed the second boy to the other two. We prepared to get to work.

I took the little box of matches from my pocket and clutched it tightly; I didn't dare drop it among the tramping feet. I held it up to prompt the other two. Like me, they were each a necessary cog to make the mission succeed – one, two, three, four – me, the sacks, the fuses, the matches – all cogs.

We didn't have to wait long. Behind us the hills blew apart in a spectacular display of destruction filling the valley to twenty feet. I didn't take time to watch but got right to work. The fuses were cut for a 90 second burn time. If we acted methodically, things should happen as planned and the three of us could move out of the way without risk of injury. In the distance we heard the

forward explosion. The trap had been sprung.

The cannons, pulled by teams of skittish horses, sat dead in the water, so to speak. I opened the gunny, removed the first sack, lit the fuse and slipped it down barrel one. Proceeding with more precision than seemed reasonable for a fully unpracticed activity, I repeated it with the other two. In the confusion it was simple to leave the scene. One problem. As we scurried up the hillside, clad in grays, we had suddenly become targets of our own soldiers.

There were seven explosions. Sharp, red hot bits and pieces of falling iron buried themselves in the ground all around us. It was only good fortune that kept one or more of us from sustaining serious if not fatal injuries. Our mission had been successful. I sincerely felt good about that. I knew boys had also been killed but didn't dwell on it. I had killed Reb boys before. Just targets, I told myself.

Reaching into my backpack, I changed my hat – it was the most revealing item distinguishing between the silhouettes of a Yankee and a Reb. The others followed my lead. There in the semi-darkness, it seemed to work. The incoming ceased. We crawled up the hill, keeping to the cover of boulders, brush, and shadows. Near the top we shed the foreign uniforms and managed ourselves back into our blues – more an act of survival than patriotism.

We took positions on our bellies and added our fire to that of our comrades. It was a rout – a slaughter – the most ungodly scene I had ever imagined. Several unexpected tears dripped onto my weapon.

During the battle, the darkness was a blessing – it blurred the individuals below me. I didn't want to see them. The realization of victory had come slowly, as the fire being returned from below gradually died out until, finally, there was none at all. With the breaking of dawn, there had been no surrender flag – just the continued screams of pain and anguish rising out of the darkness from the valley floor. Also, with dawn, came the emerging picture of a sea of mangled, blood soaked, bodies of the best boys the South had to offer. I puked. I was glad I puked.

I had survived the battle. I had no idea why. Our casualties had been light – random deaths and wounds from frantic,

indiscriminate shots up into the blackness of our position on the hill.

Later, the three of us were personally commended by the Captain himself with promises of medals to follow. I certainly didn't want a medal. I would not have chosen to do what I had done. Perhaps that knowledge would help dull the terrible guilt I knew was to follow – that it had not been my choice.

With the full light of day, our main force moved to make camp closer to Fort Smith – to rest, reorganize, and rejuvenate – to prepare for and await our next call to kill. There was no celebration like there had been after my first encounter when it had been *us* on the business end of an ambush gone wrong. Word was, as a regiment, we were up for a commendation from President Lincoln, himself. That seemed to brighten many of the lives around me. Not mine.

The more I learned about the war the less I understood it. I really needed to find some alternate way of life. It reminded me that I had still not seen hide nor hair of Jimmy. I grew concerned. I wondered why. We were told to rest and sleep. I was on it – refresh my body and allow my mind to retreat from the troubling experiences just past.

* * *

During the twelve hours that followed, I slept off and on and made two trips through the chow line. Nighttime was upon us and I was still tired. I settled in for the night. Soon after, I was awakened buy one of the Captain's aids.

"He requests your presence, immediately. Come with me."

Perhaps he planned to charge me for the Reb uniform I had failed to return. I smiled and figured that would have even produced a smile from him. I thought better of using it.

I entered his tent. His aid left us alone. The front flaps were closed behind me. I figured that indicated the seriousness of the meeting. The light from several candles flickered across the brown canvas, offering a not altogether comforting atmosphere. A Reb uniform, like the one I'd left behind on the hill, lay on a chair. It seemed humorous relative to my previous thought.

"Have a seat, here, across from me. We have things to discuss."

That got my attention. *We* – just the two of us – had things

to discuss.

“I am told you took charge of the mission to incapacitate the cannons and that its success was largely due to your action and direction. Good job. Saved lots of our lives – perhaps hundreds.”

I responded with something dumb like a shrug. He continued.

Since that first day, you have demonstrated reliability, bravery, a penchant for quick, clear thinking on your feet, and leadership. I have another mission for you.

I sat up a bit straighter, ready to listen. That tight strip across my chest set its claws again.

“I need a new scout, one with cunning and intelligence and resourcefulness.”

“Your current scouts seem to be doing well, Sir.”

I shouldn’t have said it.

“Sorry. That was out of place, Sir.”

“They are fine when it comes to finding locations and calculating troop size and capabilities. I need somebody who can bring me information on strategy – on imminent plans – battle plans. That takes a person on the inside.”

“Inside?”

An image of Jonah flashed across my mind and, without thinking, my hands went to my neck.

“Specifically, inside General Baker’s staff.”

“I don’t understand.”

“He sits at the head of field strategy in this section of the state. Find him, join him, work your ears and eyes to a place they can pick up on things – meetings, documents, conversations, plans.”

“You are asking me to become a spy? If I’m not mistaken, spies tend to get shot – often on the spot, Sir. Getting shot this early in my career as a human being has not been part of my life plan.”

Again, that quick smile he had offered to me during previous, private exchanges.

“It is not an order – strictly voluntary. You possess all the necessary characteristics. I have no one available who I believe

is your equal – young and amiable in appearance and physique, yet quick and smart of mind and wise of spirit.”

“If I were to agree, how would I even know what information might be useful?”

“You will be briefed. You can’t make notes. You must rely on your head.”

“How would I know when and where to make my report?”

“Much of that will be up to your discretion. Information about contacts will be provided – reliable people who will quickly funnel your information to me.”

It seemed clear *I* was speaking in terms of ‘if I would’ and *he* was speaking in terms of ‘when I would’. I had to wonder if the decision had not already been made – in case I tried to turn it down.

“How long do I have to think about it?”

“What time does your watch say?”

I looked.

“Eleven twenty-two, Sir.”

“Until then.”

My idea of loyalty had never been more than doing right by my friends. Suddenly, that had been booted up to the level of doing right by my country. The cog thing, again. I hated it. Still, the decision was obvious.

I stood, saluted, and offered my decision.

“Of course, if that is your best consideration of the matter. Where from here?”

He called in one of his aids and explained the briefing I would need and listed the supplies I would require. I would be back in the grays – not new, fresh, grays but believable ones, well broken in with somebody else’s sweat and ones that illustrated the several mishaps that soldier had encountered. The uniform bore no blood – just scars of battle, so I was content it hadn’t recently been removed from a boy I might have killed. I hated war so much.

“It will be a balance between caution and speed, Corporal Penny – Jonathan, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Sir, after my grandfather on my mother’s side.”

On the dumbness scale, it ranked right up there with that shrug. Oh, well. It was past.

As I changed uniforms, I suddenly sensed my mixed reaction to it all. Honored about the traits the Captain had seen in me, hopeful I could complete the mission in a helpful way, weighted down by the responsibility, cognizant of the potential tragedy if I failed at any one of several levels, uncertain that I could possibly be up to the task, and already pants-wetting scared.

I had been relieved from sentry duty, so I could prepare myself for the task. After hours of drilling by the Captain's aid, I moved back to my usual spot near the edge of the camp where I collected my things and began organizing my thoughts.

The one thing I believed the Captain had overlooked was my complete ignorance about the day to day operations within a confederate company or regiment. Perhaps he hadn't known, either. How could I learn about that? Akin to that, was my fully out of place, northern accent, as Jimmy had made obvious to me. There it was; *he* was my answer.

"*Jimmy,*" I said out loud.

"Ya called?" came the words from out of the darkness.

A body emerged. A face followed.

"Where you been and why now? I been worried."

"I been away 'cause I couldn't *get* ta ya. Now I'm here because I *can* get ta ya. Thanks for worryin', I suppose. Not sure nobody's never worried 'bout me before. What's up? You missed your last sentry rotation."

"You've been close enough to know that?"

"Seems so. You Yankees keep a awful tight perimeter. What's with the wrong uniform?"

"Lay down beside me and I'll fill you in. Take your hat off and pretend you're asleep if anybody happens by. You up for a little adventure that holds a high probability of getting us both killed?"

"You really do speak funny, Jonathan Penny."

"How about keeping it to, Johnny?"

He may have nodded. The darkness, understandably, left many things to the imagination.

I filled him in on my assignment as if it were a hypothetical I was still considering.

"Sounds like I arrived just in time, don't it?"

“I haven’t decided yet, you know.”

“Of course, you have – the uniform, missed duty, reachin’ out by encouragin’ me ta stay and listen. You’re doin’ it for sure.”

“Okay. I had no right to tell you about it, and at my court martial you better swear I never confirmed it to you.”

Chuckles – him not me.

“How long ya got ta get ready?”

“I’m already on the clock. Planned one last stretch of shuteye before I’m out of here but looks like I’ll skip that.”

“Those *both* your back packs?”

“Yes. Now, one of them for you if you agree to it.”

“I’ll come along, but ya gotta know I’ll not out and out betray my country. That don’t mean I can’t be a big help ta ya. Got it?”

“I do. I think that will often become a very thin line for you.”

“We’ll see, I s’pose. I been thin linin’ most a my life, Johnny. Should be pretty good at it by now.”

“Might as well get on with it, then.”

We arranged the packs, rifles, and such, and headed toward the line of sentries. The Captain had given me a pass to be used to get me safely out of and, later, back into camp. That was the only official document I carried – in my sock. I did have the password to use with my contacts, but that was it. I had memorized their locations spread out along the way – to use as needed.

We came upon a sentry. I handed over the piece of paper.

“This is for Jonathan Penny,” he said.

“I’m Jonathan Penny.”

“Who’s that?”

“Jonathan Penny’s advisor. You don’t think our Captain would send a kid my age, dressed like this, out into the war alone, do you?”

“I suppose not. Okay. Stay safe whatever it is you’re about.”

“Thanks.”

We moved on. Once out of earshot, Jimmy spoke.

“I’m not sure if he let us both out because you’s so smart or that sentry’s so dumb.”

“Does it matter?”

“Bein’ my tail’s all in with you on this, I’m hopin’ it was because you’s so smart.”

CHAPTER FIVE

I just might make a good Southern boy, after all!

“I need to know about the system inside the Confederate military – where I’d go to do one thing and another in camp – everything, I suppose. Rules, unique to them. Expectations.”

“We can get ta that, but first ya need ta learn how ta talk like a Southerner – get rid of your Northern accent.”

“The word ‘accent’ seems to prickle your risibles, Jimmy. Can we avoid it someway? How about using the term, ‘version’, instead? Northerners and Southerners speak different *versions* of the English language. Each is acceptable where it lives. That meet your needs?”

“Okay. Will understanding the Southern *version* is right an the Northern *version* is wrong meet *your* needs?”

“I won’t quibble over that if we can just move on.”

“You the one that done brought it up.”

“So I was. I will gladly accept your help learning how to speak properly here in the South. Perhaps, we can do that while you educate me about army life down here.”

He nodded. We had struck a deal. I wondered why being right about the ‘version’ aspect was so important to him. Perhaps he just had few truths to hold onto, so he clung to those he could. There was no time to get into that. I had to get prepared to infiltrate General Baker’s forces and it seemed my life might depend on how good a teacher my new friend turned out to be.

We needed to meet people to gain information that would lead me to the General. I had been given the Union Army's best guesses. Accordingly, Jimmy headed us for a well-traveled, east/west road just south of the hills I'd been on the night before. During the next several hours, we met lots of folks – a few were soldiers – stragglers or deserters. I had no idea how to determine which. Jimmy did most of the talking – that is, Jimmy done most a the talkin'. I was catchin' on. Before, I hadn't studied his speech pattern because it didn't matter to me what it was. I understood him just fine. Suddenly, it had moved front and center.

A rag-tag group of five soldiers – young privates – approached us from the east. Jimmy engaged them in conversation; his ability to generate believable lies out of thin air amazed me.

"Johnny, here, is General Baker's nephew and he has troublin' family news that needs ta be delivered. Any idea where we can find him?"

"Not for sure. Rumor has it there's a big buildup under way halfway between here an Little Rock. Some miles south a the road. Sorry, kid. Best we can do. Good luck."

More of the South's finest – nice folks in every way. They shared their sincere concern for me. I liked them. I had to wonder how many just like them I'd already killed. I hated war.

"Nice going, Jimmy. Good story. You keep amazing me. Let's keep using it."

He nodded and clearly needed to respond to how he had interpreted my comment.

"I'm undependable, I hate rules, and I've never been fully loyal ta nothin', but I'm *not* dumb."

"I'm coming to believe that more every time you open your mouth. Hope I haven't indicated that I thought otherwise."

He shrugged.

"I guess I just assume that about folks – that they'll think I'm dumb. Always seemed that way – people thinkin' I got no smarts."

"Smarts can refer to two very different things, Jimmy. They are often confused. First, it's about how much you know – knowledge – education. Second, it's about how quickly you catch on to new things and how well you can remember things – often

called intelligence. No doubt you're high in intelligence. Seems maybe you haven't had opportunities to learn about lots of school sort of things. That would be the amount of knowledge side of smarts."

"If that was true, I s'pose I'd have ta know it – that I was quick thinkin' and clever but didn't know a lot a things."

"Yes, I'd say you would."

"Here's a offer I never done made nobody – you fill me with knowin' about things and I'll use my clever to protect you and get you on with your mission. Maybe that was a question."

"Sounds good to me. Just what I need in my life right now – the help you indicate and somebody willing to listen to me go on about things that I think are important to know."

He smiled. We seemed to have another deal. It diminished neither one of us. Those were the very best kinds.

We kept to the road. Several others verified what the soldiers had told us about the buildup. We kept to a brisk pace and didn't stop until dusk.

"There should be a creek a ways south where we can make camp for the night – take a swim and wash up – clean up that stinkin' jacket you're wearin'."

"You noticed."

We shared smiles and raised brows.

He had remembered accurately – about the creek. We dropped our things at a spot partly sheltered by a rock outcropping – ten yards from the water. There were nearby trees – oaks and pines. The creek cut a fairly deep channel there and made for a good cooldown session in the water.

I was impressed with how well his wounds had already healed. I was saddened he had to have received them.

I worked on the jacket with my one bar of soap and later hung it near the fire, hoping it would dry overnight. Wool stunk when wet but dried relatively fast. Hung so it dripped, should hasten things.

I had a well-stocked larder – one entire backpack – beans, jerky, salt pork, biscuits, already cooked bacon, a good-sized loaf of bread, and a couple little cakes. We started with them. We were boys – it was reassuring the war hadn't yet sucked that out of us.

We talked.

“So, the war,” I said, hoping that setting the topic would be enough to hear his take on things – see where he needed to go with it.

“Ain’t seen nothin’ good about it, yet. You?”

“No. Mostly just terrible. You’d think in modern times like this, men could work things out – sit down together, talk it all out, offer some give and take, get a few things they wanted and give up a few things the others wanted. That’s how civilized men should go about things, I believe.”

“I like that – give an take to avoid war,” Jimmy began. “Old men are pig-headed and greedy. They think they deserve ta get everything their way no matter what – just because they’re old. In war, I’m thinkin’ that ‘*what*’ is mostly offerin’ up somebody else’s boys ta be killed, ya know.”

I hadn’t expected that level of thinking from him. I was ashamed of myself. I’d noticed it all my life. People tended to think other people who were different from themselves, weren’t as smart or capable. It was like something inside folks that took ‘different’ to mean dangerous or bad or inferior. I may have done that very thing with Jimmy because of his accent – er, *variety* – and maybe his grammar and vocabulary. I was ashamed. I wondered if I should apologize. I’d wait and see how things went.

About that; the grammar he used *did* follow a dependable set of rules and within those guidelines, Jimmy spoke perfect-ly. I had a lot of things to consider.

I mentioned something that was eating at me.

“Lots of boys got killed up east of Fort Smith last night – the fault of old men for sure.”

“I know. I watched. Awful. I hated you for a while over it, but I remembered bein’ in battles where we done the same thing ta you Yankees. You can take your turn hatin’ me for a while if that’ll help.

“Did it help you – to hate me for a while?”

“No. Not *your* doin’.”

I would not share the parts that *had* been my doin’ for fear . . . Oh, well. The two of us hating it all wasn’t going to change it one whit.

“What were you doing before the war – before you joined up?”

“Didn’t really never join up. Got conscripted. Soldiers come to granny’s house one night and said I was a soldier. They took me away with them, burned all my clothes and saw me into a uniform. Ain’t seen granny since.”

“Granny?”

“She raised me up from a baby. I gardened and worked around for farmers ta bring in money or trade-for-work things – milk, flour, grease, eggs. We had a pretty good life goin’, really. Didn’t always appreciate it back then.”

“How long you been a soldier?”

“Off an on for a year or so.”

“Off and on?”

“I comes and goes, ya know. We’re good fighters but terrible record keepers. When I’d come across a outfit with good mess and easy duty, I’d stick around a while.”

He offered a grin, which seemed to conclude that discussion. I didn’t press.”

“You. How long?”

“After two months of training camp, I guess it’s been a couple of weeks, now, maybe.”

“Wow. Two battles in your first couple a weeks. Sorry.”

I wasn’t sure just how to take that, but, again, didn’t press. I shrugged and nodded. If that had been good enough for my Captain, I figured it was good enough for my Jimmy.

By the time we unrolled our blankets for the night, I had come to know my intriguing friend much better. I wasn’t sure I was comfortable yet, but I believed it was coming. I also had mastered the basic survival skills for navigating my way around inside a Confederate camp – not that much different from Union. Jimmy indicated that although I had the grammar and word forms of his southern variety of English (those were not his exact words), something was missing in the sound and delivery.

“It’s too uptight! You northerners always talk uptight like if you don’t rush on ta the next word it might get lost or somethin’.”

The next day I tried repeating most everything he said and could tell I was gettin’ betta perty fast. Spoken properly, ‘Southern’

was quite pretty and soothing. It seemed honest rather than pretentious like some of the northern versions I'd heard. It was clearly less precise in many ways, but I figured that just reflected the more laid-back approach to life I was discovering in the south. Only in the south was mosey a speed. Everybody always had time to talk and help and listen.

Word along the road continued to support the rumors we'd heard earlier. By noon we had a good idea where the force was gathering and, most important, that it was General Baker's command.

Several hours later, we were looking down on the encampment from a hilltop. I suddenly understood why my Captain was interested – concerned, really, I supposed. There were thousands of troops, dozens of cannons, and row after row of support wagons. I wondered how they managed to find enough food to feed such a huge number of soldiers. It probably had to do with the large number of heavily escorted wagons, constantly coming and going.

The camp was divided into a half dozen sections, each spread out around officer tents and mess tables. Perhaps I could use that to my advantage. At that moment, I had no idea how.

"Well, I guess this is it," I said. "Time ta get minglin'."

"What we lookin' for, again?"

"That will be my concern. I agreed not to put your loyalty on the spot, remember?"

He shrugged. We started down the hill. There were lookout stations, raised high on log legs, spread out along the ridges, but we didn't encounter any sentries in the usual sense of the term. I supposed with ten thousand rifles stuffed into a couple of square blocks, none was needed. Jimmy waved up at the lookouts. They waved back.

I doubted there were enough Union soldiers in the state to take on such a force – that was based on no real information. I had heard rumors about how most of our forces had been sent further south into Georgia and Alabama and east through Tennessee to Virginia and the like.

We entered the camp without incident. It was noisy – just from the boy's, normal, voices – like the hum from a healthy beehive. I was taken by how young and poorly uniformed they

were compared with the Union force. Lots of them couldn't have been more than fourteen. They were sitting, mostly, talking with each other. I could detect no constructive activity. They were just waiting. I figured that gave them lots of time to be worried and scared – a poor command decision, I figured – but who knew? Maybe it just reflected that life-style thing.

We just walked around. I needed to find out where the general's headquarters was. My hunch was that it would be near the center of it all. I headed us in that direction. My hunch was right – three tents flying a variety of battle flags – lots of officers – runners moving in and out all the time – messengers, I assumed, helping keep the massive gathering organized.

I studied how those runners operated – communicated. Mostly by words – seldom by written memos or such. We spent the rest of the afternoon following them from place to place, and with less difficulty than I had expected, soon knew which officers were in charge of which sections of the camp. Jimmy said very little unless there was some instructive value in it for me. I knew he was taking it all in – was learning everything I was. He navigated life saving his words for important exchanges – only seldom did frivolous things cross his lips.

We went through chow lines with no problem. They were a friendly lot and were eager to talk. I encouraged it, listening rather than asking. I didn't dare chance coming under suspicion. At dusk, they lit huge fires throughout the camp – fires so large they were fueled by sections of tree trunks drug in by teams of horses. Clearly, they were not concerned about being located. I didn't understand. Those were not fires that could quickly be extinguished if the camp were set upon by the enemy. They obviously felt secure there in the heart of the state.

I figured the runners had the best access to information.

“The runners all wear armbands – three different colors. Tell me about that.”

“Colors show what kind a information they can carry – blue is low level stuff, yellow medium level stuff and red is high level stuff. Ya see a red runner commin' at ya, ya better move out a the way. He's got every privilege.”

“What do you mean by 'level'?”

“How important or urgent it is, I guess is the best way a

puttin' it."

That had been my assumption.

"I need a red band. Any ideas?"

"You stay here. I'll just be a minute."

Apparently, stealing armbands was within the bounds of what he was willing to do. He reappeared a few minutes later. My upper left arm was soon decked out in red as a courier for the highest-level information.

"If that's gonna do ya any good, ya need ta be close to a officer's tent."

"The general's tent, you mean."

I pointed. We moved and arranged our blankets in among a half dozen other runners. The system seemed to be, sleep until called. From time to time, an aid would emerge from a tent flap and call out a color – almost always red from the general's tent. One of the runners would hurry to him. Sometimes the boy would be told something, and he'd take off on the trot. Sometimes he'd be ushered into the tent and reemerge shortly to be on his way. Mostly, only reds entered. Blues and yellows hardly ever. Seemed to be an efficient system. I asked Jimmy what qualifications were needed for each level.

"Officer's recommendation, I think. Reds is thought to be the smartest."

That made sense – comprehend quickly and remember more effectively – ability to understand and pass on officer-level vocabulary.

We made ourselves comfortable. Jimmy's presence hadn't been questioned even though he wore no arm band. I turned to him and suggested he probably needed to get one.

He reached into his coat pocket and removed one of each color.

"Which one, ya think?"

We had a good chuckle. He chose blue.

"Matches my eyes," he gave as the reason for his choice.

I believed it had more to do with the lesser responsibility it represented. I wouldn't imply that he was lazy; he just preferred a passive relationship with responsibility.

We had come off several long, hard days on the road and

were ready to sleep early.

Why, I'm not sure, but I was jolted into instant wakefulness by the call, "Red". Clearly, I had my head set to it. I jumped up and reported to the aide. There I went! I was into it. He spoke without questioning my legitimacy.

"The General needs the troop count from Colonel Gates."

I knew where to go. Jimmy understood. It was the first time I had ventured out solo. My chest tightened – just a bit. Actually, I felt pretty confident. After a few minutes, I stopped in front of the Colonel's tent and announced myself in the manner I had witnessed the other runners doing.

"Red Runner, here, for Colonel Gates."

An aide showed himself. I passed on the message and was escorted inside. The aide restated my request. Without really looking up, the Colonel wrote on a scrap of paper, handed it to his aide who handed it to me. I reached it into my shirt pocket inside my jacket and left. I hoped it was proper to carry it there. I had witnessed nothing to suggest how that was to be done – that happening inside the tents. It seemed the safest place. Apparently, it was acceptable. Nothing was said. Once away from there, I glanced at the number, of course – 1,500.

Back at the General's tent, I handed it over and rejoined Jimmy. My chest was pounding.

"Go okay?" he asked.

"I did fine. The verdict is still out about my heart."

He smiled. I prepared to return to my blanket. The aide reappeared and beckoned to me while I was still standing.

"Red Runner."

I hadn't anticipated another call so soon. He specifically wanted me. Interesting.

"Yes, Sir."

Again, inside.

Again, an important piece of information. That time the General spoke directly to me.

"Colonel Gates is to prepare to move to Henderson at dawn. He is to report here immediately."

That was a big deal. I needed to get the message to my contact – the owner of a country store, five or so miles north. Not

knowing exactly where I'd end up, my Captain had me memorize six places in the area where I would find contacts. That one proved to be relatively handy.

I had two decisions to make. My response to the first was simple, get the information to my contact as quickly as possible. The second was less clear. Did I deliver the message to the Reb Colonel first or let it go and disrupt things for a few hours? In that case a few hours probably didn't matter for the Union forces. I would deliver it to maintain my good image. I intended to return.

That done, I spoke to Jimmy.

"I have to leave camp for a few hours."

"Not without me, you don't."

"Have to find a contact and pass on information. I figured you wouldn't want to be a part of it. I shouldn't reveal his identity to a Reb soldier, anyway."

"I won't look, but I *am* goin' along."

"Okay. Promise me I'm not going to regret this."

"I promise, but ya know, if I was gonna betray ya, I'd make that *same* promise."

I looked him in his eyes. I would trust him. We got our things together and moved north across the camp.

Near the edge, we were approached by an older soldier – sergeant stripes.

"What you two up to?"

I had prepared myself for such a situation and pointed at my sleeve.

"Red Runner on orders for look-out towers."

He looked us over but made no effort to stop us.

Fifty yards out, we came upon a sentry more nearly our age – apparently, they *were* in place at night.

"What are you up to – leavin' camp?"

Jimmy saved our hides. He put his arm around the boy's shoulders and spoke in a confidential tone close to his face.

"We got what ya might call a appointment with a beautiful girl at Mama's place – Center Crossing. Ya wouldn't deny us all that now, would ya?"

He grinned.

“Make sure you’re back for roll call in the morning.”

“Lessin’ we get married, we’ll be here.”

The soldier chuckled. I was again impressed with my friend’s skill at manipulating people. I didn’t linger over the thought he might be manipulating me.

I still felt uneasy about giving up my contact to Jimmy. We alternated trot and walk.

We came upon the store – *Macky’s Mercantile* – a small, white, two story, building sitting back from the road we’d taken coming east. It sat at the edge of a very small town. It was dark inside.

A note on the front door read, ‘After hours use back door’. We rounded the building and I pulled a chain beside the door. I heard the bell jingle inside. Jimmy sat back against the trunk of a tree well off to one side letting me handle things in private. I appreciated that. I waited patiently – perhaps a minute. A light came on. A man in a robe appeared inside the window. He opened the door, perhaps a quarter of the way.

“Yes?”

It had been offered as a question. I responded.

“I’m told that although President Lincoln is not handsome, he tells great jokes.”

It was the password I had been given.

He hurried me inside, closed the door, and pulled the curtains together. We stood there. I continued.

“Message for Captain Blake, near Fort Smith. Confederate contingent of fifteen hundred troops commanded by Colonial Gates on way to Henderson at dawn. Leaving massive congregation of many thousands in a broad valley five miles south of Macky’s Mercantile. Led by General Baker. Information provided by J. Smallcoin. Most urgent.”

He repeated it to me word for word. I was impressed. I nodded. He turned down the lantern he was carrying and hurried me out the back door.

“Wanna stop at Mama’s?” Jimmy asked.

“There really is such a place?”

“Sure is. A couple blocks east. A dozen girls – well, some ain’t actually been girls for some years.”

“Sorry. I want to remain disease free for my wedding night.”

“That’s one way to go, I guess.”

He didn’t bring it up again.

By the time we made it back to the general’s tent, it was going on midnight. We slept ‘til awakened by reveille at six. Breakfast was biscuits, salt pork, and beans. In preparation, it seemed to be a cut above the universal military meal – salt pork was pan-fried not boiled, butter for the biscuits, and beans sweetened with sugar or honey.

“Best eatin’ I’ve had at any a our camps,” Jimmy offered. “Must have ta do with the general bein’ here.”

He actually salted his salt pork.

Earlier, I had seen a map on the general’s desk but hadn’t gotten close enough to tell what it was all about. I figured a large map filled with arrows and names written in pencil had to be important. Somehow, I needed to get a longer, closer, look at it.

“Can I spin you a hypothetical – a pretend situation, Jimmy?”

“Sure.”

He repeated the word, hypothetical, under his breath as if practicing.

We were sitting back against a long-fallen log near the western edge of camp. We were working on biscuits we’d pocketed from the mess table. We had removed our armbands for the time being.

“Let’s say there was a well-guarded tent and inside was a desk with a map on it and a guy wanted to get a long enough look at it to memorize it. How do you suppose a guy could go about doing that – making the needed private time with it?”

“Diversion.”

“More.”

“Set up a fight or a racket or a fire – something close by and when the guards were distracted, he could go in and get his look.”

“I doubt if a general would get distracted.”

“I see. Then, set it up to happen while the general was elsewhere. Even generals have to visit the bushes.”

“That’s an interesting improvement.”

“The map-lookin’ guy’s riskin’ being shot pure and simple, ya know.”

I listened but didn’t respond. He paused as if thinking and then continued.

“There’s a huge ordinance an munitions tent some ten yards east of the general’s tent – I mean huge! A fire creepin’ close ta that would draw most a the attention, I imagine.”

“Are you indicating my make-believe was less than believable?”

“I’m sayin’ you’re a terrible liar. Your ears get red. I was surprised you were able to pull off that, ‘Red Runner on orders’, thing last night. It was good, by the way.”

“Since you offered the diversion idea, does that mean you’re up to helping or would that cross your line?”

“Always loved fireworks, myself. How about you?”

Again, he had consented without really agreeing. Oh, for a peek inside that head of his.

I raised my eyebrows but also had words.

“Dangerous for us to be that close to such a potential explosion.”

“You didn’t say nothin’ ‘bout havin’ ta be safe. Shall I keep thinkin’?”

“No. It’s a ‘two birds with one stone’ thing. You have that expression in the South?”

“Just imagine we invented it. How long will you need?”

“Five minutes will be good.”

“Sounds like lots a stuff to remember. Why don’t you just take the map?”

“If they found it was gone, they’d surely change up their plans – for security reasons – the map would be no good to us. Anyway, I have a great memory. My friends and I played a game like that – lay out items under a towel, expose them for ten seconds and then cover them up. We’d each draw what we remembered – where each item had been. The one who remembered the most, won.”

“I bet you won a lot. Great game. I’ll even give the North credit for inventin’ that one.”

“Finally! Something!”

It was worth eye contact and prolonged chuckles between us, but I figured it represented a whole lot more than that. I grew more comfortable.

We approached the General's tent.

"Hmm. Day or night?"

I had been thinking out loud more than asking the question.

At that moment, the general and two aides left the tent, mounted up, and rode off. The front flaps had been secured.

"How about *now*?" I asked.

There were two soldiers left to guard the place – both outside at the front flaps. I could slide in under the rear. I had no intention of making suggestions to Jimmy about his part in it all. He had a wealth of devious knowledge I was quite sure I didn't even want to learn about.

I made sure nobody was watching then rolled under the canvas at the rear of the tent. I was alone inside – good thing, since I hadn't even considered the possibility of being confronted in there. A lantern had been left burning low, probably signaling the quick return of the general. The map was still on the desk. Up close, I saw there were many more things than I could possibly remember. Still, I selected arrows which clearly represented future troop movements – there were dates. I caught a few place names and some officer's names. With other things I had learned, I figured it would be a treasure.

I heard voices growing loud out back and knew my compadre had set his part of things into play. A bugler sounded retreat. Sensing the imminent danger, some officer had apparently ordered the area evacuated. Jimmy followed my lead and slipped inside.

"Time to make tracks before the big boom."

It suddenly hit me.

"How about *three* birds with one stone?"

I spoke as I rolled the map into a tight tube.

"Set this place on fire, now! Then follow me out the front. We can stop running once we reach the Pacific."

He didn't understand the reference but clearly liked the potential for some excitement. He dropped one match into the overflowing wastebasket beside the desk. I tossed the kerosene

lamp against the wall and he flipped a second match onto a stack of newspapers on the cot in the corner. Excellent improvisation, I thought. I hated the smell of burning canvas. We were twenty yards away by the time anybody noticed the tent. We were fifty yards away by time the explosion leveled a large part of the camp.

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CHAPTER SIX

Exhaustion

Everybody was running away. We mixed right in, but at the edge of the encampment, we kept on going. We were soon beyond the towers where the lookouts' attention had been drawn back toward the camp.

We arrived at the base of the hill across the valley to the west. Keeping low and using natural cover, we worked our way to the top, descended the other side, and entered a pine forest, where we collapsed on our backs onto a bed of brown needles.

Catching each other's gaze, we broke smiles. Our initial nervous chuckles had soon become full blown, tummy-holding, laughter. I wondered if the human heart could beat too fast or lungs breathe too hard. It didn't matter. Later, I would come to understand we were sharing joy and emotional release about our escape, and nothing more.

We lay there for some time, exhausted and breathing heavily. Presently, we sat up – me cross-legged and Jimmy more reclining on his side, his head supported in his hand.

“I need some good place to hide this map on my person in case we get stopped, Jimmy.”

I was holding it on my lap. He got to his knees and reached for it stopping short of touching it. I understood and handed it over. He unrolled it and folded it one time across the middle then rerolled it even tighter than I had. He handed it back – a compact, eight-inch scroll.

“Down the front a your long johns. Been frisked a hundred times, myself. *Never* been frisked there.”

I made it so, while I spoke.

“I think we better keep to the grass well away from the road and shadow it on east back to camp. Likely be messengers riding the road for some time. Some might even be out looking for us in case I wasn’t as smart about things as I thought I was.”

“I may make a Southern boy out a ya yet, Jonathan Penny. Ya show great potential.”

I laughed not sure if it was at the notion or the way he put it.

We were too excited to sleep so we broke out jerky, set an easy pace, and started back.

* * *

We got the camp in our sights just before ten o’clock on the morning of the second day – I had been in a hurry to get back. Jimmy stayed behind. We surprised each other with an embrace before parting. I removed the rolled map to my inside pocket before proceeding, thinking it would seem inelegant to remove it from my long johns in the presence of the Captain.

I raised my hands high as I approached the line of sentries. I had come upon one who knew me, making it safe and easier to enter. Still, I showed my pass to protect the Corporal’s interests. He escorted me across camp so no nervous, new recruit would take it upon himself to put a hole through a misplaced gray uniform.

At the tent, I stood up straight and identified myself to the guards.

“Corporal Penny reporting to Captain Blake.”

The young guard entered and returned, the Captain at his heels. We exchanged brief salutes and then, an unexpected, lengthy, warm, hand-on-hand shake.

“Come in. Welcome back. The information you sent was important. Received it yesterday morning from a mounted currier. Arrangements have already been made for the fifth, sixth, and seventh battalions, under General Wilson, to engage him well south of Baker’s camp. Should be a rout. The Union needs another quick victory. Good work, soldier.”

“Thank you. Tell me when you’re ready for me to get to the *really* important information?”

He was in the midst of putting on a puzzled brow when a runner arrived and was escorted in without being announced. He blurted out his news.

“General Baker’s encampment was blown to bits a couple of days ago, Sir. Sabotage is suspected. May have been a thousand or more casualties.”

He turned and left. The Captain turned back to me.

“I’m getting the idea you have more to tell me. Take a seat.”

“May I suggest you summon a stenographer, Sir?”

He did.

I explained the explosion and handed him the map. Over the next hour, I passed on everything I had learned about Baker’s troops, provisions, and support equipment. I felt it necessary to describe the role Jimmy had played and suggested the mission could not have succeeded without him.

“Can we offer him a blue uniform?”

“No, Sir. You have to understand him. It’s complicated. He’ll assist and protect me but insists that he remains a loyal Confederate. I don’t pretend to understand, myself. I just ask your patrols to leave him alone. He’s out there in the hills somewhere all by himself.”

“Very well.”

He reached into his pocket and produced a large, silver, coin. Looking at it, he turned it over several times in his hand. Plainly, it was important to him.

“Offered by General Grant to some of us who served under him. If your friend will carry this, it will become his guardian angel – just have him show it when confronted. I’ll put the word out.”

“You are very kind. I’m sure I can get it to him. Thank you. You must understand. He is as stubborn as any mule you ever encountered and may refuse it.”

“All we can do is try. It is his life to live.”

He added a question I wasn’t expecting.

“You doing okay?”

“I don’t know how to answer you, Sir.”

He didn’t press.

With that, I stood. He stood and reached out and placed his hand on my shoulder as we moved toward the front.

“Where have you been all my life, Corporal?”

“Truth be told, Sir, getting myself into the worst kind of pickles a boy my age could ever get into, but maybe later on that.”

I saluted, turned on a heel, and left.

I had not considered it before – a *thousand* casualties! Lumped together, all the horrific things I had done up to then – all the boys I had killed – didn’t amount to a drop in a bucket compared with that. A thousand! Even if that had become an exaggeration as word traveled west, what had I done? In the moment back there, I hadn’t spent so much as a second considering the potential human disaster of what we were about to do. I was strictly focused on that map. A thousand lives. How could I go on? Strength drained from me.

I wiped at the tears as I crossed camp to a secluded spot by the wagons.

I was exhausted and found a place in the cool of the grass and the wagon’s shadow. I slept even before I ate.

That seemed to prove it; I really had left that seventeen-year-old me out there on the fields, somewhere. I had liked *that* boy. I hated *this* boy.

I slept for some time – until the call for the noon meal rang out from the big, iron, triangle. I wondered if there would be beans or beans. Maybe, even, beans. I began the walk toward the mess table. Kids I didn’t know came up and slapped me on the back. I didn’t understand. As I neared the line, there were finger whistles and cheers and clapping. Soldier after soldier moved me ahead of him up the line. Word was out – the Baker thing. I hated that.

I didn’t know how to react. At first, I held up my hand to acknowledge it. I soon drew it down and bowed my head. I didn’t deserve the accolades of a hero, so I wouldn’t acknowledge them. What I deserved was that hangman’s noose – apparently, a thousand times over. It became clear that it was not killing that society frowned on but the circumstances under which it occurred – in a backyard in Peoria it was cause to be hung; on the battlefield it was cause for medals. I had thought about it before – there was no universal definition of right and wrong.

I wanted to take off and run away – maybe to that Pacific

Ocean I had referred to earlier. I didn't. I filled my bowl and walked back to the wagons. Thankfully, they left me alone. What had I gotten myself into? I had to wonder how Jimmy felt. I hoped he didn't learn about the extent of the devastation we caused. I needed to get him his guardian angel coin, but I was reluctant to talk with him in case he raised issues.

I sure hoped that map was worth it. I had no idea what that meant. Worth what? One map in exchange for a thousand lives? Now we could intercept rebel troops and kill *them* instead of having them find us and kill *us* according to their plan. Blue or gray, dead boys were dead boys. I needed to get away.

There was a voice.

"Corporal Penny, are you here?"

It wasn't Jimmy. It was the Captain.

"I'm here, Sir. Down here under the wagon. Let me get up."

"Stay put. Let me join you. Is that okay?"

"Of course, I suppose, Sir."

I crawled out but remained there on the ground. The Captain was already seated, leaning back against a wheel, his bad leg straight out in front of him.

"Is there something?" I asked more than a little confused.

"I guess that was what I was going to ask you. You've been through a lot this past week. I wondered if there was anything you might need."

"For this terrible war to be over. Can you do *that* for me? I'm sorry for that, Sir; it was sarcastic. I'm sorry."

"Sometimes a little sarcasm helps relieve the anger."

"Do you think I'm angry?"

"Wouldn't be normal if you weren't. *I'm* angry."

"What are you angry about, Sir?"

"Having to be a part of this war. Having to send young men into battle knowing I'm sending many of them to their deaths. Having to be away from my wife and children. Doubting if this war will really make things better. Lots of reasons, I guess."

"I assumed you were regular army, Sir."

"Not quite! History and English Teacher at Jefferson Academy in Columbia, Missouri. Got pressed into service – the war seems to need lots of men who qualify to be officers. I really

had no choice. I had joined right out of high school and found I hated it so quit. When this thing broke out, they came to get me.”

“Children?”

“Two daughters, six and ten.”

“I’m sorry for you, Sir. You should be back with them.”

“What brought *you* to join – drafted?” he asked.

“In a way. You’ll think badly of me if I tell you.”

“Your choice on that.”

Silence set in for a short while. I spoke believing some follow up was necessary.

“I got in trouble and the judge pushed me in this direction. That enough?”

“Certainly. I was just making conversation.”

“Can I tell you something?”

“If you’re sure you really want to tell me.”

“I hate being a soldier. I hate this war. I used to like myself but since all this, I really hate myself.”

“I’m sorry. Sounds like you need a vacation.”

“A vacation from a war? Sure, on that!”

“A pass. A reward for your recent service. A week. You have to give me your word you’ll return.”

“Can’t take it if it’s a reward for all the killing I’ve done. No, Sir. Thanks, but I couldn’t take it under those circumstances.”

“How about as a medical pass.”

“I’m not wounded or sick, Sir. That would be like cheating – lying.”

“Stress is a medical condition. Surely you will agree you’re reacting badly to the stress of all this.”

I took time to think about it. I didn’t want to be tricked.

“I suppose I can see what you’re saying.”

“Where are you from, Penny?”

“Peoria – that’s in western Illinois.”

“I know of it. Been there, even. On the river. Could you make it there and back in a week? The train up through Missouri, maybe?”

“Oh, I would not go *there*. I would accompany Jimmy back to see his granny – she raised him and depended on him for most

everything. He was conscripted. I'm certain they need to see each other."

"Not home?"

"No, Sir. I can't face the mess of a life I left back there."

"Where does Jimmy's granny live?"

"Not sure. In Arkansas. Evidently too far away for him to easily go back and visit. He's been gone a year and hasn't made it back."

"You are quite fond of your friend."

"I am and for the life of me I can't say why. He's most everything I was taught not to be, but we've grown to care for each other, I guess you'd say."

"I guess so. I'll make you a deal – one my superiors may not like. A ten-day pass. You agree not to request another pass for six months."

"Really? I can do that."

I got to my feet though nothing suggested that was either necessary or appropriate. Something had suddenly changed inside me – black turning to white, heavy turning to light, loathing turning to something less. Perhaps the Captain was right – stress was a real medical condition. Hmm.

He extended his hand for help getting up. He took out a pad and wrote on it.

"Take this to the paymaster. He will provide you with three months pay – you haven't been paid yet, correct?"

"Correct. I was told new recruits would receive their first pay after three months – I figured that was incentive to not desert after training was completed."

"And this is coming upon three months. Two months in training at \$8 a month would be \$16 and one month split between private and corporal – say \$14 – comes to thirty dollars."

He finished the note, signed it, and spoke as he handed it over.

"He'll close his window at two. You better scoot."

"When does my pass begin?"

"The moment you have your pay in your hand. On the books, we'll count it from dawn tomorrow. Good luck. Remember, I'm counting on your return."

“Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir. I’m sorry there’s not a pass for you.”

He offered a sad smile. I was suddenly filled with energy. I collected my things and headed for the pay master’s wagon. That done, I loaded my pack with trail food, loaded my box with ammunition and filled my canteen. I stopped for a moment to consider I had all that I needed in life right there with me. It amazed me again how little it took to survive. I shrugged off the fact I was still outfitted in gray figuring that was to my advantage.

With \$30 in my wallet and a full belly, I headed for the perimeter, hoping Jimmy had eyes on me.

I left from near the spot I’d entered to give him something to work from. Forty yards beyond the sentry line I heard it.

“Boo! Ya don’t scare easy. No fun.”

First, I handed him the coin and explained its purpose. Humorously, I thought, he bit into it but accepted it with a simple, thanks.

Then, I confronted the more immediate situation.

“How far to granny’s?”

“Why?”

“Because that’s where we’re going.”

“You mean that? How?”

“I got a ten-day pass.”

“You’re givin’ up your leave ta go home with me?”

“Not giving it up, just choosing to use it in that way. You don’t seem excited.”

“I just don’t understand why you’d do a lamebrained thing like that for me.”

“Don’t you want to see your granny?”

“Sure, more than about anything, I guess. I don’t have a leave pass. If I get down there and somebody in town questions me, I can be in big trouble – they’ll call desertion. Main reason I haven’t gone back before, I guess.”

“Before we get there, we’ll find paper and ink and I’ll write us out two of the most impressive leave passes you’ve ever seen. Jefferson Davis, himself, would accept them. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Agreed, then. Point the way.”

“Southwest. *Yates* is nearly a hundred miles away. Lots a hills between here an there.”

“I got my boots on.”

“I guess *I* got *your* boots on, too. You give ‘em ta me, remember?”

No response was needed. Southwest it was. Two young men sporting gray uniforms, most likely safe there in Confederate territory.

We had both put in some sack time that day so – that, combined with our excitement – meant we were up to five or six hours on the trail. Mid-afternoon turned to dusk and dusk to darkness.

Earlier, I had discovered I enjoyed traveling at night. There was no one thing about it – maybe the stars and moon, the cool, the quiet, freedom from strangers. I didn’t know for sure. ‘Quiet’, probably came closest especially since I’d been part of the war. War was noisy even when it was quiet.

That night, the sky held a moon that was heading toward half full. It was crisp and clear. The moon seemed particularly bright and focused. It was like I could see some sort of pock marks on its service. Whatever that was, it gave it unusual texture and dimension – plumped rather than flat. I noticed things like that. Lots of guys didn’t.

We had been walking in silence – I supposed we each suddenly had lots of things on our minds. If they were things we could resolve, I hoped we resolved them. If they were things we couldn’t, then I hoped we could stop fretting over them for the next ten days.

It stopped us in our tracks. There in front of us, coming toward us through the darkness, was a white sheet – no, a white shirt – just a white shirt, hanging there – maybe floating – sleeves moving as if on its determined way someplace. We stopped as it drew near. I didn’t believe in ghosts and yet . . .

Jimmy had it figured out first.

“A darkie, I’m thinkin,” he whispered.

I moved ahead. Jimmy held back. Two eyes appeared just above it. He was right. I spoke.

“Hey. Nice night for a walk.”

I extended my hand for a shake. Jimmy came up behind me and pulled my arm back.

“Ya can’t shake with a darkie?”

There was an element of disbelief in his words.

“Been doing it all my life. What do you mean, I can’t?”

“He’s a *darkie*.”

That seemed to be his full and complete answer. We seemed to be at an impasse. Keeping my hands to myself, I turned back to the shirt.

“I’m Johnny. This is Jimmy. We’re heading south, but I guess that’s obvious.”

It was a kid about our age – a bit younger, maybe. There in the darkness, he seemed to just be shirt and eyes. His eyes suggested he was terrified. I figured it was our gray uniforms, so I tried to put him at ease.

“We have nothing against you. Don’t be frightened. Are you in need of help?”

“You can’t offer help to a darkie. What *is* wrong with you?”

“I’ve offered help to black folks all my life. What’s wrong with *you*?”

There it was, I figured – the very foundation of the war being played out among the three principals – a southerner, a northerner and a black person whose knees were shaking like laundry flapping on a line. It brought it all home in a hurry. Back home we had a black stable man and my father employed black women to clean the bank. As a baby I had been cared for by a black woman; during the first years of my life I’m sure I had looked up into her face more often than I had my mother’s.

I understood they didn’t live lives as equals, but they were accepted as a part of our lives – our society. We certainly didn’t shun them or mistreat them – not in a physical sense, at least. They could come and go as they pleased. One thing became instantly clear – Jimmy didn’t know squat about black people. He had, no doubt, lived his life quite separate from them. He seemed as scared of this boy as the boy was of us.

We could move on, or I could try to turn the standoff into something better. I wondered if Jimmy would abandon me if I tried that.

Having learned the shake thing was inappropriate there on that road that night, I continued speaking, instead.

“We’re on our way to visit Jimmy’s granny down in Yates. You know where Yates is?”

He nodded.

“Can you give us some idea how long a trip it is?”

Again, he nodded but didn’t provide any follow-up.

“Two days? Three days?” I asked hoping a prompt would produce something helpful.

He sidestepped so he was standing more in front of me than Jimmy.

“Three by the roads. Two by the creeks.”

“I guess I don’t understand – road – creeks.”

He moved sill closer, keeping his eyes on Jimmy while speaking to me.

“Road goes up and down the hills. Made fer wagons, mostly. Slow goin’. Creeks has paths that take ya ‘long the valleys. No up an down. Not fer wagons. Faster fer people an horses – maybe twice quicker.”

“I guess we’ll need to keep to the road, then, because we don’t know about the creeks.”

In an unexpected response, he seemed to make an offer.

“/ knows the creeks.”

I looked at Jimmy. He avoided my face and kicked at the ground. I addressed him.

“What you say, Jimmy? Want to save a couple of days – more time with your granny?”

He hitched his head for me to come to him. I held up a finger to the new kid indicating I’d be right back. I went to Jimmy who turned aside and lowered his voice.

“If we get caught travelin’ with a darkie by the wrong folks, they’ll hang us right along with him.”

I touched my neck. There had been too many hanging references in my life those past few months.

“I have the idea you can come up with a flawless cover story that will prevent such a thing if you put your mind to it – if you are willing to. I’m not forcing it, just offering a possibility.”

Jimmy looked beyond me toward the shirt.

“Save us days, huh? You handle him?”

“Handle him?”

“Do the talkin’ and stuff – the relatin’.”

“I guess so. He really bothers you, doesn’t he?”

“You just don’t understand how it is down here.”

“I’m sure you’re right.”

“I mean what you’re proposin’ can be really dangerous.”

“I have already taken your word for that. Like I said, we can just move on by ourselves.”

“See what you can find out about him?”

Jimmy surprised me with that. Some big, thick, door seemed to have opened a crack. I returned to the kid.

“Like I said, I’m Johnny. He’s Jimmy. You?”

“Ezra.”

“I’m seventeen. Jimmy’s going on nineteen.”

“I guess I’m about fifteen.”

I tried not to let my surprise about his uncertainty show.

“You on your way someplace now?”

“Away from some place, I guess.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Massa William done told us we was free. He give us a choice ta stay and work fer pay or leave ta make it on our own. He said that was gonna be real hard, ya know? I got a wanderin’ heart. Always thinkin’ ‘bout how things was other places, so I left. Been real hard like massa done said. I’m headed north. Heard life’s easier fer my kind up there.”

I turned and looked at Jimmy, waiting for his decision.

“Ya can ask him, I guess.”

“So, Ezra, you take us to Yates – creek route? We’ll share our food. Get us down there in two days and there will even be a half dollar in it for you.”

He looked puzzled. I took one from my pocket and showed it to him. He offered an uncertain nod and I could tell he’d seen one before – just didn’t understand about it – is value – about money in general, I figured.

The near silence that had surrounded us was suddenly

broken by the sound of horses – three or four, I figured. They were upon us at a gallop from the south before we could make any move of our own. They were as unsavory a looking group as I'd ever seen – dirty, smelly, shiny oily skin.

“What you boys doin' with a darkie? You got no reason ta be with a darkie. I think we'll do ya a big favor and take him off your hands.”

One of the men rode in close and scooped him up, laying him across his horse in front of the saddle.

/

CHAPTER SEVEN

. . . and I just may have wet my pants

Jimmy stepped up and placed the end of the barrel of his rifle against the head of the man who was manhandling Ezra.

“This man is employed by my father, Wellington Astor, owner a the Astor Plantation, largest in Ashley County. Unless ya want a bounty on your head – if I decide to leave it on top a your shoulders – I advise you ta *carefully* lower this man ta the ground.”

Without thinking, I had raised my rifle in the direction of the man who had spoken when they rode up. I took a step toward him for effect.

He managed a few words.

“Sorry. Didn’t know.”

Ezra slipped to the ground and moved to a spot behind Jimmy.

The men rode off.

Jimmy, who had not yet lowered his gun, took aim and one of the men’s hats went flying. They urged their mounts on and galloped out of sight.

I’m sure I gulped.

“You could have killed that man, Jimmy.”

“Didn’t.”

I had never seen him shoot so had no idea how good he was – suddenly, I had – suddenly, I did.

I wasn’t sure how to respond – to any of that last five

minutes. Ezra had no such problem.

“Thank ya. They was fixin’ ta hang me, ya know. Thank ya, thank ya, thank ya.”

“I think he’s mostly speaking to you, Jimmy.”

That forced his response.

“It’s okay.”

His words had mostly been spoken into the air, but they *had* been spoken.

It was as if he wanted to add an explanation but either had none or didn’t have the additional words to go with it. Maybe, he just thought it would be inappropriate. He busied himself by taking far too long reloading his rifle.

I tried to take up the slack.

“You alright, Ezra?”

“I ain’t been alright since I was old enough ta know about *not* bein’ alright. You probably can’t understand that.”

“Probably not. I’m sorry that I can’t.”

He caught and held my gaze, clearly studying me and considering what I had said. I hoped he understood I was sincere.

Words were not working well for any of us. I pointed down the road to the south. We managed ourselves in that direction. Ezra held back and followed Jimmy – apparently, his newest hero.

I prepared to make still another Yankee blunder.

“Come up and walk between us.”

Jimmy answered for him.

“Bad idea and he knows it. If he ain’t behind us, folks’ll think somethin’s fishy – whites and darkies don’t walk as equals. Doin’ it would risk the wellbein’ a all a us.”

“You from up in Yankee Land, ain’t ya?”

Ezra had finally put it all together – me approaching him with my hand out, my ignorance about the facts of life in the South, my kindnesses offered in his direction, and, likely, my ‘variety’ of English. He clearly felt safer with somebody who understood those things than with an inept do-gooder like me. I admitted my ignorance and would let them lead the way on such things.

Presently, we came to a bridge. He pointed to the creek below and moved off the road down the slope to the bank. We followed. Goodbye road. Hello trails, gurgling water, poison oak,

and water moccasins. Why was I doing this, again?

Jimmy stopped me and opened my pack. He removed a biscuit and handed it to Ezra.

“You promised, remember – ta share food?”

I had, and I had not followed through. Where was my head? I must admit, Jimmy’s response took me by surprise – some sort of integrity powerful enough to penetrate his life-long take on black people as being inferior – less deserving. My respect for the boy grew.

“Thank ya. I got line an a hook. See, the water’s thick with supper if it’s ta your likin’.”

Taking my cue from Jimmy’s reaction – a single nod – I spoke.

“Sounds good to me. I’m not a fisherman, so you’ll have to boss me.”

Their reaction puzzled me. Ezra smiled over at Jimmy. He returned it – ear to ear with a shake of his head. The idea of a ‘darkie’ bossing a white man was apparently more than a little humorous. I had a lot to learn. The two of them were developing a strange relationship. Each one uncomfortable in the presence of the other and yet saw that in some ways they had more in common than either had with me. I assumed my ‘bossing’ would come from Jimmy.

We continued walking the bank. Eventually, the two of them pointed at the same spot in the stream.

“A good hole there at the bend,” Ezra said.

I waited for an explanation. It came from Jimmy.

“Dredged out by the current where the water is forced against the bottom and outside bank. Probably six feet deep. It will be loaded with fish not caught up in the top current – free ta take the bait. Speakin’ a which, you know how ta dig for nightcrawlers?”

I set my pack back on the grass and removed my small army shovel. I dug while Ezra unwound and prepared the line – he would use about twelve feet of it. I figured I understood – distance from the bank to the deep spot and a bit more for the depth. I wanted to ask why they hadn’t cut a pole but didn’t. The baited hook and small stone tied in place as the weight just above it, worked fine without one. All that dangled from a small, thick stick tied four feet above the hook – the float.

Virtually as fast as Ezra dropped a hook, he jerked another fish out onto the bank. Jimmy released the hook, severed its head, skinned and gutted it faster than I had imagined possible. I'd feed another worm onto the hook and Ezra was back at it. Without so much as a word among us, we had established an efficient system. I figured there was a message there for our world, but didn't pursue it.

In and among those activities, Jimmy and I built a small fire, cut green sticks for skewers, and soon had our meal underway. I was not a fan of fish but had to admit, that evenin', I enjoyed it. A little lemon would have been nice – oops – my privilege showing. I wondered if either of them had ever used lemon in that way – I wondered if either of them had ever had a lemon. Of course, they had. The south was noted for its lemonade – it was in all the books. They probably had not read the books.

It made me wonder about my aversion to fish. For one thing, mother seldom cooked it. My first thought was upsetting – because Catholics ate fish on Friday's and my family didn't want to be associated with them. I shuddered even considering that might be the reason. I'd been mentally berating southerners for their prejudice – how about my own. UGH! I wondered if the war had been about Catholic's rights if I'd have participated.

After eating, we walked on into the dusk before stopping for the night. I learned that snakes – copperheads were the bad ones, it seemed – became lethargic in the cool of the night so sleeping on the ground during the dark hours was safer than during the day. Thanks a lot, guys. Until that moment, I hadn't even considered such a danger.

Although uneasy at the new prospect, I must have slept, because I woke up with the sun – a few minutes before the others. I enjoyed the time to myself – just sitting there – me, the water, the trees, and the rising sun. There in the valley, I could watch the sun's rays chase the darkness of the night across the floor and up the eastern slope behind us. It filled me with wonder. The other two took it as common place.

One thing was clear – they had many things to teach me – or, maybe, I had many things to learn from them. Hmm. I'd think about that later. Either way, I would thank them at some point.

By mid-morning, Jimmy and I had shed our coats and

opened our shirts. We had left the creek and were following a small – narrow and shallow – river, widening a bit, mile by mile. I asked its name. Neither of them knew and neither of them seemed to care. It was just the river of the moment – the river that was serving us just then. It hadn't asked *our* names. Like I said, southern life was as laid back as I was coming to understand, northern life was uptight.

Jimmy put up his arm and we stopped.

“Listen! Troops on the move – coming toward us. We best take cover.”

At that point, the bank had flattened and widened – stretching out from the trees some thirty yards – certainly wide enough for a company or more of soldiers to make its way north. It sounded on the small side to me. Maybe that was why they were down there with us rather than up on the roads. The Union encampments that I knew about held regiments and battalions – nothing a company would want to meet and have to take on.

The bushes and trees back at the base of the hill provided good cover for us. The other two sat cross-legged, pushing aside an opening with their hands that would allow them to watch whatever was about to come into view. I followed their example. Jimmy was right – it was troops on the move. I was right – it was a company – a short company – no more than sixty, gray uniformed men. They marched – walked – four abreast at the pace of the exhausted. From the condition of their uniforms, it was obvious they were battle weary with lots of walking wounded among them – many being assisted. It took no more than five minutes for them to pass. If exposed, I figured we'd be okay – dressed as we were. I hoped Jimmy had another believable story up his sleeve, just in case.

As the end of the line was about to pass, the column halted – we could hear the command being passed along to the rear. They broke ranks and most sat where they stopped. Some filled canteens from the river. Some sat in the river – it had already grown hot. Those that had food, ate and shared. In southern parlance, they were a sorry lookin' lot.

Jimmy got to his knees and slipped back into his coat.

“I'm goin' out there and see what I can find out.”

I didn't approve but didn't voice it. My Captain had said it

best; 'It's his life to live.'

Ezra looked at me as if figuring what he should do. Fortunately, Jimmy handled that.

"You stay here with Johnny, Ez. I won't be long."

He stood and left.

I silently wished him luck. His uniform was far too well kept compared with the others. His face and hands were too clean. He was moving with too much energy. I hoped none of that caused a problem.

Ezra, recently dubbed, 'Ez', moved closer to me as we watched Jimmy work his way among the men. He would stop and talk and then move on and repeat it. That went on for ten minutes before he returned.

"They're comin' off a early mornin' battle south a here. They all tell the same the story – they destroyed a small Yankee company. The fightin' was vicious – hand ta hand over several hours. The Yankees finally turned tail and run off ta the east. This Company was too beat up ta pursue 'em. They're headin' northeast believin' they'll be hookin' up with Baker's force. I didn't tell them anything."

"Who'd they think you were?"

"I told them I was a scout for the tenth cavalry movin' this way out of Conway. They accepted it with no suspicions, I believe. I avoided officers. Do you need to get the information back to your regiment?"

The question surprised me.

"I'm quite sure its scouts will detect them. My Captain is big on having scouts out gathering information. I'm good with continuing on our trip. That Company is in no shape to launch an attack on anybody."

Jimmy nodded. Offering his agreement in that, or any, way only happened occasionally. His responses typically remained more nearly neutral. In most matters, Jimmy was not one to judge another's word or position. Ezra had no idea what we were talking about but clearly reacted to our tone.

We waited for the column to resume its trek north along the river, then we continued south.

With the sun high in the sky, we ate from my backpack as

we walked – biscuits and jerky. We had wasted hours, so had picked up our pace without discussion. It soon appeared that more time was about to go down the drain.

We had become leery – suspicious – of unusual noise on the trail ahead of us. In the least, it was a collection of angry voices. When we realized it was coming toward us, we moved in among the trees to our left and waited.

As a small group came into sight, Ezra whispered, “Slavers”.

“How can that be?” I asked, once again letting my naivete hang out. “There are no slaves anymore.”

Ezra turned to Jimmy waiting for the explanation to come from him.

“Slavers are men who round up darkies, take ‘em down the Mississippi ta New Orleans and sell ‘em ta plantation owners from the Caribbean plantations.”

“How awful! I didn’t know.”

Jimmy continued as the full contingent appeared between us and the river.

“There you have it – three white men and seven darkies. You feel the need ta do somethin’?”

He put it all on me. I supposed that suggested *he* was inclined to let it be.

“I feel the need but not sure we can take on three seasoned criminals, or whatever you’d call them.”

The black men – and boys – were chained together. It might have been a group of fathers and teenage sons. There went my chest again.

“Any ideas, if I do need to do something?”

“We could easily pick off the white men. You first with that new Yankee rifle that can outfire mine three to one. Then I’ll take out a second. By then you’ll be ready to do the third – thirty seconds, tops.”

“My inclination is not to kill men from ambush.”

“You have the strangest collection a inclinations I ever done seen in one man, Johnny. Maybe it’s a Yankee thing. It’s like y’all have ta have a committee meetin’ ta decide whether ta have beans or hard tack for supper.”

I did have to smile at that. He was saying I tended to take too much time considering alternatives, where he acted immediately on instinct – impulse. As was his style, it had been offered more as an observation than a judgement.

During our words, Ezra became upset at the sight. I supposed that had been my committee meeting.

“I need to intervene, but it has to be some other way.”

The situation changed, suddenly. A small, flat bottomed, steamboat turned in off the river heading in our direction. It was something over thirty feet long and twelve wide. It resembled a houseboat with a short, snub-nosed, flat deck in front for cargo. The wheelhouse was up top. With such dimensions, it had been built for capacity and not speed.

The group we’d been watching stopped when the boat came into sight. The men in chains were ordered to sit. With the crisp snap of a bullwhip they quickly obeyed.

Being a flat bottom, the boat moved right up to the bank. It lowered a wide plank to make boarding a simple, dry boot, matter. The meeting had clearly been anticipated. One of the slavers went onboard and disappeared inside. It seemed like the time to make our move, except we had no move to make – we, being Jimmy and me. Ezra, on the other hand, had a plan.

He got up and walked out onto the bank. The two men saw him and gave chase. Ezra turned around and made a bee line right back to us. We understood and held our rifles high. As the men entered the thicket, they slowed – we struck them, knocking them to the ground, both were unconscious.

Jimmy handed Ezra a club-sized stick and gave him instructions.

“Ez, you got ‘em?”

The boy nodded; the hint of a smile worked its way across his face. My take was, they better just lay there or be prepared to receive 15 years of angry revenge across the backs of their skulls.

Jimmy motioned me to follow him. We bent low and ran to the boat. It was a foolhardy move – we had no idea how many men might be inside, or did we know what fire power they possessed. Once onboard, we took positions on either side of the closed door. Jimmy looked across at me. I nodded. He pushed the door open and we entered, rifles at the ready. There were just the

two of them – the slaver and the boat captain clearly completing a deal – the bill of sale was on the desk.

Within seconds, it was all over. We walked the men down the plank and out onto the bank. Jimmy brought rope from the cabin. While Ezra explained things to the prisoners, Jimmy and I tied the four men to trees some distance inside the wooded area, took their rifles, ammunition belts, and boots, and muzzled them with their bandanas. Given time, they would escape, but it would take many hours.

It was interesting to me how profanity sounded exactly like profanity even through gags.

I searched the men's pockets and found several useful items including nearly one hundred dollars in Union currency and keys to the chains. I handed the keys to Ezra and he soon had the men freed. Some of their ankles were raw and bleeding. They went to the water to care for their wounds. The three of us had a conference.

"So, now what, Yankee boy?" Jimmy asked having all quite seriously laid the next step in my lap.

"If we only knew how to operate that boat, we could make good time toward Yates. But that wouldn't help the folks we just rescued. I'm sure they don't want to go south."

"I got a confession, boys," Ezra offered, avoiding eye contact with either of us.

We turned to him and waited.

"I wasn't just walkin' north when I met ya. I was headin' for a woman who is part a the underground railroad – you knows about that?"

We nodded; each surprised the other one knew.

"Let me take these people ta her. You done enough. I've mostly been lookin' for someway ta leave ya, anyway. Goin' south has no margin in it fer me. You savin' my life and all, I figured I owed ya. Yates is downriver. You can't miss it. Other bank."

"How far you need to go on north – how long to make that contact?"

"From here, less than two days, I s'pose."

"What will you do for food?" I asked.

"If I was ta have a rifle, we could hunt."

The plan was set. I offered them the men's boots and they accepted them, tying the laces together and hanging them around their necks. I didn't understand. Again, Jimmy explained.

"They've never worn boots in their lives. They're bein' polite, takin' 'em. Maybe they can sell them."

I handed the hundred dollars over to Ezra. One of the men clearly understood about it. He quickly became their banker.

With four rifles and packs of ammunition, they set out north, along the river. I was sorry to see Ezra leave, but it seemed right. Jimmy offered him a nod – as much recognition as he could allow – still, it seemed important to him. It was returned. Like I said, they understood each other better than I understood either of them.

"So," I began, "seems we have a boat on our hands."

"I bet we can learn ta handle her, don't you?"

It was what I would have expected from Jimmy – just wade right in and do it.

"Let's at least look her over. Ever driven a boat?"

"Nope."

"Ever been *on* a boat?"

"Nope. You?"

"I have. Peoria – where I come from – is a river town. Even watched the pilots make ready to sail. Let's go see what we got here."

Half an hour later I found myself backing the flat bottom out into the river and heading us south – it had been ugly, but we *were* headed south. I could tell Jimmy was impressed. By the end of the first hour, he was at the wheel – like a four-year-old with his first piece of hard candy.

It was a slaver's boat for sure with a room at the back complete with chains and cuffs and whips. It was a new concept to me – capturing the freed slaves here and selling them back into slavery down in the islands. What sort of a world did we live in where one group of men thought they had a right to own other men? It made me sick. I understood Jimmy wasn't affected by it – not so much, anyway. Just as slavery had *never* been a part of my life, it had *always* been a part of his. By the time I was five, I knew it was wrong and by the time he was five he knew it was right.

Life became complicated and confusing for a young person

once he left home and began rubbing elbows with people who held *their* beliefs – their *different* beliefs – just as strongly as he'd been taught to hold his. Again, it made me doubt if there even was such a thing as just pure old right and wrong.

“I guess I haven't thanked you for your help back there, Jimmy. I must admit I didn't know how you'd react.”

“I must admit I didn't know how I'd react, either.”

He offered his smile. I didn't know if I should press. I figured he'd tell me to back off if that's how he felt.

“I'm interested in why you decided to help.”

“I'll just bet you are. You're interested in everythin'. I never done know nobody who was so nosey into God's business like you – how many stars are there, how did mountains get built, are we ever gonna run out a water, will smoke ever cloud the sky so we can't see the sun – you just go on and on and on about thin's I never done considered. You're chancin' runnin' out a brain power, I'm thinkin'.”

An interesting way of putting it. I wondered if he had intentionally evaded my question – about why he had helped. Regardless, he was serious about that difference between us. I guessed I was born curious. Mother encouraged it. I'm glad about that. Maisy, the black woman who had helped raise me, had comments similar to Jimmy's. I never took her seriously. It had never occurred to me that a person *could* take such a position seriously – not wondering about things – not thinking that wondering about things was wonderful. Interesting! Asking questions helped keep a person free. Blind acceptance kept one a captive of his ignorance – not only *his* ignorance but the accumulated ignorance going back generations.

In Jimmy's case, questioning my inquisitiveness seemed to have a tad of admiration mixed in. Maybe that was just me justifying my way compared with his way – questioning things versus accepting things. It made it easier for Jimmy to know right from wrong – accepting rather than questioning. The lives of both of my new friends were based on weighing things – most all things – in terms of rightness and wrongness as they had come to understand the terms – black or white, and nothing in between.

His way was probably better suited to *his* way of life. I hoped mine was well suited to *mine* – whatever it was going to be.

My 'pondering time' was cut short.

"May be trouble headin' our way out there," Jimmy said pointing at a smaller, faster boat closing on us from the bank to our right. The small cannon mounted on the foredeck immediately suggested something less than a gracious welcoming committee. It was manned by a half dozen riff raff with rifles, handguns, and shotguns. Clearly, they were going to try and board us. Surprise to them – nothing of value there other than a few cases of whiskey and a wheel of foul-smelling cheese.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Things, they was a changin’

“Is that big, fat, rusted, metal tank its steam tank?”

It was a crude description but close enough.

“Pretty sure it is.”

“Is that the pressure gauge off to the right side at the top?”

“I imagine it is.”

“Take the wheel and keep it steady.”

The water was calm. I just might be able to keep it steady.

We changed places. He picked up his rifle, aimed, and eased back on the trigger. With that shot on its way, he reached for my rifle, ready to make a second attempt if necessary. It wasn’t.

The tank vented steam in a powerful plume directed by chance forward against the men. They were soon into the water, hurting and hollering. The boat sat dead in the water. We had passed it and were just downstream in a position that its big gun was useless. They managed a few random, small arms, shots in our direction before growing silent. I figured we’d just made an enemy. I figured it didn’t matter. Doubted if our paths would cross again.

What was it about me, suddenly, that I kept hurting people?

The answer came easily – I had never really had enemies before – well, there had been Bradley. Without enemies – belligerent enemies, I guessed – there was no reason to have to

defend myself – to hurt others – unless one was a bully, but I wasn't, and I would unscramble all that another day.

“Wow! Another fantastic shot, Jimmy. And what an idea. I had neither of those things in me, you know – the idea nor the skill.”

“Good thing you didn't need ta have 'em, then. It's what makes us such a good team; I'm built around a right-now, practical mind, an you're built around a careful, figure it out first, then do it, sort a mind. I seldom miss out on the fun but often get in trouble. You never get in trouble but often miss out on the fun. Can I steer, again?”

He'd just saved our lives from a gang of unsavory river pirates and brushed it off like it had been nothing at all. I wondered what was going on inside him. In my case, my heart was pounding, my chest was tight, and I just may have wet my pants. *His* full and complete reaction seemed to be wanting to play sailor-boy.

So, he thought we were a good team and seemed to be implying we had a 50/50 arrangement. I had never been sure how he saw us – well, how he viewed *me*, mostly, I supposed. His studied portrait of the two of us was well taken. He wasn't just a quiet person – he was a thinker. Again, I'd undersold him.

I couldn't understand how he was able to split his loyalties like he did. I mean, I had several loyalties: to my church, to my country, to myself and my preservation, to my family. None of those, however, were areas of my life that were regularly pitted against each other – none of them presented either/or situations. He was loyal to me and my missions – and therefore to some extent to the Union – while remaining loyal to the Confederacy, which was trying to defeat the Union. It was like his brain was divided into compartments that didn't talk with each other. I wondered what might happen if someday they started to.

As nightfall neared, we had covered ten times the distance we could have by walking. Jimmy began recognizing things.

“There's Tomahawk Ridge. That's not fifteen miles upstream from home. This is the *Cossatot River*.”

He allowed himself to express excitement for the first time. He pointed.

“We need to beach this boat on the west bank. Need to travel overland to the west. Why don't you take her in? I'll likely

break her. She's in good shape. I'm sure somebody else can make good use a it."

He really did see us as a team. I didn't know why his consideration for other, unknown, people surprised me. Shame on me!

I set her into a small, well-concealed, cove off the beaten path. It had not resembled the landing of a seasoned river captain but achieved my two objectives – arrived at land – 'unbroken'. Maybe it would be found. Maybe it wouldn't. If not, we could use her on our trip back up north – if Jimmy decided to return with me. I had wondered about that from the beginning.

We doused the fire and vented the steam.

"That pass you were gonna write for me – ta keep me from gettin' shot as a deserter?"

We found paper, ink and pen in a desk in what had been the Captain's office. I soon had a masterpiece ready for him and a duplicate for me.

"We'll need to fold them up and make it look like we've been carrying them for a while."

He read it aloud and approved. I hadn't been sure how well he could read. I was surprised. I wasn't sure why my expectations for him always undersold him. I kicked myself for that.

I built a fire on the bank, while he went after supper. Ten minutes later we were smelling rabbit roasting over the flames – a new aroma for me. He dug some wild carrots and onions, chopped them up, and laid them out on a large flat rock close to the fire to warm. Half an hour later we were feasting. I watched with interest as he prepared the meat.

"So, I'm guessin' this is the first rabbit you ever ett?"

"That's right. Rather good. Thanks."

He shook his head plainly dumbfounded that any human male could reach seventeen years of age and not have eaten rabbit. I had held back two little cakes and surprised him with them. It was a good way to finish our evening.

"If we're up by daylight we can be to granny's by breakfast – hotcakes, bacon, eggs, hot biscuits – soft and moist."

We were up by daylight and on our way on empty stomachs. He soon had us moving along a dirt road at a brisk trot.

He had great confidence about how things would turn out. I hoped nothing interfered.

We rounded a bend. He broke a grin, stopped, and pointed.

“There it is. That’s where I grew up.”

In Peoria we would have called it a hovel. Two rooms at most. The front was stone, the rear wood – upright boards, several windows – each a different size and style. The roof was a patchwork – shake singles, metal sheets, and tarpaper. It had been cobbled together down through the years. I could tell in his face that it was Jimmy’s castle.

I hung back to let him make the first contact. He had pointed to the smoke from the chimney as proof things were the way they should be. We set our coats aside.

He stopped at the open door and knocked on the frame, calling ahead.

“Granny. Ya got visitors.”

An old woman appeared wiping her hands on her apron. As it is often described: her face lit up. Jimmy took her in his arms and twirled her around, setting her down just outside on the ground. Hands held between them, they chatted quietly together for some time before he brought me into her life. She offered me a hug and I was happy to accept it.

“Come in. Come in. Have your breakfast ready before ya can count your chiggers.”

She chuckled at her little joke.

I had come to understand all too well about Arkansas chiggers! That saying, however, was new to me and suggested a long time rather than a short time. Oh, well. Perception was the . . . oh, never mind.

The two of them fell right back into a well-practiced routine; Jimmy set the table and went to the well for water. He set aside a wooden lid in the dirt floor, which covered a shallow cavity. He removed eggs. It was their cool place for perishables. Granny moved pans and skillets around on the black cast-iron cook stove. I enjoyed watching. Big, brave, Jimmy had become little boy Jimmy just like that. He took her bossing like he had his entire life. His smile hadn’t stopped since we rounded that bend out front.

Granny was a fine cook. There were applesauce flapjacks with brown sugar syrup and biscuits with apple chunks in them.

There was home-churned butter and cinnamon tea sweetened with honey. The eggs were scrambled with pieces of bacon sprinkled through them.

She apologized for not having gravy that morning. The food was delicious – like every breakfast I'd ever had at home and yet completely different. Best, of course, was watching my friend with his granny. She sat close beside him holding his hand and patting his arm. She stroked his cheek with the back of her hand. She ran her fingers through his hair. There were tears – females always had tears.

He screened what he had to tell her and assured her his job in the army was safe – he chose to suggest he was a scout. She was clearly relieved. She had been worrying, of course. Every mother and granny on both sides of the conflict worried constantly about their boys.

With the problems surrounding my recruitment, it was the first time I really considered that – that my mother and grandmother were worrying about me. I hadn't written – training had been a 16 hour a day undertaking and . . . well, my time since had been fully occupied. All things considered, I really wasn't sure how they felt about me – if they'd even want a letter. I would see to one later. Jimmy had shown me just what things to include and what things to omit. He was blessed with better than adequate common sense.

We remained in the area four days. Jimmy introduced me to the older men who were left in the tiny town – most men and boys older than fourteen had left for the war. I learned how to play poker – they used those little lids off acorns as chips. They were never cashed in. I didn't know if I was a pretty good player or if they allowed me to win. They were nice men – what did one do with 67 acorn hats. My place of origin had not been raised. I liked them. They chose not to speculate about the war in my presence, although their dislike for Mr. Lincoln slipped out on occasion. I figured my grays hadn't fooled any of them.

We swam in a local creek every afternoon while granny napped. I hadn't been that clean in three months. I missed the bathtub and good smelling soap back home. I missed soft towels and clean clothes every morning. I missed a bed with fresh sheets and a soft pillow – two if I wanted them. I missed eating off plates with silverware and drinking out of real glasses.

Jimmy had never had most of those things. I was sure his granny *never* had. Compared with them, I had lived the life of royalty. I supposed I had, even by the social standards of Peoria, Illinois.

And, I had twelve years of education, which was well above the national average. I'd never taken time to appreciate all that. I guess I'd never had reason to – I was so absorbed by just living my way through the life I'd been presented. It wasn't that we didn't have grannys and Jimmys back there. They were relegated to pockets of poverty hidden in the shadows of the docks – places families like mine never had reason to travel. What's the saying – out of sight, out of mind?

I wanted to help granny improve her life – the conditions she lived in. I wondered why. I supposed because I had reason to get to know her. I didn't know any of the folks like her that lived five miles from me, but I knew granny who lived five hundred miles from me.

It seemed both Jimmy and I had some socially sanctioned hang-ups – him and black people and me and poor, less educated people, Catholics – my God, I had more than he had.

After breakfast on the morning of the fifth day at granny's, I went on outside so Jimmy and his granny could have their goodbye in private. We headed back toward the cove. The boat was still there. We spent the morning chopping wood to fuel the trip. Granny had sent food. We ate while the boiler built up steam.

“You take her back out into the river, Jimmy.”

“Think I can do that?”

“Don't you?”

“Sure, I suppose I can. Ready?”

“Yes, Captain.”

I offered a salute. He returned it. That was as playful as we had yet allowed between us.

It got a full-blown grin. Jimmy hadn't offered many of those when it was just the two of us. A sadness about something underlaid his life. My guess was it had to do with his father and mother. He never spoke of them, but then, neither did I. I had a sadness, also. It would never go away. I hoped Jimmy's would, someday.

We were soon headed north making slower time moving

upriver against the current. Still, it was many times faster than walking. I had read that currents were slower close to shore where the flow hung up on the shallows and the banks, so we kept to that plan and probably increased our speed at least some.

“How long until the river becomes too narrow and shallow for the boat do you think?” I asked.

“We weren’t far below that point when we first picked it up. A day maybe.”

I nodded. It meant I’d be back at camp in less than three days. I’d make my ten-day limit with ease. It looked like I’d return with the entire \$30.00, too. I had tried to give some of it to Jimmy to give to his granny, but he wouldn’t take it. His people didn’t take handouts. He understood I hadn’t intended it as any kind of insult.

A question crossed my mind – one I hadn’t stated out loud before.

“You got ideas about what you want to do when this war gets over?”

“Wait an see how things turn out, I guess. Thought about farmin’. Got no land. Probably end up workin’ for somebody else. Hope ta get married. Like that, I guess. Hard ta consider the future for guys our age right now, ain’t it?”

“I suppose it is.”

“You go back to that bank?”

“Probably not. I been thinking about heading west – maybe to Colorado or down to Texas.”

“Them’s a long ways away.”

“There are trains that make faraway places lots closer here in modern times.”

He nodded.

“You been paid for your service, yet?” I asked.

“Got vouchers for after the war – only good, of course if we win. Cash money is short down here. Even the confederate currency ain’t accepted everywhere. Union dollars or gold is what’s best.”

“I read the Confederacy can only get supplies from Europe by trading goods – cotton or sorghum for guns and such – that their money isn’t any good internationally.”

He nodded. I had no idea what that meant. Maybe he had

heard the same thing. Maybe he was recognizing me for offering new information. Maybe he wasn't interested.

He dropped a question out of the blue.

"Ya think I'm smart enough ta go ta high school?"

"Of course, I do. You're one of the smartest people I know."

I could see he believed me. Jimmy wouldn't have asked the question of me if he hadn't been prepared to accept my answer. I wondered where he was going with the idea. I forced the issue.

"So, what about it – high school?"

"I hear it gets ya better jobs – makes more money. Jake – you met him at the hardware store – says high school is the difference between being a clean-hand adult an a dirty-hand adult. You get his meanin'?"

"I get it. I suppose he's right. I've never put it in those terms before. You after clean hands?"

"I think so."

"Good for you."

"I'm sure *you'll* have clean hands, Johnny. Wouldn't it be somethin' if I could, too?"

"It sure would – if that's what you want. A country can't run on just clean hands, though, you know."

"I know."

He held his up as if to offer proof.

* * *

It was mid-morning of the second day. We had left the boat and were walking north along that gravel road that had originally headed us south.

I stopped and pointed east.

"The camp is over there about two miles, right?"

"Right. I'll stick with you 'til we reach it – make sure you get there safe an all."

"That sounds like you're planning to leave."

"I've made some decisions."

"Sounds like it. Good for you, I suppose. Any you can share?"

We left the road and headed cross-country.

"Bein' down home, I seen how all the men was so proud a

me for stickin' up for the Confederacy. It *is* my home, ya know."

"Sure, I know that."

"It seems like I've just been playin' soldier after those first couple a battles – been avoidin' more a 'em – didn't want to get killed. What the men back in Yates said made me see myself for what I am – a coward – probably even a traitor – you can understand what I'm sayin'."

"I suppose I can. I'm not sure what to say. I know I hate the idea of having you leave me. Friends shouldn't have to leave each other. We *are* friends, aren't we."

"I'd say so. Perty good friends. I know what you're sayin'. You know what I'm sayin'?"

"I know. Hard to imagine not having you around, though."

We walked on in silence for the better part of a mile. I knew what he was thinking. He knew what I was thinking. What if we met during a battle – him in gray and me in blue? I shuddered and hoped he hadn't seen.

We came upon the camp. That was not technically true. We came upon the spot where the camp had been. The grass was matted down across the large area, and easily worn paths that had led from one place to another had laid bare stripes in the red soil.

"Gone," I said stating the obvious.

"What ya gonna do?"

"Don't know. I should have anticipated this could happen. The Captain didn't speak of the possibility. I guess I have to find some other Company and explain my situation. Batoopsy!"

"Batoopsy?"

"My mother's only swear word. It always made me smile."

I walked the grounds trying to figure where the Captain's tent had been. Jimmy followed, understanding without me having to say it.

"Wasn't it under that big ol' oak, yonder?"

He pointed. It seemed right.

"Between that and the blue spruce. Yes! I think this *is* the place."

I stopped and sighed. I sat, cross legged to consider my situation. I leaned forward picking at the grass, while Jimmy

walked to the oak. He seemed to be studying something up in the branches and began climbing. I figured he could occupy his time any way he wanted to. He knew I had thinking to do. I was just happy he hadn't said goodbye right then and there and left me alone.

Halfway to the top he called to me.

"Got somethin' here that seems ta belong ta you."

"I don't understand."

I got up and went to the tree.

"Can you see this?"

It was a backpack hanging from a rope, hidden by the shiny, flat, leaves on the branches.

"Yeah. I can see. So what?"

"Let me bring it down."

I had no idea what was going on.

He jumped the final six feet and put the pack in my arms.

"See that?"

"Ah ha! Fascinating."

Painted in small, white, letters was: '*Cpl Small Coin.*'

"From my Captain. What a guy."

I sank with it to my knees and opened the top. There was an envelope with a sheet of paper. It was marked: Att Small Coin. Below that there was a verse – not a great verse – at first glance a strange verse:

On my way to tiny stone
Please come along with care.
The winds of war will soon be blown
Need you to come and share.

I had not read it aloud and was glad I hadn't due to my friend's recent decision to return his allegiance to his southern roots. The Captain was moving the regiment toward Little Rock – tiny stone – and requested that I rejoin them there.

In the pack was a spankin' new blue uniform, a box of ammunition and as much food as the extra space would hold. I closed it.

"Things intended for me from the Captain. Thanks for

spotting it.”

“You’d have found it eventually. He knew ya would.”

“The note told me where I was to report. I’m thinking that under the new arrangement you’ve set up between us, I shouldn’t tell you.”

“Right. I shouldn’t know. I don’t want ta know. I better be on my way, then.”

“You got enough provisions? There is food in this pack.”

“I’m fine. Got a hankerin’ for rabbit, anyway – maybe squirrel – see which one invites himself for lunch first.”

He offered a quick smile.

There was a short awkward, hesitation before we reached out and clutched at each other for a final embrace. It lasted a long time but would certainly be remembered as far too short. There were tears. He slipped into his backpack, picked up his rifle, and set out back toward the gravel road that would head him south. He never looked back. On the road, we had heard rumors of Confederate troops ten or so miles west.

I dropped to my knees and let myself sob – fists to my eyes – like a little kid.

It was perhaps ten minutes later when I righted myself and stood up. I looked east, wondering if I should make the first leg of my journey in blues or keep to my grays. I’d keep to my grays for a while – those rumors about Rebs in the area.

I did my best to put Jimmy out of my mind. It seemed I had nothing to fill it with. I managed a smile – not sure if it showed – when I thought about the Captain’s verse. He couldn’t leave plainly stated information behind in case it fell into enemy hands. He had returned to his English Teacher roots – sort of an unspoken bond between us. He had used my identifier, Small Coin.

I broke into a trot. The sooner I got settled into the next phase of my life the sooner I could leave the old one behind – get too busy, too involved, to think about it. The war had just taken a terrible turn for me; I would probably never know if the bullet I sent flying toward the enemy was destined to kill my best friend.

* * *

It felt good to run. I opened my coat when I began to sweat.

I made camp for the night without a fire, secluding myself in among a stand of brush. I had cold beans thinking if I ate the heavier provisions first, my packs would lighten faster as I neared my destination.

As I moved on east, I did my best to avoid people of all stripes. At one point I came upon a cow and managed a large drink of milk – first I'd had in months. I wasn't used to warm milk – still, it was great. I thanked her. She didn't seem to care one way or the other. She was a 'Red' – *Ayrshire*, I figured – so probably hadn't taken sides – blue or gray. I smiled at the absurdity.

On the evening of the fourth day, I camped by water. It let me bath and wash my long johns. The next morning, I switched to my blues but kept the Reb outfit in case – in case of what I wasn't sure – unfriendlies, I guessed. I figured I could spin some believable tale over them, after all, I had had had the very best teacher. I estimated I was getting close to Little Rock. The Captain had not given me specific directions. I understood that would not have been possible.

At one point, I put my hand into the new, blue, pants pockets. There was a piece of paper folded many times as if to make its presence obvious. I took it out and unfolded it. A note from my Captain.

If you are reading this you had a successful – safe, at least – trip south and back and are getting close to where we are. Sorry I could not be more specific. My best guess is on the north side of the river just east of the big city. That may have changed. The havoc you wrought on B's encampment is still being felt. They broke up into several smaller detachments and spread out while they regroup and set new plans. We are here to keep things disorganized with hit and run offensives every day. Your crafty thinking will be helpful. There are sergeant stripes awaiting your arrival. God speed. You should probably burn this.

I did.

It was another of those good news/not so good news messages. God knew, I did not want to be a sergeant. I did not want the outcomes of battles to rest on my crafty thinking. I just wanted to slip into the background, keep my weapon clean, wake

up and go to sleep by the bugle, gripe about the food with the guys, and follow the soldier in front of me. Me a sergeant? Who'd respect a wet behind the ears seventeen-year-old sergeant? Who should?

The sun was setting behind me as I topped a rise on east of the city. I found myself looking down into a wide valley. There was an encampment. My spirits improved immediately. I would have to get closer to know if it was Union or Reb. What I did know was that there was a sizeable group of troops coming up another valley behind me from the south. They were gray-clad with scouts climbing the very hill I had just managed.

I could assume one of two things: they were there to join up with the troops in the encampment – provided they were also Rebs – or they were there to attack the encampment if it was Union. I gave myself a short time to survey them – get a count, get a feel for their armaments, look over the officers assigned to it.

I hurried ahead down the slope and trotted across the valley to a point where I could make out the Stars and Stripes fluttering above the central tent. I had to warn them. Rebs liked to attack in the early morning with the sun at their backs. That meant they still had to circle east. One thing seemed certain; by early-morning those hills were going to be stained with blood – young blood – north and south blood – for the most part, innocent blood.

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CHAPTER NINE

No Drums, No Bugles

I approached a sentry and asked to be pointed toward the commander – it was more of a relief than I had expected to find out it was my Captain, offering his, by then, expected reaction.

“Is there no way I can get rid of you, Sergeant Penny?”

He offered a warm smile and his hand for a shake.

“Sit. Tell me all about your furlough.”

“That will need to come later, Sir. We have serious trouble brewing for dawn. I believe that a Reb detachment of 1,000 – maybe 1,400 men – is moving to set their position atop the hill to the east of your camp. How many men do we have?”

“No more than 500. Another 500 expected tomorrow evening.”

“That will be too late to be of any help. I’ve had time to look the situation over from up on that hill to the west in case you want to hear what I have to say and what I think.”

“Of course. Let me call my aide.”

He entered and we all took seats.

“As you know, I’m sure, just over the western hill is a wide, deep, north/south, valley.”

“Yes. The scouts have reported no activity over there since we arrived here.”

“That’s changing quickly, Sir. The Rebs are passing north

through it right now. They are moving slowly and keeping to the grass to not kick up any dust that might announce their presence. Clearly, they want this to be a surprise. I estimate it will take them five or six hours to move clear up to the north end of the valley and then follow the pass to the east and circle back to reach the top of that hill to the east of this camp. I figure they will arrive up there just in time for the attack at dawn. It appears their plan has been well planned and is being precisely executed.

“One thing about that hill to the east I’m sure you have noticed, Sir – a swath some fifty yards wide has been logged – top to bottom. It leaves a hundred yards of untouched forest on each side as well as the cleared area across this valley where your camp is. That logged hillside provides the only reasonable access to this camp by an attack force.”

“I’m aware of that and have lookouts posted there.”

“May I go on for just another minute and offer an idea that’s way above my pay grade?”

I got his quick smile.

“Certainly.”

“Got paper and pencil?”

His aide provided it and we moved to stand at the table. I drew out a rough map showing what I had just described. I began presenting a plan as I pointed here and there.

“We deploy our forces concealed among the tree cover on each side of that central, cleared area – both on the ground and hidden up in the branches. Similarly, we deploy more men just east of camp across the bottom of the hill – between the hill and this camp.

“We wait as if we don’t know they are coming – leaving a few of our own to wander around the camp overnight – so they can be seen from wherever the Rebs are watching us. We hold fifty or so men in the forest at the very top of the hill. Once the rear of their regiment moves down onto the cleared hillside – like I said, the only reasonable way of accessing the camp from any direction – those fifty, fall in behind them across the ridge, bellying down in the cover of the tall grass and scrub oak.

“At a given signal, all our men open fire. We know the Rebs don’t waist ammunition – they won’t fire ‘til they see us – which should be impossible and throw them into a turmoil for many

minutes. From what I could tell, they are mostly young recruits and are carrying ball-and-black powder rifles. We can get off six or eight shots to their one or two making our five hundred perform like two thousand of their men.

“It’s just a kid’s thought. Sorry if I overstepped my rank.”

I stepped back from the table and waited. His aide spoke.

“The plan leaves us fully committed without any back-up, Sir, and, separated like that, the left hand won’t know what the right hand is doing if anything goes wrong. There is also the matter of getting caught in our own crossfire. We might be better to abandon camp, scatter into the forests, and wait to fight another day.”

The Captain nodded and picked up the map to study it. He addressed his aide.

“You have another plan to suggest – we’re possibly outmanned three to one?”

His aide shrugged.

“Just observations, Sir.”

“And I always appreciate them. It’s why I keep you by my side.”

He took a moment to look each of us in the eyes.

“Decision time. Here it is.”

The Captain turned to his aide.

“You explain this plan to Old Winston. Have him select fifty seasoned veterans and put him in charge of the lower wall across the bottom of the hill. Give him temporary command. Roll all our wagons across his position for them to use as cover.”

“But he’s still a private at almost seventy, Sir.”

“He can outfight any twenty, eighteen-year-olds in any outfit. Then, instruct Lieutenant Miller to take 200 men and spread out evenly up and down the hill just inside the south forest area. I will lead another 200 men near the edge of the north forest. Sergeant Penny, you feel up to handling the fifty who will close off the top?”

“No, Sir, but I will, of course. If I may, Sir, that will be a good spot for some of the younger, less experienced boys. All they will be required to do is to fall flat on their bellies in the tall grass and pull the triggers. Being virtually invisible and at an impossible

angle, they should only receive minimal return fire.”

He turned to his aide.

“Make it so. Have the four groups selected within the hour. We will deploy in two. If Penny’s estimates are correct, we will be in position hours before they begin their assault. Once on station, suggest the men eat and then sleep until five a.m. Sunup will be about five thirty. In any instance, they are not to make noise. Nobody fires until they hear three quick shots. Because of your unique position in the plan, finally closing the gap at the top of the hill, you will be the one to fire those shots, Penny. Be sure to carry a sidearm.”

“And my rifle, Sir.”

It warranted his quick smile in return.

“The Rebs are going to hate us for not following the old rules of confrontation, Sir – march toward each other, set, and fire.”

“Which reminds me, Penny. Pass the word that the men are to fire close to where they stand. We can’t afford that crossfire problem Lieutenant Potter mentioned.

“Tell Winston and Miller to keep watch for white flags. They should have runners ready to inform me although I plan to be high in a tree so I should be able to see them. We don’t want this to become any worse than it has to be. I’ll select a work detail to set up a rope line confinement area down here for prisoners – I hope we have a lot. Later, we’ll use a contingent of the expected reinforcements to move them on to a POW holding area.”

“And the wounded, Sir?” I asked.

“We’ll do the best we can.”

My Captain was a good man. He did his duty with humanity and honor. Unlike some of the Generals I’d heard about, his goal was to win the war, not kill off a generation of southern boys.

I sure hoped Jimmy hadn’t joined up with that force. From the direction he had headed, he just might have.

We deployed with full packs and once on station, dined on whatever rations were left in them. I made sure my boys understood the simplicity of our assignment – no getting up and advancing like they had been taught in training – they were capable of hitting their targets all the way down the hill. The sunlight would be on their backs. The enemy would have no place

to hide and no targets to aim at. My hope was that it was a rout, over with almost as soon as it began. Lots of gray arms in the air immediately. I saw no evidence of a general with them, so the pre-set strategy would likely be very straight forward – down the hill, shoulder to shoulder, on the way to overrunning the camp, holding fire until they met the enemy in the valley.

I had one concern. Rumor had it that many southern generals were forbidding white flags to even be carried, forcing fights to the last man – motivating the win at any cost strategy Winston had spoken about. I could not fathom such inhumanity – especially to your own soldiers.

I had no illusions about my plan. Given the full amount of information I had gathered and shared, I had to assume my Captain would have devised a similar one.

The construction crew maintained the fires but kept them so low that they didn't give away the fact we weren't there. That should pose frustration for any forward observers who were trying to take a head count. Surely, they already knew our numbers. The crew added a good touch by leading horses in and out among the fires. It proved we were there and made them wonder what we were up to. I assume that had been at the Captain's direction. He was a smart man.

I slept fitfully and by four had given up trying. Fortunately, most of my boys seemed to have no problem – they were teenagers, after all. As I looked across them, there, asleep on the forest floor, I allowed a momentary question; for which ones was it to be the last night's sleep they'd ever have. I felt a single tear run the length of my cheek. I left it alone.

I hated it when my thoughts took me to the moral issues of war – forced me to think about what I was doing and how I would justify my atrocities to myself later on in my life – if there were to be a 'later on in my life'. There we were, 500 strong – or weak, about to execute *my plan*, the purpose of which was to kill however many of the 1,400 enemy soldiers it took to make the rest of them surrender – one step better than a plan that included total annihilation of the enemy, I figured. Little solace in that! I had been through one of those 'to the last man' battles and still couldn't sleep because of it.

A general, who would later respond to the battle plan,

referred to it as clean, neat and surgical. How could anything about war ever be characterized as clean or neat? I supposed when your life was dedicated to improving strategies, techniques, and armaments to kill young men who were in some way different from you, you would have a different take on it.

I hoped President Lincoln shed a tear for every boy who offered up an eye or an arm or leg or his life that morning. Jimmy hated war. I hated war. And yet, there we were, fighting one another. I had heard stories about brothers from Missouri and Kansas that ended up on opposite sides. I couldn't imagine how it would be to come up against your brother on the battlefield. I wondered if the reasons behind the war had brought them to hate each other so much it *wouldn't* matter. What had overtaken us? Ugh!

I certainly didn't hate Jimmy and I'm quite sure that, in the end, he didn't hate me. Of course, I didn't hate *any* of the boys I was about to kill. My experience in Yates had led me to believe southerners hated northerners more than northerners hated southerners. They surely hated Lincoln down in Yates. They seemed to have convinced themselves he was the one who had started it – forced the Rebel's hand, anyway. Who was I to say that's not how it happened?

I wondered about Lincoln – the man, Lincoln. If one could take the words in the Emancipation Proclamation as words from his heart, I figured he was a good human being, but that was because my experiences with black people were more nearly as equals. Upon reflection those past months, I understood that *wasn't* true even though I had been raised to believe it was. Black people were generally treated better in the north. They were free, but equality played no part in it – more like the runts of the litter eventually getting what was left. They did the jobs few white people were willing to do. They were paid maybe a dime to the dollar a white person would receive for the same sort of service. They *weren't* invited to sit at our tables or smoke our cigars or marry our sons and daughters.

I loved my Nanny and would have protected her with my life if necessary. Still, I was beginning to see I didn't hold her as an equal to me. My society had taught me not to dislike black people or fear them – to allow them to make good lives for themselves; it had also taught me they were not like me – didn't

deserve what I deserved because my skin was white. It seemed to me they understood that as being God's truth.

All *that* had seemed fine, proper, the way life was meant to be. It was how I had been raised. I had the feeling Ezra was going to be quite disillusioned and disappointed with northern society. His freedom was not going to resemble white freedom. It wasn't fair.

'Fair', was like some random concept God had just thrown out to tease, confuse, and confound human beings. It was like a 'thing' that never could come about. Its pursuit was always futile. People defined it differently – held different expectations about it. It was entirely self-centered so could never represent the basis for consensus. My team thought it was fair if we won and unfair if we lost. The other team thought the opposite. Mostly, I supposed, it was about things far more subtle than that. Fair if we did well, but not fair if black people did better than us, or even just as well. It was fair that Baptists had the right to practice their religion but unfair that Catholics could (or even live next door) – after all, their ultimate allegiance was to Rome and not to the United States.

That morning it would be fair if my soldiers slaughtered hundreds of southern boys because we were in the right and they were in the wrong. The south would . . . well. I shouldn't let myself get started on right and wrong.

It was becoming clear to me: Life didn't get easier with age. The nature of, *difficult*, merely became compounded.

Suddenly, there they were – no drums, no bugles, just row after row of silent, gray-clad kids, topping the crest of the hill ahead of the rising sun and spreading out across the clearing on their way down that slope. At that moment, each one was confident victory was about to be his and that he would see tomorrow's sunrise and talk and joke again with friends.

That was nothing any soldier had a right to expect – it suggested youth, naivety, inexperience – ignorance, even. I supposed that was how the generals needed it to be to keep their armies advancing – hope at any cost – false hope better than no hope.

Sergeants didn't puke over such things. I puked. What did that make me?

I had awakened my boys only moments before. They

stirred uneasily – eagerness or anxiety – both offered the same clues. They turned toward me, waiting for my signal. I'd gone over the plan in detail with them – once the entire force had passed us as they moved down the hill, we would belly crawl across the span at the top of the rise, spread ourselves at regular intervals, find adequate cover, make ready to fire, and wait for my signal – those three shots from my sidearm. Suddenly, I rearranged our position in terms of what seemed to be an overlooked possibility. I had every fourth boy turned up hill in case some back-up contingent might arrive.

It was time. I asked God for his forgiveness, unholstered my gun, pointed it in the air and pulled that trigger three times in rapid succession. Those quick, crisp, cracks commandeered the moment. Flocks of blackbirds lifted as one giant ever-shifting shadow into the morning sky. What had I done? The early morning peace and serenity burst apart with the unmistakable din of war. In the shadows of the woods on both sides, rapid, random, bright orange flashes commandeered the scene. Soon the smell of gunpowder floated up the hill, definitive proof even to the deaf and non-seeing that we were in the midst of battle.

As the head of the column came to a halt under the barrage from the base of the hill, the Gray Boys further back fell into those in front of them like dominos in a line. For way too long, they stood there turning one way and then another finding no targets – bewildered and befuddled, looking for leadership that wasn't there. There was no enemy for them to fight. They fell like wheat beneath the scythe. In my most vivid images of how horrendous a battle might be, I had never imagined anything so gruesome.

The boy beside me looked over at me, tears on his cheeks. "Shouldn't we stop this?"

Of course, we should, but how did you stop a battle? I had put no such measure in place.

The Captain knew. His bugler played cease fire. We stopped. It was like *our* Captain had raised *their* white flag. We'd see how they reacted. I called across my line of soldiers.

"As you are. Reload. Be prepared to resume firing any moment."

As if obeying their absent officer's orders, the Reb's began placing their rifles on the ground and raising their hands. From

atop some tree to our right came the Captain's deep voice – louder and more commanding than I had imagined it could be.

“Pass your rifles to the north. Do it now! Quick! Quick!”

Through cupped hands, I repeated his orders from my position behind them, high on the hill. Miller did the same from the woods to my left. There could be no doubt about what was expected of them. Soon a chorus of our soldiers joined in, thankful the slaughter had come to a quick end – calling out, blue boy to gray boy as if offering encouragement to their own kind. Our soldiers began appearing at the edge of the woods up and down the hill, rifles at the ready.

I searched the scene in front of me for officers – there were fewer than a dozen. I had to question their plan – spread too thin, perhaps. I crawled to the crest of the hill to see if there was a rear guard of any kind. Half a dozen horses were galloping down that hill in the opposite direction – the Confederate Battle flag flying. I could have easily picked off the big man in the middle – I didn't.

Our soldiers saw to the roundup according to procedures – boots off, laces tied together and hung around their necks. Coats open. Pockets turned inside out. Belts, and ball and powder pouches, dropped to the ground. Hats left behind.

It took several hours to move the herd into the valley. Once cleared of those who could walk, the search for wounded left on the battlefield began and dozens of litter bearers began carrying them down to the compound. Our medical facility was overwhelmed. All quite inhumanely, those clearly dying were passed over to cry out and choke on their own blood there on a hillside they couldn't name; the less critical were attended to first.

Down in the camp, I walked among the prisoners searching for Jimmy. I didn't find him. I might have missed him. It was a huge number of prisoners. Not finding him did nothing to quell my anxiety – he might not have been here, or he might be lying on the hill up there.

I searched for the Captain, eventually finding him instructing four mounted scouts to scour the area for medical assistance and transportation from nearby encampments.

“Sergeant, Penny. Good work up there, today.”

“I suppose. What do our casualties look like, Sir?”

“Very light – almost none, in fact – very few fatalities that I

am aware of. The duration of that battle may become the shortest in the record books.”

He was plainly buoyed up – about the victory, of course, but more about the lack of Union casualties.

“I’d like to volunteer to supervise the Reb burial detail.”

“Alright. Pick three armed boys to support you and a dozen Rebs to do the work. Find Reb shovels up on the hill. May I ask why you want to do this?”

“I perpetrated a massacre, this morning, Sir. I can’t just walk away from the carnage and feel good about it. I need to see it, so I can acknowledge what I did.”

“And . . .?”

“It surprised me. He seemed to know.”

“*And*, to see if Jimmy’s up there. He’s not among the prisoners.”

He patted my back but offered no words. I left to take care of things. I hadn’t eaten in eight hours. I wasn’t hungry. I did drink – long and hard.

A dozen men with shovels wasn’t going to do it. I sent one of my men back for three dozen more and a dozen more guards. My estimate was that they had lost nearly half their men and that there hadn’t been two hundred shots fired from the fourteen hundred soldiers who had started down that slope. As I came upon body after body, I kept thinking I saw him – Jimmy. In the end, I was fairly certain he was not up there, either. I thought that should make me feel better – lift my spirits. It didn’t. War was death. Eventually, he *would* be in battle somewhere. Odds were that he’d make it into some Union soldier’s sight. Most likely, he and I would share that same end.

* * *

By late the next afternoon, the prisoners and wounded had been moved out of our encampment. The Captain asked me to have mess with him in his tent that evening. Unusual. I went, of course.

“I have a handful of medals and ribbons for you.”

“Do I have to take them?”

He seemed less than surprised by my question.

“No. I am obligated to offer them to you. I will keep them

with me if you don't take them."

"That, then."

"Don't you even want to know what they were awarded for?"

"No, Sir. Your hash good this evening?"

"Is hash *ever* good?"

I had changed the topic. He had forced a smile from me – the first one I could remember in many hours.

"Can we talk – I mean do you have a few minutes, Sir?"

"Of course."

There was a thick, dark, shadow in my mind that I needed to talk away. I wasn't entirely sure what it was about. When I talked, such things often took shape or became obvious so I could deal with them – dispense with them if possible. From the time I was a youngster, I had depended on my grandfather to listen back home. I sighed and just started.

"I have determined that war is evil, but I have yet to meet an evil man on either side of this war. That has to mean that good people have chosen sides to commit evil. I just can't make sense of that."

"Life often comes down to a choice between the lesser of two evils, Penny. Which is more evil – letting men live in slavery or going to war to free them?"

"I would think evil should be evil, Sir. You are saying there are levels of evil? Bad evil and better evil – maybe even good evil? It contradicts the whole concept of evil. My reading of the Bible tells me doing evil is, by definition, an unforgivable atrocity – period – full stop. Therefore, if I commit evil acts in the service of making things better, I have still done unforgivable things."

"Maybe this will help, you. I could live in the north and ignore slavery as long as it remained out of my sight in the south, *except* for the most powerful of all emotions – all human convictions – love. If I believe all men are worthy of love, and if some are being mistreated, I can't just ignore their condition, can I?"

"Now I'm *really* confused, Sir. You seem to be saying that love becomes a valid reason to perpetuate evil. I've always seen them as opposites, you know – love vs evil – they cannot coexist."

“Let me back up. When people hold ideas that disallow other people’s ideas – slavery *or* free, for example – it becomes obvious that both cannot be true – they cannot coexist. Yet, some honestly believe slavery is right and proper, while others believe it is wrong – despicable, even. Only one can be evil. We each have to choose our definition. From one perspective, it would be evil to take away a person’s slaves – his bought and paid for property. From the other, it would be evil to have slaves in the first place.

“When neither point of view will yield to the other in a peaceful manner, there comes a standoff. It becomes an impotent ‘battle’ of ideas or values. Since an *idea or value* cannot be destroyed – killed, if you will – and if one believes his ‘good’ idea *must* prevail over the other ‘evil’ idea, it seems obvious that the *person* holding that incompatible idea must be silenced if change is to be instituted or the status quo maintained. Said another way, since the idea cannot be silenced, the alternative has been to silence those who hold it – those who advocate it and act on it. From that point of view, you and I do not enter battlefields to kill southern soldiers, we enter to quell the idea – the evil idea – that powerful men have the right to own and mistreat less powerful men.”

“I guess I didn’t know ideas bled. I get what you’re saying, but that’s shrouded in the abstract. There was nothing going on on that hill yesterday that was abstract – I aimed my rifle and killed other human beings with bullets that burned their flesh as they entered the other boys’ healthy young bodies. Not once did I see a gun firing ideas.”

“I understand what you are saying, Penny. I don’t know how to configure war other than as the result of unresolvable conflicts between ideas or values – needs, sometimes. Down through the centuries, mankind has been unable to resolve such differences in any way but war. I come back to it – which is the lesser of the two evils, allowing the evil of slavery to continue or controlling or killing its advocates to prevent it?”

“I see where you’re going, Sir. If we are true to our personal ideals and beliefs, we are compelled to get involved. The strong must defend those who cannot defend themselves. The inevitable part seems to be that in order to combat evil, good men must commit evil acts themselves. To me, killing is evil regardless of the intention or greater purpose. It’s enough to drive a person

mad.”

“And it *has*, son.”

“I know. I was there when I joined your regiment. I had just killed my girlfriend – accidentally, but that didn’t change the fact she was dead. I couldn’t handle an accidental killing. How am I to handle the fact that yesterday, I intentionally killed a dozen southern boys – boys I didn’t hate – boys who didn’t specifically hate me – the Johnny boy? They were boys who were not *my* enemy – they were merely required to stand in and die for the truly evil men who were attempting to maintain the idea – the practice – of slavery.

“Better, I suppose, would be to have those same old men out on the battlefields killing each other. It is *their* war.

“This may sound awful, Sir, but it seems to me God made a terrible mistake when he gave mankind great intelligence but loosed it on the world without any universal constraints. If a man wants to use his intelligence to enslave or maim or slaughter other people, God clearly allows him to just go do it if he’s strong enough. When I have children, I will love them so much, I will do whatever it takes to see to it they are protected from such things. If God truly loves us, I can’t see why He doesn’t do the same. I guess I’m at the point of believing he doesn’t care – my recent experiences sure don’t support the conclusion that he does. It’s like he set up good and evil and sits back taking great pleasure at watching men do terrible things to each other – like a game – a competition. Like I said, I know that’s an awful conclusion to draw. If I were designing a World for beings I loved, I’d certainly do it differently – I’d base it on cooperation and compassion not competition and hate, for one thing. And don’t give me that *powerful devil* thing – if God was powerful enough to create the universe, he is powerful enough to quell evil – period. UGH!

“Since it is unfathomable to me that a loving god would act in that way, my conclusion has to be there is no loving god – perhaps no god at all.

“I have such terrible nightmares. There are moments when I don’t know how I am going to make it to the next moment. I stand and pace as if that were going to shed it – leave it behind. I really hate myself, you know? Worse yet, that doesn’t stop me from going right back out the next day and doing it all over again. It’s

like I'm hellbent on punishing myself; kill, grieve, guilt – kill, grieve, guilt. How about *that* for the most self-centered take on war ever?

“Those ten days away were like heaven, because I knew I was free from that for a while – my little cave, carved into ‘Time Mountain’, during which nobody in a blue coat with more stripes could require me to do the bad stuff – to launch evil acts against anybody.”

After having said all that, I really didn't feel better about any of it. I stood.

“I want to thank you for listening and doing what you could to clarify and explain things. I will think about what you said. At this moment, I wish I hadn't spoken, because now you will be concerned about me. I don't want to be a distraction from your duties and other concerns. I'm sorry about that. I understand there is no useful way to respond to the ranting of a boy my age who has to operate with such limited knowledge, experience, and wisdom, so please don't try.

“I will await my orders for tomorrow. Good night, Sir.”

It would not be a good night for either of us. I'd just seen to that. I took my bed roll up on the hill near the woods, so if I had another screaming nightmare, I wouldn't bother anybody close to me.

CHAPTER TEN

I Met an Evil Man

I climbed the hill to a spot high enough to catch the breeze – one near the edge of the north-side woods – one free from the stench of blackening blood. I had been admonished not to leave the safety of the camp. Safety?

The grass was so tall that I needed to stomp it down. At the top I overlapped it from all four directions forming a pillow of sorts under my blanket. I lay on my back, hands behind my head, surveying the sky. I wondered how the stars had gotten there. I wondered if they were happy being there. If they were really balls of fire, why were they white? I wondered if their only function was to produce tiny points of light in the night sky. I wondered if they really had a function. Perhaps to indicate the limits or the vastness of the universe. Perhaps to introduce beauty into darkness. What was the universe? How did it get here? If life was only to be found on Earth, why did He go to all the trouble to make the rest of the Universe?

I sure needed some beauty introduced into *my* darkness. I tried not to relive the scene – me taking aim and killing other boys. And yet, where had I just taken myself – back to that battlefield. I said I'd killed a dozen – it may have been many more than that. I had fired at least sixty rounds during those fifteen minutes. My ammo box was essentially empty. As I had looked down the hill that morning, there was nothing but targets – large, gray-clad,

virtually immovable targets. I really didn't even have to aim to hit one. It was like they were just standing there beckoning me to take their lives.

I was tired and was soon asleep. If I dreamed, I wouldn't remember. If I screamed out, it hadn't awakened me.

What I *did* remember was awakening to a heaviness on my chest – something poking at my breastbone. In the instant, I hoped it was not a mountain lion or a wolf checking out its mid-night snack. There was no time to develop such scenarios.

Momentarily, I found it was the end of a shotgun – not routine issue by either army. My head cleared slowly. There above me was a large man with a full, unkempt, graying beard and coon hide hat – fat, with oily, long over-tanned, leathery skin, and tangled, shoulder-length hair. Two others – younger – similar in appearance – stood back just a bit. He was speaking but not to me.

“Suppose them officers down there would pay ta get a soldier boy back?”

I answered as if it *had* been directed at me.

“The Union doesn't pay ransom.”

I tried to sit up, but he set his foot heavily on my chest and forced me back down. My head hit the ground. Had it not been for the 'pillow' it might have knocked me out. Pain grew from my neck down into my back.

“Shut you prattle, Soldier Boy. Don't them Yankee officers teach ya ta keep shut lessin' yous spoke at?”

I assumed I had just been 'spoke at' but decided to hold my tongue. He had kicked my rifle aside. I had brought my sidearm – my only chance of leveling the playing field. It was in its holster under my blanket. Going for it didn't seem like a good bet with a shotgun pressing deep into my belly. I relaxed back on the ground and waited.

“I think we'll take him home – jist fer the fun a it. Pick him up an carry him, Waylon.”

“Right, Paw.”

Aha! Father and sons. I supposed there were no more loyal followers than sons. I couldn't figure what they wanted – why they would even waste time with me. Fun?

Waylon was a match in size and hygiene to his enormous father. The other not so much.

We proceeded back through the woods. I found lying limp on his massive shoulder made for a more comfortable 'carry' than tensing up over it. Presently, we came upon a dirt road at the end of which sat a wagon with horses – that kind so odd in appearance that they seemed ashamed for being horses. Waylon power-dropped me onto the bed of the wagon. It had been unnecessarily hurtful. Again, my head and neck. I lay still, on my back, eyes open, taking in the scene. Nothing looked encouraging even though no specific threats had been made. I wondered what the younger boy's name was.

"Travis, you sit in the back with him. Blow his head off if he makes any move you don't like."

There they were: the name and the specific threat. I decided against eye contact – one additional thing for him to become upset over. I suspected that threat had really been more for me than Travis. How could I provide 'fun' if he blew my head off?

The other two sat on the seat. The old man handled the reins – that seemed to complete the story. He was totally in charge and probably saw his sons as incompetent. I imagined that down through the years he hadn't minced words with them about that. The younger one, at least, seemed cowed. I doubted if he would have made eye contact if I had tried.

We moved up the hill and down the other side, eventually turning onto a wider, clearly more traveled road – dirt but without sprigs or a green center line. Areas of tall grass spread from each side as we left the woods.

The wagon stunk – that could have been solely from the mens' stench but, in fact, included that from untanned, freshly gathered, fly-laden pelts – rabbit, squirrel, fox. I assumed that was what had led them to be up in the woods that night – walking trap lines. I knew very little about trapping but had read stories about trappers – none of which buoyed my spirits. So far, the highlight of the adventure was that as far as I knew, there was no market for well-tanned, Yankee boys' hides.

Within the hour, we arrived at a cabin or barn or hut set back into a stand of trees. It was difficult to make out details in the

limited light.

Waylon carried me inside. Why I wasn't allowed to walk I couldn't figure. For sure, it wasn't his maternal instinct. They lit lamps. My best take was a combination barn/house/hut. The maid had been absent for some time – at least one generation, I figured.

The 'boys' removed my boots, belt, and coat. The old man took a seat in a padded chair and indicated for me to be placed at his feet, on my back – a belly footstool of sorts – that special kind made to accommodate restless boot heels. He raised and lowered his right foot a half dozen times grinding it through my shirt into my soon bleeding flesh. My, how that hurt.

I figured it centered on the fact I was from the north and in the Union Army. It took no great mentality to assume men of my stripe were not held in high esteem by that family. On the other hand, he just may have not cottoned to the shape of my ear. Who knew with that kind of deranged man?

"Well, don't just sit there, Travis. Show some manners. Offer the Soldier Boy some beer."

I was sure that one and only swig I had taken with my friends at the stroke of mid-night, which announced my 16th birthday, had not prepared my system for what was coming. I was right.

Waylon lifted my shoulders and placed several over-sized pillows behind me – raising me to an almost sitting position. Travis began pouring the drink down me. He was patient about it, making sure not a drop was spilled. I thought swallowing rather than refusing represented the better part of valor. I counted five steins before losing track. My head had grown fuzzy. I was amazed it hadn't made me sick. The old man waved off the next.

"So, what ya Yankee boys up ta – headin' east, west, south? Reb generals reward that sort a information mightily. You boys been burnin' barns and businesses hereabouts. That's not bein' neighborly. Down here we have ways a showin' Yankees how much we disapprove a that sort a thing. We're fair 'bout it, though. We lets 'em scream out all the pain before we hangs 'em.

"Ya can ask my boys if I knows how ta lay on the pain – most killed the both a them more than once when they strayed from God's Word."

He pointed to a large Bible on a lamp stand. Its ragged

cover and the darkened edges of the pages convinced me it had been in regular use. He knew what he believed and had found support for it within those pages. My religion was the other way around – find the truth in the pages and then go about living it.

The vision he presented of what I was about to be put through was clear even without the details. My abdomen had already received a sample. I really was naive – I had no idea what those details were going to be – how they would go about paining me. It seemed they were practiced in the art – dealing it out as well as receiving it. Beyond a few less than really painful childhood spankings, I had no experience in that area. I had never even been in a schoolyard fight.

My heart raced. I found it hard to catch a breath. Clearly the alcohol was to loosen my tongue about Yankee movements. It hadn't. I hoped it also helped dull the pain to come. What's worse than pain – agony, maybe – that seemed more like what was coming. I was a soldier. I'd take it. That made so little sense, I couldn't believe I had even lent credence to it. The alcohol, perhaps.

It seemed I had found the first truly evil man I'd ever known – there was, Bradley, but that was a complicated, separate case. His was evil in words and ideas rather than physical pain. I supposed there had, also, been the men who confronted Ezra and the slavers, but they had not laid their hands on me. *This* man seemed to take pleasure recalling the beatings he meted out to his own flesh and blood and neither of them flinched at the mention of them. I wondered if those accounted for why Travis limped and why Waylon wore a patch over one eye.

One might think they would be easy converts to help me get away and then leave with me. They wouldn't be. I didn't know if it were from fear or loyalty, but it was clear they'd defend the old man's actions, whatever. He spoke. They jumped. I supposed I should never complain about my life, again.

I will spare the details, both because I have no reason to sicken anyone and because I have no intention of reliving the eight, excruciating hours that followed.

It was going on seven the following morning when Waylon dragged me outside to where the old man and Travis had rigged a noose. It hung down from a tree over the back of the wagon.

The meaning became clear. They would stand me on the back of the wagon, noose synched up around my neck, then slap the horses and I'd be left dangling – not a casualty of war – a casualty of pure evil. Hmm. I was already a casualty of pure evil.

At that point, I was beyond fear – beyond really caring anymore. I was drenched from the dousings with water to revive me – again and again and again. My throat was sore and bleeding from screaming. My right upper arm was broken for sure. My left leg was useless for whatever reason – twisting – beating with two-by-fours. I was bleeding from my mouth and nose and possibly from my ears. I was numb from the pain, so it affected me in no real way by that time – their sign it was time to hang me, I figured. The fun was gone once I had lapsed into silence.

They stood me in place on the rear of the wagon. I had to support my weight on my one intact leg. I dared not let it buckle. The noose was tightened in place. It was all done in silence as if a well-practiced routine. I suspected the grounds were laced with shallow graves containing disfigured Yankee bodies. The rope was pulled taut over the limb and tied off around the trunk of a small oak.

Paw, removed his hat as if in an act of reverence – a twisted mind. Waylon and Travis followed his lead but stayed back several yards. Paw kept his eyes on mine. There was a sense of keen anticipation in them. Waylon and Travis looked at the ground. I figured their Paw's evil had not necessarily been passed on to them. Their complicity had other roots.

In the war, my enemy had been driven by its allegiance to an idea that contradicted my idea. What I was experiencing was no such conflict of value or belief – it was pure and simply the administration of evil – the delight in another's man's pain. That last talk with my Captain had helped me understand the difference.

I closed my eyes and waited – like I said, I no longer cared – I figured I was already dead in all meaningful aspects of the concept. I couldn't help but wonder what God had in store for me once my life had been extinguished. Truth be told, I didn't even care.

But then . . .!

My eyes popped open as gunfire erupted. I felt the rope fall

onto me, limp. It had been severed – good shot, somebody! I heard voices – one, the Captain’s. It had all happened in the same moment – the shot, the collapse of the noose, the rifles to the heads of my three abductors and somebody holding the team in place. Two of my boys approached me and as my world went dark, I collapsed, limp, into their arms.

* * *

The story was that I remained unconscious during the three day trek by wagon and train north to an Army Hospital in Springfield, Illinois – back where the war had begun for me. That was where I had awakened to my own cries of pain, confused, and experiencing hurt in every fiber of my body.

Due to the nature of the injuries to my leg and hip, I was in a body cast for nearly two months – that coming after numerous operations to realign bones and mend torn tissue and reset dislocated joints. My arm rated its own coat of plaster – upper bone broken in two places – elbow dislodged. I was given no encouragement to think it would serve me well in the future.

The contusions to my head, neck and chest beat the rest of me back to some appearance of health. There would be an unpleasant looking scar on my right cheek – from a beating with a chain as I recalled. Oh, and there were those two ribs – both broken off my breastbone. They only rated a tight wrap. Doc said I’d probably be having intimate, profanity-laden chats with them for the rest of my life.

Someone had informed my mother and father – my Captain, I figured. He was the one who, out of concern, had come looking for me that night and ultimately saved my life. Rumor was, he had asked for volunteers to accompany him in his search and over a hundred stepped forward. He selected five.

My parents visited twice – both very uncomfortable for all concerned – those mostly silent, smile and nod, and sip water affairs. My Father provided a liberal allowance, saying it would be there for as long as I needed it. He knew I would not extend the time unreasonably. He was plainly guilt-ridden. I couldn’t ascertain about what, exactly.

Sixty-four days after entering that hospital, I would exit through the front door to greet another uncertain future.

The men who had delt the irreversible punishment to my

body were sentenced to life in prison at hard labor. Had *good* won over *evil*? It certainly didn't seem that way to me. Their evil would haunt me forever. Evil One – Good Zero, and there went *that* adage.

Deemed unfit for return to military service, I began considering other options. Returning to Peoria was, of course, out of the question. I would be an embarrassment to my family and having to live under the shadow of Bradley's, generally accepted, lies would be intolerable for me. Burning his father's store to the ground only tempted me for a moment – but *what* a moment!

At the hospital, I had taken a fancy to one of my nurses – Sue Ellen Woodward. She was three years older than I, so nothing could come of it – a real man did not marry an older woman. I would never forget her kindness. Anyway, I was nowhere near ready for marriage.

Even though the war was still raging, and I was no longer a part of it, everything about it continued to have its tentacles wrapped around me – around my head, around my heart, around my gut – from its fundamental underpinnings, through its human toll, to the seemingly ever elusive solution. It was as if I weren't capable of distancing myself from it.

I had heard about war correspondents and approached the largest newspaper in Springfield. Supported by my allowance, I was able to offer my services on a per-piece basis. I'd write stories out in the field, I would mail them in or the paper would pay for my telegraphing them, and deposit payment into a local bank account for each story they used. They treated me fairly. They called for more. As my byline became more widely recognized, my fees increased. The editor said people bought his paper just to read my columns – think of that.

At first, I kept myself to the skirmishes – the run-of-the-mill kind with easily predicted places and times. It soon became apparent that I didn't want to be an after-the-fact sort of reporter. I wanted to be there, so I could smell the powder and write from the emotion of the experience – provide the horror and heroism, hear from the soldiers, and receive reactions from the people whose lives had been directly affected by the battles.

Those things soon came to be part of what set my pieces apart from the rest. I wrote in all five senses. My editor pointed out

my style was unique – moving my stories along with phrases separated by hyphens – providing a realistic feeling of the normal flow – the starts and stops of life – not forcing the recitations to follow the unnatural forms dictated by manuals of style. There were few *‘periods’* on a battlefield – well, that one big one, of course. It had taken several stories to convince him of that. The readers became enthralled by it saying it drew them into the stories. The paper soon put me on salary and offered bonuses for my best writing. At that point, I informed father I could make it on my own. His deposits into my account did not stop.

I purchased a bigger, sturdier, faster, younger horse and began expanding my range. I rode the area watching, listening, discussing ideas with those I met. I began writing beyond what there was to report in an attempt to clarify life’s elusive truths – good vs evil, right vs wrong, socially helpful values vs socially destructive values. I began creating fictionalized stories that illustrated what I was finding relative to those truths. Many of them offered just the conflicts in values and morals to let the reader propose or find his own solutions. People needed to move beyond what I said and begin thinking seriously for themselves. I was not their source of Truth. I was there to promote their search for it.

I found newspapers and magazines that would publish my fiction in whole or as series. It was to become the series that came to endear my words to the public and grow my bank account.

I did well with first person stories written through the eyes of some person relevant to the battle – a soldier, an officer, a doctor. Someday, I might try one from *my* perspective that encompassed that whole year. One very popular piece was written from the viewpoint of a ten-year-old who’s brother hadn’t been heard from after a battle. It told of his heartbreaking search – soldier to soldier, cross to cross, door to door, town to town. I shed tears as I dictated that one to the telegrapher.

Gradually, I became braver – more foolish, perhaps – and ventured toward rumored mega-battles. I carried an introductory letter from my editor, although after two months of widely circulated stories, I found my name was frequently recognized – ‘that kid who writes the brutally honest stories about the human toll this war is taking’, well, words that meant that – it was what I would want them to say.

Unexpectedly, I found most generals appreciated my

honesty and the moral and ethical issues I tried to raise. Religious leaders regularly scolded me for avoiding references to the spiritual realm. I found most politicians did *not* appreciate my work. Some even tried to suppress my stories. A senator once offered to pay me well to slant my stories toward his politics. I had to bribe the telegrapher to include a run of swear words in my response to him. I knew them – I just didn't typically choose to use them.

Almost one year to the day from the moment I had rescued my Captain and shamelessly inserted myself into the battle plan there in *Wilson Pass*, I came upon an isolated encampment south east of Conway, on the northern bank of the Arkansas River. Atop a low plateau, from the distance of a quarter mile, it looked to be, perhaps a thousand men/soldiers/boys. It flew the Union flag. It was an unseasonably hot, April, afternoon. I had stripped to my trousers for the overland trek so stopped and made myself descent before entering the camp.

There, among the familiar, battered, blues of a Union regiment, I felt embarrassingly out of place in my wool-blend fedora, brown suit, ruffled, white shirt, and less than plain, civilian boots. A private led my horse – me astride it – to the officer's tent near the center of the camp. Along the way, I heard whispers: 'Isn't that Jonathan Penny, the reporter?' The paper had begun printing a small picture of me along-side my articles. Apparently, the soldiers were among my readers. I hoped they found them accurate.

We stopped at the tent. I slipped to ground and freed my crutches from the saddle. With them in place, I hobbled after the private to the entrance. Word of my approach had apparently arrived ahead of me.

While standing at the front flaps, waiting to be announced so I could enter, a familiar voice bellowed out familiar words from inside.

"Am I *never* going to be able to get you out of my hair, Penny?"

The flap opened. After the briefest moment as he winced at my physical condition, we embraced. There were tears, hopefully hidden until we entered the privacy of his tent.

We talked for most of an hour – more about me than him or the regiment, I suppose. It was the first opportunity I had to

thank him in person for saving my life. I drew it to a close, knowing he had more important things he should be doing.

“Your permission to talk with the men? You know I’ll not reveal anything I shouldn’t in my stories. I’ll run any that come of this stay by you before I leave. If you have activity pending, I’ll stay out of your hair.”

“My scouts haven’t found the enemy within fifty miles of here – that’s a good deal further than we can see here on the flats of the valley.”

“One more minute, then, if I may.”

I removed a recent sketch from my coat pocket and handed it to him.

“An idea for an alternative to the generally unsuccessful balloons being used to support scouts in seats at the ends of tethers. I saw one fall a hundred feet to his death not long ago – thus this sketch. This is what I call a portable scouting tower to be used on just such flat terrain. It consists of three, collapsible, hundred-foot ladders, that quickly form a stable, triangular, tower. All of it can be transported on one, single-team wagon. It will increase a scout’s visual range from a mile on horseback to nearly twelve from on top of the tower. I estimate ten men can have it up and functional in fifteen minutes – down and put away in twenty-five. The ladders are cross-braced at thirty and sixty feet making it possible to keep the unit extremely lightweight and quick to assemble.”

“Still always thinking, I see. Fascinating. Thanks. I’ll send it up to command with my suggestion they give it serious consideration. It would offer a good two-hour warning even for a mounted brigade. 360-degree vision. Like a ships crow’s nest out in the middle of the flats. I like it. Thank you. Probably some sort of ‘civilian asset’ medal in it for you.”

I put on the expected frown.

He raised his eyebrows, understanding.

“That does remind me, Jonathan Penny, famous reporter and author, I still have that collection of all those other medals – they’ve multiplied since that last battle. Seems to me – strictly as an outsider to your world of writing – that there must be a useful, first person, story attached to each one. Just might offer a nice personal touch.”

“I had not thought of them in that way. I wouldn’t know which was attached to which encounter.”

He opened his trunk, picked one at random from a small box, and handed it to me. Pinned to it was slip of paper, which contained my name and the necessary information.

“You did this for me – on all of them? Thank you. I suppose I am ready to receive them, now – just no ceremony – no pinning.”

The Captain put up his arms – palms forward – indicating I’d get no such guff from him.

Back outside, the young man minding my horse asked if I had eaten. I had not. I became amused as he proffered an explanation for the ‘old man’.

“We have what we call ‘mess’ in the military, Sir. It means food – chow. You’re welcome to partake anytime. Let me show you to the tables. I’ll help you with the bowl, if you like. Will you be staying overnight? If you are, I’ll feed and stable your horse for you.”

“Yes. I’ll be staying over – probably several days. I can handle the bowl. You are very kind.”

He had no idea how to respond. I remembered how it was.

I also soon remembered how food from a mess table was. It required an extinguished olfactory sense and a cast iron stomach. I could smile, remembering our saying: ‘if it moves, stab it; if just lays there, salt it.’ Nothing moved – other than the shaker.

As I had made my way from place to place among the soldiers, I looked for familiar faces from before. There were virtually none. I wondered what had happened to them. I would not ponder an answer. I wondered what would have happened to me had I remained. I suddenly lost my appetite.

I was sitting outside at a table with paper and pencil, racing dusk, to set down my initial impressions. I never wrote by lantern light outside. Snipers liked to take pot shots in their direction. I had been treated very well in the hospital but harbored no ambition to return.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Life's Elusive Truth

I remained with the regiment for several more days. It turned out to be a goldmine of wonderful, personal vignettes. Once it got its marching orders, I left. They needed a good day to prepare. That didn't mean I had abandoned it. I'd tag along from a distance and cover the ensuing action from relative safety. I had that choice, now – relative safety. The soldiers didn't. When the war came toward them, they were required to meet it, face it, deal with it, give up their bodies to be maimed or killed. *There* were five more articles I could pull right out from my interviews.

I liked writing and often spent ten to fourteen hours a day at it – thus my prolific number of publications in such a short time. On some days, the paper would run three of my articles. I was coming to understand the great responsibility it involved – to tell the unadulterated truth and move the reader to think and plan beyond it – to apply moral measurements and make concrete plans – start movements, even – to hope my readers would not turn away from the sickening reality but be moved to take some step toward ending the madness. Why I believed they would, I didn't know. History seemed to show that faced with the same questions, decisions, and the same evidence, generation after generation, they never had really changed before.

During those several days at the camp, the Captain had made time for me on a number of occasions. We talked – seriously

– with a view to the future – neither of us were into reliving our war stories. It was, like it had always been, man to man, not Captain to kid. It was the first time anybody had treated me like a man. That pleased me and made me feel special. I took it as a responsibility.

He seemed to be holding together well. I had no idea how he managed that. Perhaps he and Jimmy shared an ability to divide their minds into compartments that didn't talk to each other. It made me wonder how much longer I could have held it together. I had allowed visions of me, alone on a hillside, with the barrel of my rifle wedged below my chin, just waiting to offer me my final relief. Had it not been for the, 'Waylon, Travis, and Paw incident' who could know what might have transpired. Interesting to think I might owe my life to that evil man and his sons. Talk about a story!

I returned to the low, flat-topped hill from which I had sighted the regiment days before. I felt one with the regiment. It had been my only, army, home – now populated with different boys and men but still my regiment. I set up an overnight camp and built a small fire to discourage visits from worrisome varmints – coons after my food, cayotes and wolves after my flesh, and mosquitos after my blood. It seemed my body served up a multi-appetite menu. I was sure there were comparisons to be drawn with types of people I had met.

My arsenal consisted of a six shooter, a late model rifle, and a nervous pessimist's excessive supply of ammunition. I carried an axe and a hunting knife. It wouldn't stave off a platoon of advancing Rebs but should give me an upper hand with the occasional fox or snake or the passersby with evil intent. Since my hospital stay, a cautious approach to life had emerged. At eighteen, I felt thirty – many said I looked it. I had celebrated my birthday that last night at the hospital. There was cake with candles and a kiss I will never forget.

I was not really afraid. Perhaps I should have been. Upon leaving the hospital, I had considered taking on a traveling partner – a help-mate sort – but I'd always been a loner. Mary Lou had pointed out to me that was a poor attribute for a husband. It had given me pause – an as yet unresolved 'pause'.

It had come to present less of a concern since the 'incident'. Being like I was since then, no woman would ever want me, no woman *should* ever want me – disfigured and forever dependent

as I had become. I was still struggling with that. I felt pleased for Jimmy in that area, hoping he was still the strong, good looking man with the endearing smile I'd last seen. Surely, he would find a fine wife.

I still thought about him often. I hoped he was well, and unmaimed, and as happy as his life would allow. The Captain and I had spoken fondly about him – the classic combination of intelligence and ignorance.

My take had been hopeful – that with his intelligence he would be driven to study away his ignorance, so he could base his life on facts and solid evidence and make good decisions. His desire for high school and the way he intentionally worked to improve his vocabulary, gave me hope for him.

The Captain's impression was that ignorance, led by intelligence, could only lead to a bad end. Intelligent people became leaders of the less intelligent. *Uninformed*, intelligent leaders so often led their followers in harmful directions – pell-mell toward dangerous, counterproductive, goals and ends – directions the educated would understand made no 'real' sense and could only end badly. They couldn't create a life based on facts and the very best information because they did not know about them. Instead, they had to base life's decisions on opinion, hunches, untruths, and lore – all often erroneous bits and pieces that led to false and dangerous conclusions. He pointed out that intelligence, without accurate knowledge behind it, was often *more* dangerous than ignorance by itself.

I figured the worse part of all that was that the ignorant generally had no way of knowing they were ignorant – understanding which of their beliefs were poorly taken – so they had no way or desire to correct their paths. It often became generations deep. I hoped the Captain's conclusion was wrong in Jimmy's case. I figured it was – my friend's interest in furthering his education – establishing a clean hands life – gave me great hope.

Should I go look for him – Jimmy? Why would I do that? How could that help or improve anything? He had made his decision and left me. It was his life and I should leave it at that. But he seemed to have left me only over his loyalty related to the war – not over our friendship. Perhaps after the war the dilemma would evaporate, and he'd come looking for me. If he read the

papers, I wouldn't be hard to find.

It needed lots more consideration. For somebody who had always believed he knew what was best for everybody, I should have been proud of my flexibility and patience with the matter. UGH! I thought my head would explode!

Before it did, two figures approached, walking – trudging – slowly through the tall grass that bent in the welcome, gentle breeze of the late afternoon. I was seated on the ground, not the position of advantage in such an encounter. My guns were several yards away, covered by my bed roll, which I had unrolled just moments before. I raised my arm to greet them across the last twenty-five yards.

At that distance, I first determined they were Rebel soldiers – sixteen or seventeen – one stripers. As they neared, one unshouldered his rifle, moving it to a casual position angled toward the ground but clearly at the ready.

They returned my greeting. The fact I remained seated seemed to offer some degree of relief to them. I hoped they were not after my horse. For me, that would be like being abandoned in the desert. I hadn't thought to hide my crutches and hoped they didn't take them as a sign I would be an easy mark if that was their intention. I would have been, of course. I was worrying like a writer building up to some sort of tension-filled encounter.

I would use my crutches as an icebreaker.

“Hi. Sorry I didn't stand to greet you.”

I pointed to them on the ground beside me.

“No problem, Sir. Sorry about that. You're a Yankee.”

“And you are not.”

It garnered two brief smiles. They stood their rifles on the ground beside them as they towered over me. I leaned forward and offered up my hand for shakes. They were willing.

“I'm Johnny. A newspaper reporter – about to make supper. If we had a couple of rabbits, we could make it a threesome.”

“I can make short work of that, Sir. This hill is loaded with 'em. Give me ten minutes.”

The other one surveyed my camp, such as it was.

“Need a bigger fire, Sir. Let me gather some wood.”

He laid his rifle down on my bed roll and trotted off toward

a small stand of trees. He was back in five minutes with an armful carefully selected to meet our needs. It seemed we had established a working level of trust. He went to work rearranging my fire. It had been a congenial start. I needed to pick words and topics that would continue things in that vein.

“Had a long walk, today?”

“Since sunup. Got separated from our company during a running skirmish yesterday. Haven’t seen Company 4 have you – thirty tired young men dressed in gray and scared out of their skins.”

I offered a grin, assuming some of it, at least, had been offered as humor.

“I haven’t, but I’ve been at this spot for less than hour, I suppose.”

I silently praised myself for having moved far enough back on the rise, so my old regiment was out of sight. The other boy returned with two, nice sized chunks of meat, cleaned and ready for the skewer. It would be my second rabbit and I believed it had been my suggestion – something I assumed they would go for. Fire Boy and I had dismissed the earlier two shots as merely the prelude to our supper. A story for another time.

They had soon constructed a spit. I opened a can of corn and one of beans and placed them close to the fire to heat.

We were sitting at the fire, which gradually replaced the sun as our source of light. I quietly admired how they could sit cross-legged. Perhaps, it was more jealousy than admiration. I still encountered the occasional, ‘pity Johnny’, day.

“No backpacks, I see.”

“We’re lucky ta have escaped with the clothes on our backs. It was terrible.”

“Your first battle?”

“Yes, Sir. Not looking forward to our second.”

That line of conversation had taken us down an unpleasant route. I’d try again.

“This you’re home territory?”

“Harrison.”

“Bentonville.”

“I’ve been both places. They both seemed like really nice

communities.”

“The best.”

The other boy nodded.

“Got girlfriends back home?”

“Yes, Sir. Maggy.”

“No, Sir. Four sisters and a dog.”

Hardly an equivalent, I thought. I supposed he was suggesting he had a good thing going as well.

“This war is changing things back home, I suppose.”

“All the able-bodied men is gone. Boys have ta pick up the slack. Stores pretty empty. If the Yankee soldiers don’t take the supplies, *our* soldiers do. A pretty sad time for those left behind.”

“As if things aren’t sad for the soldiers.”

They nodded and shrugged as if that were just a given. So, things were bad on all fronts and they were tired, hungry, scared and lost. Most certainly, it was not the life they had earlier thought their teen years were going to present for them. There was something about ‘carefree’, wasn’t there?

“What about you, Sir?”

It seemed a sincere open-ended offer to hear about me. It required a delicate balance between the truth and the Truth.

“Like you already noticed, I’m from up north – Peoria, Illinois. Got forced into the Union Army, got wounded, went to work for a newspaper and am currently on a low hilltop somewhere in central Arkansas happy to be making two new friends.”

They seemed to like that version and more quickly became less put off by my Yankee-ness than I would have expected.

“Never knowed a Yankee, before.”

“Truth be told, I’ve known very few Southerners. Liked the ones I’ve met, except for those that insisted on shooting at me.”

I hoped I hadn’t gone too far with that. My intention had been to introduce a bit of humor and play down our obvious differences and work up our similarities.

They smiled. That was good.

“Afraid I’m not set up for dinner guests – have just one tin plate and one fork, knife, and spoon. I suppose we could take turns.”

“We brought our fingers. Twist those tin can tops clean off, and we’ll make pushers – spoons.”

I indicated they were theirs for the taking. The fire builder took to the cans. The hunter examined the rabbits.

“Lookin’ good. Rare, about five minutes. Well-done, more like fifteen.”

Two more Rebs had entered my life. Two more nice boys. Clearly, they didn’t hate *me*. Clearly, they’d have killed me had I been wearing a blue uniform. Clearly, I still wasn’t close to having it all figured out.

I had avoided political and philosophic topics. Probably so they wouldn’t have to become any more upset than they were. Probably some because people who were all about survival, tended to set such concerns aside. I couldn’t help but ask one question.

“You have any good idea why we’re fighting this war?”

“Darkies,” the hunter said.

“Slavery,” the other said, nodding. “Grampa says without slaves the south will go broke.”

“Your families own slaves?”

“No.”

“No.”

“Your families going broke because of it?”

“No.”

“No.”

I dropped it. We ate.

“You’re welcome to sleep here at my fire if you want. It has grown well beyond what I need,” I said sliding away from that topic before it could cause us problem.

“We need ta keep movin’. Gonna head upriver ta Little Rock. We hear that’s solid Confederate territory. Feel safer there. Bound ta be a Company that’ll take us on. Be good ta walk in the cool for a change. Thanks for your kindness.”

They stood and picked up their rifles. I tossed them each a can of vegetables. They nodded and stuffed them deep into their coat pockets. As they were turning to leave, the fire builder felt moved to speak.

“We never had no idea Yankees could be like you are, Sir.

We're really glad we happened onto you, but it sure does make bein' a soldier harder, ya know."

I knew. I *hoped* it would. Maybe I had stumbled onto part of the answer – an hour a day of required sitting at a campfire with your enemy. Now, there was a novel. I'd title it, *Across the Flames*.

Any response would have seemed condescending, so I just offered a nod and a wave.

I hated it about myself, but I would keep one hand on a weapon while I slept that night – in case the Reb in them demanded they return and do their duty against the Yankee. I hoped they didn't. I really hated that I had to keep killing nice people.

I seldom slept well. If it weren't the leg it was the arm and if not the arm, it was the ribs. No position of comfort lasted long. For some reason I slept quite well that night.

Dawn broke with the bombastic sounds of hell. I crawled to a position where I could ascertain what was unfolding. A battle had begun in the valley below me – the camp was up against what looked to be a massive Rebel assembly. I could tell from the arrangement of the troops, that overnight, contingents had approached the encampment from four directions. It meant the officers had driven the men hard, since just the day before the scouts had observed no rebel forces within fifty miles. The Captain's regiment was clearly a target of importance. It would have taken a twelve to fourteen-hour forced march to cover the distance.

If the Captain's camp had any advantage, it would be that they were going up against an exhausted enemy. That was less of an advantage than it might seem. All the enemy had to have strength enough to do was stand there, firing round after round into the large circle of defenseless, unorganized, men and boys.

After an hour, it was over. The several white flags raised had not been honored. I hoped that from down on ground level the confederate officers had been unable to see them through the morning fog and clouds of spent powder. I hoped that *was why* it happened.

Quadrant by quadrant, the land below grew silent. With the sun, the fog faded, and the smoke rose into the heavens. I assumed hundreds of Yankee souls rose along with it.

I would write the story. I would make it the best one I had ever penned. It would describe the horror. It would be punctuated with the screams of pain and anguish that had risen to meet my ears. It would be lit by the unrelenting, crackling, orange flames belching from thousands of rifles – at times enough to light the camp like noonday. It would tell of the horrific irritation of the nose and eyes from the noxious smoke that often caused soldiers to toss aside their rifles and flee into the night in search of water to wash it all away. It would present a contrast between the comforting greens of Mother Nature’s gently swaying grass, which offered equality among every uneven nook and cranny of the valley floor, and the ugliness of the mangled bodies, laying there in pools of red that flooded its roots – perhaps a precursor of humanity’s inevitable demise. It would speak of the generation lost and the spreading sea of grief it had initiated. It would be a testament to man’s insufferable pride, greed and ignorance and his devastating insistence on reinstituting them generation after generation. I would title it: Blue Coats: Red Blood. It would be my last report from the field.

What had happened to me? Not only had I given up hope of calling out, if not silencing, the warmongers, I had lost my faith in good people like those two boys who had just shared my fire and meal. What was possibly left for me other than taking a heartbreaking header into the depths of despair? Why couldn’t I have compartments?

I had felt dirty before I became a soldier for the misfortune that had beset me – the awful sorrow I had brought upon myself and others I had loved. I felt dirty while I was a soldier for what I was doing – the atrocities, day after day, the atrocities. I felt dirty afterward as a journalist for devoting myself to reporting on and profiting from the depths to which man’s depravity could sink. No one of those roles seemed any worse or any better than the others.

I reeked of the stench of man’s inhumanity to man. I could no longer put the burden on ‘them’. For my collusion with evil, I bore it along with the rest.

I needed something else – something that offered some promise of, if not cleansing me, at least brushing off the filth and grime – something that pointed my purpose in a positive, even if ill-defined, direction – something that might relieve or overpower

the remorse and guilt that was consuming me. I wept for mankind. I wept for myself.

I marked the last page of my journal, FINAL, and tucked it into my saddle bag. Life needed a new start and with it, a new journal.

After one final, tear-blurred, glance into the valley – “Goodbye, my dear Captain” – I started south – most likely to Yates, but I had made no commitment to that.

* * *

I had named my horse, Dobbin, after the magical horse in a story I made up as a little boy. After Nanny tucked me in at night, she would sit on the edge of my bed and I would make up stories. She listened with such great interest, I just knew they were *wonderful* stories. I found my friends liked them as well. At any rate, I had named my horse, Dobbin.

Dobbin and I took to living in the moment – we stopped often to observe or admire or wonder about whatever the scenes presented. He was a patient and attentive listener. From time to time, I’d attempt to capture something in writing – a scene, a feeling, an idea, some special combination of nature’s sounds – even a few stories. We seldom hurried – there was no reason to hurry toward one’s next moment – it never failed to be there. How could you understand a thunderstorm if you didn’t become one with it on the trail? How could you make friends with the fledging squirrel if you didn’t sit quietly in the grass and wait as long as necessary for it to grow in curiosity and trust, and cross the expanse in fits and starts to investigate?

During those first two decades of life, I had somehow been fooled into believing success was in some way tied to one’s productivity – running fastest, making A’s, making the most money, being elected to office – even being voted most likely to succeed. It was an irksome trait to try and overcome. That, in turn, was supported by the time-honored and oft quoted adage; if you’re going to do something, do it well. Why? Why not just do it for the heck of it? I doubted if I had *ever* before posed that question to myself. I had been too busy doing things well.

Ten days later found us – Dobbin and me – hesitating at the outskirts of Yates. I had already told him the story about how it was my friend’s hometown and about the wonderful people and

about granny, of course, and her applesauce pancakes. I had shared that my motive for returning was uncertain. If it were to find a sense of rejuvenation, I risked disappointment. If it were to reunite with my friend, I risked disappointment. If it were to run away from life, I risked disappointment.

I thought my goal had become to minimize risk, to shed responsibility for my past, to do no harm in my present, and to make no plans that might complicate my future.

Presently, I urged Dobbin forward. We stopped again when we came upon granny's place not thirty yards further on.

I wasn't sure how I was going to react. I wasn't even sure what there might be to react to. Did I have any business being there? Had it been a foolish mission? Was I carelessly meddling in other people's lives? Should I just leave – move on?

I didn't – leave. I dismounted, set my crutches in place, and approached the door – it was closed. I knocked. There was no answer. I knocked a second time. I stepped back and looked up at the chimney – there was no smoke.

An old man hesitated on his walk and veered toward me.

"Nobody lives there no more, son. Granny died last winter, and little Jimmy Ray is missin' in action. We're all hopin' he's been taken prisoner but none a our inquiries has gave us hope. You're his friend, aren't you. Yes, you were here before. I'm Jake from the hardware store. I'm sorry you had to make the trip. Sorry about your crutches. Seems there's so much to be sorry about."

I hadn't responded. He patted me on my back, turned, and continued down the road. I imagined he was finding lots of backs that needed patting.

I knew it had been a long shot. I had told myself I would not be disappointed. It seemed I had forgotten to tell my tears. I mounted up and continued through town toward the west. I had never been to Texas. I just bet Texas had children that would enjoy a new story. How should it begin?

"Once upon a time there was a horse named Dobbin. He was a kind horse. He was patient horse. He was a lonely horse. He lived alone on a beautiful hillside. Most of all, Dobbin wanted a friend.

"One day, two, young, barefoot, boys happened by his hillside. Their names were Jimmy and Johnny. They soon

discovered Dobbin had simply wonderful magical properties that would lead the three of them on simply wonderful, magical adventures. That very afternoon . . .”

* * *

In the final entry in Johnny’s old diary, he had tried to sum up what he, as an 18-year-old, believed about life’s elusive truth.

Life’s elusive truth is this: The World is filled with good people. The world is filled with bad people. Most good people don’t become bad. Most bad people don’t become good. Sometimes good people are compelled to do evil things.

In the short run, bad people always win – they cheat, the good person loses; they steal, the good person loses; they cause harm, the good person loses; they kill, the good person loses. Even, if in the end, the bad person is caught and punished, the good people he has done wrong have already lost. So, on the basis of fact and logic, evil always wins.

Wars are most often disputes between ideas – not between men – certainly not between the young men who confront and kill each other on the fields of battle. To confuse those facts is to forever condemn mankind to the worst imaginable end. Killing the man or his surrogate does not kill the idea. To open one’s mind and work to understand each other, allows for compromise, sometimes, even, solutions.

Those are the undeniable, sad truths about life, but it should not temper good people’s determination to continue doing good. It has to be the fundamental social purpose of human life – good people must take good care of each other – it’s all we have going for us.

-The End