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# Bet Lee: An American Civil War Novella

Tamara J. LaFountain

*University of Washington - Tacoma Campus, tj19@uw.edu*

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Bet Lee: An American Civil War Novella

By

Tamara LaFountain

A scholarly project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Committee Chair: Dr. Michael Allen

Committee Member: Professor Janie Miller, M.F.A.

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I dedicate this novella in loving memory of my mother, Sharon Leigh Gratton-Hanson (1941-2010). Thank you, Mom, for giving me, when I was very young, the gifts of tenacity and imagination. I needed both in spades, and I would have neither without you.

Finally, I acknowledge here, with utmost admiration, the generation of Americans who lived through, fought in, and solved the Civil War.

“Any understanding of this nation has to be based, and I mean really based, on an understanding of the Civil War. I believe that firmly. It defined us. The Revolution did what it did. Our involvement in European wars, beginning with the First World War, did what it did. But the Civil War defined us as what we are and it opened us to being what we became, good and bad things. And it is very necessary, if you are going to understand the American character in the twentieth century, to learn about this enormous catastrophe of the mid-nineteenth century. It was the crossroads of our being, and it was a hell of a crossroads.” – Shelby Foote

## **Abstract**

An estimated 400 to 500 women disguised themselves as men to fight in the American Civil War. Though the war ended nearly 150 years ago and over 65,000 books have covered every aspect of the subject in that time, only a handful of recent works have explored the subject of the female civil war soldier. The vast majority of these women lived in secret; and, since secrets kept are difficult to research, it is likely that the published historical studies on the subject have found all that can be discovered (Leonard, 1999; Cooke and Blanton, 2002; Hall, 2006). This novella takes what information exists about these women and crafts a story about one – a composite of research and imagination – into a novel, thereby adding to their remembrance by reaching a wider audience through a popular medium and suggesting *the rest of the story*.

## **Introduction**

An estimated 400 women disguised themselves as men to fight in the American Civil War. Though the war ended nearly 150 years ago and over 65,000 books have covered every aspect of the subject in that time, only a handful of recent works have explored the subject of the female Civil War soldier. The vast majority of these women lived in secret; and, since secrets kept are difficult to research, it is likely that the published historical studies on the subject have found all that can be discovered (Leonard, 1999; Cooke and Blanton, 2002; Hall, 2006). I propose to take what information exists about these women and craft a story about one – a composite of research – into a novella, thereby adding to their remembrance by reaching a wider audience through a popular medium. I am concerned with history's tendency to portray these women as mannish. Through my novel, I would like to transmit the idea that women can fill typically masculine roles – as combat soldiers – and still maintain their femininity. Feminine

does not mean weak, and strong and resourceful do not necessarily indicate manliness.

Additionally, it is important that the timing of my novel markedly coincides with the advent of the admission of American women into combat roles. A look into the margins of American history shows that, while denied the right to fight in combat, hundreds of women have long done so, albeit secretly.

“The male of the species, in his brawny egotism, has to be reminded from time to time that he  
has not made history alone.”

Charles S Muir, *Women: The makers of history* (1956)

## Literature Review

A study of women who disguised themselves as men to fight in the American Civil War requires, first, an adequacy in the discipline of American History, integrated with a feminist school of thought. Only recently with the advent of women’s studies in the late 20th century have scholars published extensive pieces exploring the subject, beginning with Leonard (1999). Cooke and Blanton (2002) later published the most thorough exploration of the subject to date. Both compliment Wiley’s 1952 masterwork *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union*.

Prior to the practice of interdisciplinary studies, most Civil War historians failed to mention female soldiers in their works. In fact, the premier study of the daily lives of Union soldiers, though more than 400 pages long, devoted only three pages to the female soldier (Wiley, 1952, pp. 337-339); whereas Cooke and Blanton (2002) dedicated 250 pages to the life

of the female Civil War soldier. As Repko (2012) wrote, “Discovering scholarly silence on a problem is often as important as discovering an important published insight” (p. 171).

Leonard’s, Cooke’s and Blanton’s research projects filled a long-standing gap. “[T]here comes a point when disciplinary certainty has to be abandoned in order to ‘discover the unexpected truths of reality in the borderland’” (Repko, 2012, p. 54). Women disguised as male soldiers existed in this borderland, maintaining secrecy as much as they could. Of the estimated 400 women who disguised themselves as men in the Union and Confederate Armies, the story of only a handful has ever been fully told. In the male-dominated world of the 19th-century, these women needed to maintain their secrets, lest they be told to return home and “act like a proper lady” (Howe, 2002). Many of these women were discovered when wounded or captured. Incredibly, at least one woman was pregnant during her service (Blanton and Cooke, 2002, pp. 13-14; Leonard, 1999, pp. 219-220). With few exceptions, those who were not discovered continued to live in secrecy.

### **If it wore pants, it was male**

Wiley (1952) was a product of the prejudice of his time in history. He understandably referred to women as the ‘gentler sex.’ He even went so far as to refer to Civil War women soldiers as ‘freaks’ in the course of his text (p.139). Wiley’s unconcealed bias has to do with when he wrote his studies – 1940s and 50s America. What he and many of his contemporaries speciously supposed about women soldiers has been ameliorated in the last fifteen years by a variety of scholars, writing volumes about these brave and pioneering women. What these recent academics have concluded, in large part, is that prejudices against women, like Wiley’s and their own contemporaries’, actually aided these female soldiers’ deception.

Leonard (1999) advanced this conclusion. In one chapter of her book, Leonard addressed how men's biases against women allowed female soldiers to pass as men. Among the social rules reinforcing the gender dichotomy of mid-19th century America, was, of course an obvious dress code. Leonard asserted that this code allowed women to easily pass as men, stating that "Rigid codes of dress...reinforced assumptions among Civil War soldiers that 'if it wore pants, it was male'" (p. 205). Simply put, no woman would wear pants, and so anyone wearing pants was no woman. Additionally, Leonard points out that "women were presumed unfit for military service in consequence of their presumed physical, emotional, and intellectual weaknesses" (p.205-206). It seemed that for the typical mid-19th century man, someone who could endure the arduousness of camp life and the sudden terrors of battle could not be a woman; therefore, if a woman dressed like a man and endured war, she could easily pass as a man, given the assumptions of the time. Wiley (1952) devoted just three pages to the mention of female soldiers in his lengthy research. Most remarkable is that to transition from this scant mention of the women – back to his extended discussion of the men – Wiley used this sentence to qualify his short discussion of female soldiers: "Freaks and distinct types, however interesting, comprised only a minority of the rank and file" (p. 339). With that one sentence he dismissed these heroines as with the flick of his wrist. And, as Leonard suggested, such gender biases allowed women to pass with ease and fight.

In 2006, author and historian Richard Hall entered the conversation. In one chapter of his study, he wrote that "even in camp, male soldiers often were slow to recognize that a fellow soldier had feminine characteristics, perhaps finding it unimaginable that a woman would have the audacity to masquerade as a man and have the endurance to succeed at it under hardship conditions" (p. 57). Additionally, his work implied that the lack of attention paid to these women

after the war came from an erroneous belief that they must have been ‘immoral’ women, or whores (p. 55). Postwar writers, Hall asserted, intentionally ignored the women, even writing that they did not deserve attention because “they did not seek to be known as women” (p. 55). In other words, since they disguised themselves as men, then they should not be afforded special recognition because of their gender. And yet, it certainly was an incredible and unique circumstance for these women to pull off this deception and serve in combat.

Leonard (1994) asserted in an earlier work that, in order for it to have been somewhat acceptable to acknowledge that some women fought, they would have been thought of as coming from the ‘lower classes.’ And even so, these women were thought to have “slipped over some vaguely defined edge of decorum, if not sanity” (pp.174). They were, historians of the time wrote, ‘bizarre aberrations’ at best (p. 173). After all, they were women who behaved in a manner far outside of Victorian-era gender norms. Thus, they were a subject to be deplored and ignored.

### **Why not accept that women fought?**

Why would the literary communities of the late 19th century and 20th century exclude female soldiers from their stake in the Civil War? Simply put, it would have been considered improper for a woman to have been involved in what Wilson (1962) called “patriotic gore.” His book discussed the contribution of Harriet Beecher Stowe with her incendiary novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, but failed to mention the women who fought.

Wilson paid principal credence to Ambrose Bierce, the well-known ex-soldier disenchanted with war and writing in a blunt and shocking fashion about what he experienced, surrounded by constant death and gore. As Aaron (1973) put it: “Ambrose Bierce not only choked on the blood of the Civil War, he practically drowned in it. For the remainder of his life it



bubbled in his imagination and stained his prose” (p. 181). It may have been unfathomable for literary scholars, prior to the 21st century, to definitively include the “gentler sex” in such a scene. They may have, of course, thought it would be distasteful to their readers. Besides, according to Fuller (2001), the literary community of the Civil War generation struggled just to come to terms in their writing with the cataclysm of war and the specter of the countless dead – it consumed most written thought.

And yet, incredibly, many of the first women’s rights activists were born of the Civil War-era (Donovan, 1985, pp. 21-24). Madsen (2000) noted in her work that women in the 1850s and 60s were emboldened by the abolitionist movement to demand their own freedoms (p. 3); however, such women were pariahs in the Victorian Age, partly explaining the general public ignorance about women who fought. It would have been a social risk for female soldiers to expose themselves. Yet, as Margaret Fuller wrote in the mid-19th century: “What woman needs...is as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded, to unfold [her] powers” (Donovan 1985, pp. 32-33). It can be argued that female Civil War soldiers disguised themselves as men for this very purpose – to live freely and unimpeded, and to find their power.

As Hall (2006) concluded, "The truth about female soldiers has been, to some extent obscured by social and psychological factors relating to gender discrimination" (p. 70). Women acting as men, dressing like men, and behaving like men likely presented a conundrum to any historian prior to the late 20th century simply because they fell outside of gender norms. They were weird, so to speak. If male historians of the early to mid-20th century believed, as apparently they did, that these women were mannish, or lesbians, and thus ‘freaks,’ then they would perhaps not have deigned to write about them.

## Female scholars step in

“Women will remain trapped in age-old patterns of enslavement and they will lose hard-won freedoms unless they learn and transmit their history.”

– Josephine Donovan, *Feminist Theory* (1985)

Since the discipline of history, and especially that of the American Civil War, has typically been told from a male-centric view, the advent of the feminist school of thought was necessary to spark research into the stories of these oft-ignored heroines. Leonard (1999) published the first study of women soldiers 134 years after the Civil War. Why did it take an integration of the feminist theory with the discipline of American History to get this story told? As Repko (2012) explained, “theory refers to a generalized scholarly explanation about some aspect of the natural or human world, how it works, and why specific facts are related, that is supported by data and research” (p. 126). The feminist theoretic paradigm established a school of thought, an intellectual focus, interested in, of course, women’s studies. When seen through a feminist lens, these women’s stories receive long-overdue analysis.

Despite these thorough research projects, the lives of almost all female Civil War soldiers remain shrouded in secrecy. Even the best researcher cannot discover material that does not exist. Only a few of these women warriors ever shared their stories publicly. It seemed most of these women chose to maintain the secret, even after the war.

Four years after Cooke and Blanton published, Hall (2006) joined the discussion, paying almost immediate tribute to Leonard’s *All the Daring*, calling her book “a cogent discussion of the issues” (p. 58). Hall also mentioned that little is known about the women’s motivations as most remained secretly hidden away (p. 54). It is in this same discussion that Hall supposed that

many of these young women joined to escape a disagreeable situation at home (p. 54). Much has to be deduced based on the scant documentation about anonymous female soldiers.

Leonard (1999) discussed how women passed entrance examinations (physicals) and how they managed to train and drill in accord with male soldiers. In addition, Leonard examines 'uncomfortable' but relevant questions about women's ability to hide menstrual cycles while in the field. Leonard also discussed how set gender roles ironically aided the women in their ruse: "if it wore pants, it was a male" (p. 205). The book included the amusing stories of women discovered because of the feminine ways in which they first put stockings on in the presence of male soldiers (pp. 208-209). Leonard's book is a fine compliment to Wiley's (1952) pre-eminent study of the lives of Union soldiers.

Wiley, none-the-less, betrays his male-centric 1950s bias with one line: "Some of the gentler sex who disguised themselves and swapped brooms for muskets were able to maintain the deception for amazingly long periods of time" (p.337). No such line can be found in the latter studies written by the so-called gentler sex; however, both Wiley and the female scholars must be understood and used to tell the story of the life of female Billy Yanks. After all, the disguised women had to live as men did, and Wiley is the expert on how Civil War soldiers lived.

### **The Role of Historical Fiction**

With Leonard, Cooke and Blanton, along with Hall, uncovering all that can probably be researched about these secretive women, the time may be advantageous for a historical fiction account to add flesh to the bones of these allusive histories (Lively, 1957, p. 72). As historian Robert Lively (1957) wrote: "In clothing the skeleton of historical fact with the flesh of human purpose, a successful artist must cross beyond the limits of documentary sources and draw from the primary sources of imagination the selective litter of unique detail that alone warms fiction

with the breath of reality” (p. 72). The validity of the fiction writer’s account relies on “the conviction he builds in the reader’s mind” (p. 72); therefore, to write a fictional account about the female Civil War soldier, the writer must be thoroughly versed in the studies explored above and be able to render from them a credible account. Most importantly, “the novelist must make his fact palatable” (p. 77). Writing fiction, “leaves [the historian] free, at least to search honestly for the meaning of events along the unmarked boundaries between the known and the unknowable” (p. 78). Much is unknowable about women who lived in secret as Civil War soldiers. For now, their stories remain a hazy collection of estimated numbers and likelihoods, but a novelist could perhaps transform the information about them into a vivid story.

### **Method**

“Too often the historian, like Hamlet in his graveyard, alienates the audience by finding first in the skulls of Alexander and Yorick the fact that they are dead. The novelist begins with ‘the more consoling proposition that Alexander and Yorick...[were] once...as much alive as we’”

(Lively, 1957, p. 189).

History as a discipline provides, as Dr. Robert Lively suggested, the skeleton of historical fact. The historic novel, meanwhile, adds flesh to the bones (p. 72). I plan to bring one of these women – a fictional composite – to life and to place her story into the hands of readers. As Josephine Donovan (1985) wrote in *Feminist Theory*, women must learn and transmit their histories in order to maintain our ‘hard-won freedoms.’ I intend to do just that in this one instance: widely transmit a once-ignored piece of women’s history. Novel reading “tends to awaken curiosity” in ways that monograph histories cannot (Lively, p. 190). I suggest that I am

in a position now to bring these Civil War heroines out of the margins of history by utilizing a popular medium.

**Personal passion for the Civil War and the story told through *Bet Lee: A Civil War Novella***

I have studied the Civil War for 32 years, avidly reading every book, magazine and article I have had access to. In that time I have come to possess my own extensive Civil War library. I have travelled to nearly every major battlefield and many minor ones on several occasions. I have interviewed respected Civil War historians and re-enactors from Tennessee and Virginia. Yet, just five years ago, I did not know, or care to know, about female Civil War soldiers. No historian or park ranger ever mentioned these women to me. I have made clear why this would be: a male-centered bias entrenched in our culture and within the study of American history.

Even though I am a woman, I somehow shared this bias. Social norms have taught people for decades that women cannot or should not occupy male spaces. If they do, they are not *normal*, or as Wiley implied: they are *freaks*. Recent personal circumstances taught me to see the marginalized in society and have compelled me toward a paradigmatic shift into a Feminist mode of inquiry.

Also, it is only recently that women have been admitted to combat roles, and they will likely carry a social stigma with them that may take generations to break. As Megan Mackenzie (2012) pointed out in a *Foreign Affairs* article:

In a 1993 New York Times article, General Merrill McPeak, former chief of staff of the air force, admitted that he had "a culturally based hang-up." "I can't get over this image of old men ordering young women into combat," he said. "I have a gut-based hang-up there. And it doesn't make a lot of sense in every way. I apologize for it."

The *Commission on the Assignment of Women in the Armed Forces*, established during the George H.W. Bush administration, enumerated the reasons why women should not be admitted to combat. Among those reasons is the "real or perceived inability of women to carry their weight without male assistance" (Mackenzie 2012). I take personal and practical offense to such an assertion and choose to highlight women who have indeed successfully engaged in combat roles, albeit secretly.

The main character in my novella is Bet, an average 17-year-old farm girl from Indiana, living through extraordinary circumstances. She chooses to disguise herself and fight for no other reason than a desire to share the freedom afforded men of her generation. I write Bet in a way that confirms Matthew Teorey's assertion: "These strong, independent women took the prohibited step of 'unsexing' themselves to gain access to male space and authority" (p. 75). Bet can and does *carry her own weight*, as by all accounts did the factual female Civil War soldiers. For example, one of the best known female soldiers, Sarah Emma Edmonds, alias Frank Thompson of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Michigan Infantry, served in a variety of capacities during her time as a Union soldier, including as an infantryman in combat, drill, picket, and guard duty; as a mail carrier and a male nurse; and even as a spy. She served in the First Battle of Bull Run as well as the Battle of Fredericksburg, one of the worst Union catastrophes of the war. She contracted malaria and other fevers and recovered (Cooke and Blanton, 2002, pp. 67-68 & Teorey, 2008, p. 80).

Edmonds' secret was eventually known to her closest friend in the service Jerome Robbins, also from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Michigan. Though he was shocked to learn her true identity, he maintained her secret and their friendship (Cooke and Blanton, 2002, p. 60). Like Edmonds, Bet

has strong ties with two soldiers in her regiment, Charlie and Blakely, who help maintain her secret. Since it seems many more women were discovered in the ranks than successfully disguised themselves, I added these protagonists to help protect Bet's secret. They act as a shield against her discovery.

Many women were not discovered, though, simply because of 19<sup>th</sup> Century biases. As Teorey wrote, "most men, including Edmond's...comrades in arms, never even considered that women could express the highest 'male' virtues or that they could or would infiltrate 'the homosociality of the battlefield'" (p.79). This bias shielded women, including Bet, from detection. I include a chapter in which the men in Bet's regiment discuss the discovery of a woman in another unit, without ever thinking there could be one among them. Bet participates in the conversation, even criticizing the men for their ignorance. The conversation ends with her friend Charlie saying, "I suppose no *ord'nary* woman could fight."

Finally, I attempt through my story to highlight several feminist concerns, such as rape, objectification, and the subjugation of women. I tackle issues enveloped in both race and gender, and I do not romanticize war but honor the courage and fidelity of the Union soldiers, men *and women*.

## **Conclusion**

"Well, boys, I was talking to a fella from Indiana who says his brother was at Shiloh. Well, his brother said that when they was treating the wounded thar, they com'st across a woman! A woman soljer! Godammed, ain't it?" (Excerpt from *Bet Lee*)

Though the Civil War ended almost 150 years ago, the subject of the female Civil War soldier has all but been ignored compared to that of the male soldier. The advent of the Feminist

School of Thought opened the door to new discoveries: women soldiers hiding in the margins disguised as men. Though historians have known since the end of the war that these women existed, it took an un-biased base of feminist scholars to shine a light on their achievements and to begin to remove the cloak of disgrace from them.

Through my project, I have intended to contribute to this newly mined knowledge by creating the story of one fictional character based on the real women who fought in the American Civil War.



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Fields.

# BET LEE: A Civil War Novella

## Preface

We won that war. Even so, we do not get the same accolades as the Southern soldiers do. The Southerners had flair and military panache and a tendency toward splendid victory, while we simply possessed a dogged and unflinching determination – nothing glorious about that. When we won, we won hard. When we lost, we lost completely. We couldn't harvest any romance out of our failures, and yet, nothing seems more celebrated than the vanquished Southern army: the Lost Cause. How could such a group of grand and ragged men as filled the ranks of the Confederate Army meet defeat? The country wonders. They say the reason is found in resources. We Union soldiers could tap more men and more materiel. Plain and simple goes the line: we won because we could throw more into the effort and we could throw it in continuously. Well, I think we won because of the boys in our ranks. Victory carried the Southern boys forward in the first years of the war. We Union men in the Army of the Potomac had to resolve to go forward through defeat. And go forward we did. We went forward through Manassas, twice no less, through the Peninsula Campaign, Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville. These defeats were complete. We should have given in after the Fredericksburg fiasco, but still we kept at it.

I happen to think that it takes remarkable will and ability to move through desperate loss, to stay the course and capture the win. I watched the boys suffer through hard times and doubt – not to mention a maddening string of inept commanders. I suffered with them, lost with them and won with them. I drilled with them, marched with them, bunked with them, waited with them, held out with them and fought with them. I saw my only friends grievously wounded and killed. From among my four bivouac mates, I alone survived, or so I thought. Death visited everyone during the war. My daddy enlisted and died early on, fighting in the first battle of Bull Run.

After his death, my mama broke down and we lost our farm in Indiana to her unscrupulous, mean-spirited brother. It seemed I had two choices to escape him: I could enlist or I could get married. I chose to fight – for the Union, that is. My mama died, in a way, when my daddy was killed. My parents were gone. I was just 17-years-old and I was their only child, *their only daughter*.

### Introduction: Bet Lee

1862

No one suspected a thing. I bragged, cussed, and spat from time to time to perfect the image. Those habits made the man, I thought. I had a lot to learn. Before I joined the regiment I cut my long hair – no, I massacred it – until it was cropped close to my scalp in dirty patches of various short lengths. I smudged my face and practiced lowering my voice and acting as though I didn't bear any feminine attributes. That's when I started spitting which led to the bragging and the cussing. The first *goddamn* made me blush a little, but only a little. That part was easy. The only way to be free was to be a man, and I wanted to be free -- enough to *goddamn* all over the place.

I stole a shirt and brown trousers from my cousin back home. I donned them resolutely on the morning of recruitment. I tied the baggy trousers up at the waist with some old twine. The abrasive material still felt foreign and irritating against my skin. I walked out on to the dusty street with a practiced attitude. I sauntered over to the grocers, my hands stuffed deep into my trouser pockets, and gazed at my altered reflection in the store window. I supposed I looked coarse enough. Indeed, I thought, I looked *dirty* enough to be a boy. After a while, I would probably stink, too. This is just gross. I suppressed a sudden urge to giggle. I had to pull this off.

When Daddy was killed at Bull Run, I ran out of options. Thirteen dollars a month was a lot of money. I could save up and have enough to travel west.

A man inside the grocers glanced at me and tipped his hat. I worried that I had been made. Did men tip their hats to each other? I wondered. Either way, I didn't have a hat to tip. I nodded solemnly at him. He held up his hand to hold me in my spot while he finished his transaction. He walked out of the store, intently munching on an apple. He stared at me for just a moment, brushed another red apple off on his sleeve and held it out to me. I took it cautiously.

“You planning on signing up today?” He asked with a bit of an amused smile. I couldn't make him.

“That's right,” I replied in my practiced, deep voice and, for added effect, I belligerently spat on the ground. He cleared his throat, looked down for just a moment – I swear he chuckled, and then met my eyes with a charmed look.

“Well, all right then. I am as well. We'll sign up together. My name is Charlie Black.” I looked at him suspiciously, but he just stood there widely smiling at me between bites.

“You gonna eat that or what?” He asked, motioning at the apple he had just handed me.

I nodded and bit into it with feigned male gusto. I figured a boy might talk with a mouth full of food, so I told him my name between chomps. I was cautious not to offer more, and Charlie didn't press me. While we ate, I sized him up as best I could. First off, Charlie was clean and I immediately felt embarrassed at my dirty appearance, but that couldn't be helped now. We'd all be dirty soon enough. I shrugged. He stood at least a foot taller than me and had neat short-cropped black hair – no screwy patches. When I dared to meet his gaze, I noticed he had gray and nearly translucent eyes. He smiled unremittingly, like he'd just heard an amusing story, and it started to annoy me. I wondered if I was the funny story, but he seemed solicitous and

sincere. I guessed I liked him all right, and walking up to recruitment with a mate might help me pull it off.

“Well, looks like all the fellows are lining up over there.” He pointed toward the recruitment office with the core of his apple. He peered askance at me.

“Are you sure you’re wantin’ to do this?”

I raised my chin at him and scoffed, “You having doubts?”

He chuckled deeply, looked me from head to toe and quipped, “Not about myself.”

Charlie and I were among the first to enlist that morning. In the winter encampments we shared a cabin with two other men from Company B, Private Blakely and Private Hanson. Private Blakely looked young. He was a quietly contemplative boy who always seemed to peer about him with more meaning than most could muster. I sometimes wondered what he was seeing. His dark eyes and black hair contrasted with his pale skin in a striking way. He wasn’t given to smiling when it wasn’t necessary. He was a dependable fighter, and courageous almost to the point of recklessness. Blakely was a fine boy, and I liked him. Private Hanson, on the other hand, was a shifty fellow from nobody-knew-where, and he was not to be trusted. He was prone to pointless belligerence. He drank with impunity and shirked duty whenever possible. He looted the farms we passed, against orders, and we sometimes wondered what he may have done to the poor citizens. We were burdened with him and always hoped a rebel bullet would un-burden us; however, Hanson skedaddled more dependably than anyone, which made our hoping pointless.

One hot June day, after we’d been drilling for hours, the four of us returned to camp. Steam rose from our woolen uniforms, lending a ghostly effect to our group. We smelled like the

dead, and felt nearly there. I sank to the ground near our tents. Charlie stood over me, supping cool spring water from a wooden barrel, letting chill drops fall onto my face. Blakely dropped next to me and wordlessly opened his uniform front.

“My God it’s hot,” I moaned.

“Shut up, sissy,” Hanson snarled.

Charlie stiffened perceptively.

“Now look here,” he snapped at Hanson, “How ‘bout you stop giving Bet a hard time, Hanson. He’s likely to whup you. And if he don’t *I* will.”

Charlie’s hard look withered any sense of determination Hanson may have had. He sulked off in the direction of the sinks.

“Look at that,” Blakely cracked, “Shit heading to the shitter.”

Charlie didn’t laugh but stared after Hanson, looking as though he might kill the man.

Charlie, Blakely and I shared plenty of hard fights together, but that is another part of this story. The main thing I want to get across here is that I pulled it off, soldiering for three years without ever being made. The thing is, I did get caught dead-to-rights one night that same summer. Our company encamped near a cool, clear run in the midst of some thick woods. The boys all stripped at a run and jumped into the creek. I could only watch and wish. They all yelled at me to come along but I pretended to have the quickstep. I clutched my stomach convincingly and screwed up my face. I sulked off in the opposite direction.

Night came quickly and they wandered back to camp, in pairs and groups. The moon, though full, was hidden behind a cloud, outlining it in silver light. The stars speckled about it in fine appreciation. The boys dropped out pretty quickly. Charlie sat nearby, idly poking at the



camp fire with a stick. Blakely had wandered off to find a tree to sleep under. He refused to share the tent with Hanson. Pup tents squeeze a pair tight, and he did not care to be squeezed up to Hanson. God knows what he'd be missing when he woke up. After a few moments of staring into the flames, looking as though he puzzled something out, Charlie stood up, brushed off his trousers, looked at me once and walked into the tent without a word. The sounds of camp grew intermittent and desultory. I thought I heard a woman wail somewhere, far from the camp.

With a final glance about me, I walked cautiously down to the waters of the run. I nervously trotted next to it until I figured I put safe distance between myself and camp. I stood quietly for a moment, allowing my breaths to come evenly again – no sound. Only the babble of the run, the distant night call of an owl and the insistent stringing of Virginia crickets. I slipped out of my uniform and stepped into the cold water. The water cooled me like liquid ice. I stroked around a few times, and then sat still, feeling it flow and caress against me. My pale body had a creamy glow in the night. My rough, calloused hands contrasted sharply with the delicate, soft skin of my stomach and thighs.

I had to hurry this delight. The last thing I needed was to have Charlie come looking for me. I left the creek as softly, and with much reluctance, as I could and started to pull my dirty uniform back on. It was a sharp disappointment. I despised the dirty wool, and wished for a clean, linen dress and some light pantaloons.

Suddenly, from the dark trees I heard a branch crunch and snap. The sound reverberated through the darkness. My legs locked underneath me and my heart jumped to my throat.

“Who’s there?” I whispered anxiously. I forgot to use my boy voice. Shit! I cringed.

Blakely stepped out of the tree line slowly, looking as though he worried that he might frighten me away – that I would bolt like a deer discovered and surprised. I wondered how much he had seen.

“I woke up when I heard you, Bet.” He said. “I picked a spot just yonder to sleep and then you come a runnin’ past me – damn near stepped on me, too.”

I felt my eyes tear up and cursed myself for being such a girl.

He looked me dead in the eyes, and I supposed he was trying to gauge something about me. A shaken moment passed before he said, quickly and quietly, “Shit, Bet. You ain’t the only one what’s got secrets around here.” He took a deep breath, and looking down he murmured, “*Damn* it anyway.”

Then, looking up again and keeping his eyes locked on mine, he whispered urgently, “My mama is a slave, on a plantation not more than 20 miles from this here run.”

My short, surprised intake of breath broke a moment of tense silence.

“Blakely...” I whispered, trailing off.

“I know why you pretend. You *gots* to be a white man to be free. Don’t seem right, does it? We ain’t never let the company down. Never skedaddled. They’s plenty worse than us. But, if they knew who we was, they’d run us out – or worse.”

We stood in silence, suddenly kindred. Reassured by his sincerity, I gazed at his thick, glossy black curls and dark eyes as if it were the first time I had seen them, and I suppose it was. The cloud slowly drifted past the moon, and unbounded light sparkled off the waters of the run.

## Blakely

His earliest memory as a child was of his mama crying – a quiet, pained cry in the dark of night. Her piteous whimpers awoke him, and he turned to see why she cried. There in the moonlit darkness, his mama’s dark skin disappeared under a writhing, wicked form of a white man. Terrified, he cried out a little, quickly clamping his trembling hands over his mouth. The man’s head snapped about and he glared at Blakely through the dark of the cabin. Blakely recognized Massa and felt his jaw drop as frightened tears pooled in his eyes. Massa released a wicked little chuckle and ordered in a dark, breathy voice “Turn away boy.”

His mama tried to explain what he’d seen, and in the explaining she excused the man, saying, “He your papa, Blakely.” Stunned, he backed out of her arms and ran out of the cabin, stumbling upon his best friend, Massa’s son – his *white* son.

The boy stood smiling at Blakely in the sunshine and heat, his dark hair a tousled mess capping his pale head. Blakely frowned and blurted out, “You my brother.” The boy seemed to accept it without thought, cuffing Blakely playfully in the arm and screeching, “Course I am!” Playfully running off, stirring up dry Virginia dust under his feet, he looked to see if Blakely chased him. This time, Blakely stood still, just staring after the boy, tears rolling down his cheeks. *Wish I could tell him about his papa*, his thoughts spat. Suddenly, a thought occurred to him that had not occurred to him before. He held his hands up in front of his face, turning them from side to side, inspecting his white skin. *I am the same color as them. Why am I a nigger?* He thought, angry in new ways. He let out a short, frustrated sigh. He resolved to ignore the hateful color of his skin, stuffed his hands into his trouser pockets, and sauntered off in the direction his impish friend had run.

The bond between the brothers strengthened as the years passed, slowly as most Southern days and years do. The brother shielded Blakely from the hard work in the fields, keeping him close as a personal servant. Sometimes, though, when he would find himself commanded out to pick cotton, Blakely felt intense guilt at his position and pain for his family and friends, forced to labor in the fields each day, during every hot and miserable daylight hour. Sometimes, Blakely would sneak away from the big house to help his mama in the field, and her hands would be bloodied and tied up in linen, still steadily picking cotton while she sang a rhythmic hymn.

“Now, it wasn’t all bad,” Blakely winked at me, sensing that his story thus far may have been hard for me to hear.

Blakely said that, sometimes, as young teenagers, he and his brother would run off to town together, and if a stranger from the mountains happened by, both brothers would be addressed as if they were high-born white gentlemen. The scene always repeated itself there on the dusty streets of the small Virginia town.

“Excuse me, young sirs,” the stranger would say.

In response, Blakely would stretch to his full height and perfectly mimic a proper white man’s accent, “How may I help you?” He would ask in a ridiculous, arrogant manner. Looping his thumbs around his suspenders, he would rock forward on his toes, tilt his head back and look down his fine nose at the stranger. Once the confused, embarrassed stranger passed, he and his brother would run off, laughing, and punching at each other.

Blakely laughed out loud as he relayed this part of his story to me, shaking his head at his own nonsense. Then he grew quiet again, scratched at the embers of the fire with a stick and continued. “My brother always said the same thing to me on these days,” Blakely said with a

deep look into the flames. “You’re a fine nigger,” his brother would laugh at him. One time, after this routine, Blakely stopped his brother short. “Look,” he said, “You should not call me that. Look at me.” He thrust his hands into his brother’s face. His brother stopped short, and looking at Blakely’s hands, he gently took them in his and murmured three, quietly ashamed words, “I know it.”

Shortly after that, the brother began to teach Blakely to read in secret. He spent long hours in Blakely’s cabin and Blakely could sense that he began to love his people in ways that Massa never had. Massa was a cruel man with a quick temper and a sharp lash. His son was soft spoken and deeply sympathetic. Mistress eventually tried to keep her son away from the colored boy. Blakely and his mother and all their kind blighted her life. She made a point of making that clear to all of them, and the more her son seemed to be one of them, the more she resented him and hounded him. Everyone could see it, Blakely said.

“Why do you insist on running around with them? You are better than the lot of dirty stupid beasts – all of them! That foolish boy and his disgusting mother are making you soft!” The brother understood his mother’s resentment and tried to explain it to Blakely. He told Blakely that he had tried to show her compassion, but she was a hard, wasted woman, always insulted by the people around her.

Blakely and his brother would spend long hours, off in the woods at a quiet, slow-moving stream, fishing for nothing and silently pondering the situation life had placed upon them. An unspoken comfort wrapped the boys together in the quiet woods. They stayed close to each other, both deep in thought about their shared troubles. On afternoons late in the season, when

the air flowed fresh and cool and the leaves painted the trees above them with brighter colors, the boys would sit for hours in silence. Only the sound of leaves descending to the earth rent the silence with little whispers in their clearing by the stream. Occasionally, they would glance at each other and attempt reassuring smiles. They both knew that times were changing. Blakely's brother was almost twenty-years-old now. He should marry soon, and would eventually become master of the plantation, and he did not want to own those he loved. He asked Blakely with a fevered awareness, *How do you own your own brother?* Blakely quietly watched and let the young man reason it out. He had strong faith in his brother. He was close enough to him to know he was a decent man.

One day, as the two made their way back toward the house in silence, several sharp, fearful cries suddenly carried to them through the woods, breaking the calm. Blakely recognized his mother's screams, vehemently threw down his pole, glanced harshly at his brother and ran toward the house. His brother followed on his heels. There in the clearing near the columned house, the mistress beat Blakely's mother mercilessly with a thick wooden rod. Every time the Mistress raised the rod, little droplets of blood flew off in distorted little arches. Blakely stopped short, stunned and motionless, his face turning red with rage. His brother ran past him, gently placing a staying hand upon his chest. Blakely knew his brother would have his hands full enough saving the one.

The brother grabbed his brutal mother by the waist and held the rod. "Stop this!" He cried in a deep, commanding voice. She shrieked out and demanded release, clawing at him like a wild cat.

"Why do you do this?" He asked, breathless from her struggles.

“She disgusts me! I told her to stay out of my house. She is a conniving whore...”

“You will shut up woman!” The brother cried out to his irrational mother. Never knowing him to have such strength, all those who watched in the clearing breathed in sharply, almost as one being, and stood silent and tense. Blakely was stunned by his brother’s command.

“How dare you?” The mother demanded in a spitting, condemnatory whisper. The brother set her down gently, shook his head in shame for his mother, and went to raise Blakely’s broken mother from the ground where she cowered in fear, crying softly. The mistress thumped furious little ignored fists against her son’s back and about his head.

“Get your hands off of that creature! Do not help her!” The mother screamed fervently. He stopped short, and softly handing Blakely’s mother over into the young man’s embrace, he turned to his mother and grabbed her wrists to constrain her. He stared at the bloody stick at her feet for a moment and then, looking into her eyes, he asked in a tired, pained voice, “Who is the beast, mother?” And he released her.

In an instant the flat of his mother’s hand snapped across his cheek and she spat, “You behave as though you are one of them.” Blakely’s mother cried out at the abuse. The young master slowly turned his face back to his mother and looked on her with incredible pity. This she could not brook and turning sharply on her heels, she walked away from him, muttering as she went, “You are not my son. Go live with your niggers. You love that whore.” Her voice disgorged condemnation – a final, severe decree. That was almost the last time the mother spoke to the son. She had but one last thing to say to him and that much later.

As the war approached, the brothers grew into men, both of them twenty-one when time came for Blakely’s brother to fight. Massa demanded that his son fight for the Confederacy. The

decision dogged the brother day and night. He loved his home. He believed in loyalty and knew that, by his, his integrity and honor would be judged. If he refused to fight, he would be lost forever. Reputation is everything in the South and especially in the pious Virginia piedmont. If he garnered the wrong sort, he might as well be dead. At least, that is how he would be treated: as though he was.

He never returned to his mother's house, and she never protested his absence. Blakely said that Massa just accepted it blindly, acquiescing to his wife, not understanding or even accepting his son any longer. Massa, Blakely said, had gone wrong in the head and seemed like a missing, gone man. Perhaps, Blakely scoffed, his own cruelty had driven him mad.

As the war approached, the brother stopped spending as much time in Blakely's cabin. He tried to explain to Blakely what he was going through and how he felt. He told him that he belonged nowhere and to no one, except to the land. He spent most of his time, he said, off in the woods and fields, trying to hide from the inevitable. He had to choose, but he felt that he couldn't. Either way he went, he went wrong. The damned war backed him in to a corner and, not meaning to, he grew insolent and angry. He told Blakely that he disliked himself for it. Down in the tall grass, next to the slow stream, he lay hidden away, staring up at the slivers of sky that broke through the tree tops, wondering what he ought to do, vacillating between curses and prayers. Blakely watched over him, sometimes, quiet and unseen in the grass not far from him. Blakely couldn't fully understand his brother's torment or his hesitancy to act, but he loved him and needed to know that he would be all right. Blakely himself had long ago decided to what was right.

"I am as white as any man," Blakely told his mama, as if she had not noticed. "I will run north and enlist." She understood his desire to be free and simply kissed his cheek, hugged him



tight and cried. She might never see him again, she knew. Yet, he was determined that she would see his return and that he would bring her freedom with him. He meant to purchase her. He would buy his mother. He had but one thing left to do and that was to tell his brother his intentions. He left his mother reluctantly and ran out of the cabin, afraid that if he didn't go now, he might not have the strength to leave her. She yelled after him, "I love you, son! It all right." The tears he had managed to hold back, rolled from his eyes at that – his brave little mother – beaten and used, and still so courageous and bright. He dare not look back at her gentle face. He was certain that at that moment she feigned a comforting smile, and he could not stand the sight. He said a silent prayer for her safety. At least his brother would still be around to protect her. He knew he loved her like she was his real mama.

He found his brother, sitting under a tree at the edge of the plantation's southern woods, looking very hardhearted. As soon as Blakely sat down next to him, his brother hung his head between his bent knees. Blakely picked up a stick and started drawing symbols in the dirt. After several quiet moments, Blakely implored his brother, "You have to make a decision."

The brother looked up and squinted at the sun, without saying a word.

"It ain't gonna be easy," Blakely coaxed. "But you have to do something. You cannot sit out here forever. Not now."

He paused and looked at his brother, waiting for a response. The brother said nothing. Blakely grew frustrated.

"Well, I'm going north to enlist," Blakely announced, while getting to his feet and brushing his pants off. He looked down at his broken brother. His head shot up and he glared at Blakely.

“The hell you are!” He roared, suddenly sickened by the thought of losing his only friend to a war he condemned. He stood up to meet Blakely face-to-face.

“I’m leaving now,” Blakely declared. “I already told mama, and you ain’t stopping me. I gotta do something. I am gonna fight for the right side.”

Without saying another word, his brother pushed Blakely to the ground. He fell hard and skid a space in the dirt. After a stunned moment, Blakely stood back up and shouted “God damn it! What the hell you doin?”

“You can’t go unless I says so.” The brother leveled his eyes at Blakely, attempting to assert an ownership which they both knew he did not believe in.

“I am going,” Blakely spit between clenched teeth. “You can go to hell.” And with that, he turned and walked away, never once glancing back at his brother.

Most people in his part of the world knew Blakely’s parentage and so he had to hide as he ran north, the same as any other escaped slave. He knew, however, first, that his brother wouldn’t chase him down, and second, that once he was out of the area about his town, chances in his favor grew. People farther away, up toward the north, were likely to look at him and see a white man. This, at least, his master gave to him.

Once he made a good distance between himself and his home, he stopped by a creek to drink and to wash the caked dust off of his hands and face. As he bent low, next to the cool water, he heard branches – the debris on the forest floor – moan and snap somewhere behind him. He bolted to his feet and looked in the direction of the breaks. He had to slow his own panicked breathing, to listen carefully. He did not even know which direction he should run as yet. He needed a visual clue and desperately scanned the woods for one. The forest had suddenly

grown so quiet that all he could hear was his forced, measured breathing and the low song of the running creek. He thought to call out, but then scolded himself for a fool. He decided to just break for the creek and run to the far side and beyond. As he turned to run, a voice stayed his retreat. He turned about slowly, and there, through the light barrier of the springtime trees, he spotted his brother, hands up in a consoling manner, cocked smile on his dirty face. Of course, his brother would know his route.

“I am coming with you, Blakely” He declared. “You cannot make it safely without me. Your mama begged me to follow you and see you north. I never have been able to deny her anything. I rented her out to the Johnson’s to keep her away from mother. They are going to keep her for a long while. They are good people and mother was happy to be rid of her.”

“Have you decided what you will do?” Blakely asked.

“Well, not exactly,” His brother offered. “Get you north to begin with. I can decide after that.” With that he stood, pack on his back, waiting for Blakely to join him.

Blakely shook the water of off his hands and picked up his pack and followed his brother north.

That was the end of Blakely’s story and the beginning of how we met and ended up in the same regiment, two pretenders.

“We walked all the way to Ohio and joined this here regiment. It a stroke a luck that you had the same thing in mind.” Blakely said matter-of-factly and, with that, he winked at me.

“What did your brother do?” I asked him. Just then, Blakely’s partner, Charlie rejoined us by the fire, plopped down and lounged back on his pack. Blakely nodded at him. No words

passed between the two. Something told me that Charlie had heard this story from his friend many times.

“Well,” Blakely said in a silly sort of contemplative manner, “I imagine my brother did what he knew to be right.”

“You don’t know where he is?” I asked. I couldn’t believe that the two would not have found a way to keep in touch, even with the war raging everywhere at once.

“My brother was quiet as a saint on Sunday, but just as passionate.” He said with a chuckle. “He was given to brooding and struggled with the decision, but there warn’t no part of a coward in him. He fightin’.”

“A quiet Rebel?” Charlie asked incredulously. “I suppose he’s one of those over yonder, screeching like a rooster every time we fight. Quiet Rebel! Who ever heard of such a thing? They’re all fire-eaters.”

Blakely guffawed at his friend’s amazement and simply quipped, “I suppose he found his voice.” The two settled in for the night by the fire, never saying a word, just staring at the dancing, rolling flames, lulled into some sort of forgetful daze. I sat there running Blakely’s story over in mind, thinking about him and his mama and his lost brother. Somehow I was not surprised that Blakely was the bravest, best-natured man among us.

### Farm Boy

Most of us had a time of it, slowly growing accustomed to life in the Army. Nearly every one of us came from farming backgrounds. Some of us could fire a gun and hit a target. Most of us learned to follow directions from our fathers back home. Almost no one of us shirked hard work, but hard work on a farm is not the same as hard marching and harder drilling. Tough as we were, we had to become tougher still.

Having been the only child on a farm, I was accustomed to a hard day's work; and yet, I was not prepared for the different sorts of pains that came from these military exertions. My feet, when not numb, felt like I had sharp stones for soles. When I first woke each day and stood on my feet, I nearly toppled every time – not from any weakness in my body, but rather just from the shock of hard, relentless aching cutting through my feet. When I first lay down at night, the throbbing distracted me; however, fortunately, the same work which hurt my feet also exhausted me and I slept soundly, no matter the pain.

Even so, the first week or so in Virginia, sleep escaped me. I still had some feminine sensibilities and the men offended them soundly. I quickly learned that when men suppose that they are in the company only of other men, they do not mind their manners at all. These men colored nearly every sentence with lavish profanity. Not to mention that these farm boys seemed to know more about women than any young men of their ages ought to know. Half of what they claimed to know was not the least true. Foul boys. I learned words I never heard my father speak, nor ever would have cared to. Certainly my father could never have thought of my mother in the way these boys suggested that men thought of women. Even so, the language was the least offensive thing about training camp.

Men in a camp do not concern themselves with anything like modesty. No man was too ashamed to relieve himself in the company of others. The first few times this happened around me, I demurely turned my head and cleared my throat. After a few puzzled looks from the boys, I stopped acting as shy about these functions. I got used to men grabbing themselves, spitting, cussing and stinking. When I was a girl, no man would have ever acted this way in front of me. It took a lot of getting used to. It was all I could do not to gasp in indignation the first few times I

was offended. Worse yet, I eventually managed to join in the crudeness a couple times just to cement my ruse. I grabbed at nothing.

At any rate, bunking down with the boys was the most awkward thing for me. I would lie each night, listening to the men snore, cough, toss and turn, and fart. Men are obnoxious, noisy sleepers, and they stink, especially after a day or two of drilling. If I have to be honest, I suppose I stunk a bit, too, but I know I didn't smell as bad as a man, not matter how much I tried to look like one.

One boy from northern Ohio, who never said boo during the day, held near complete conversations with himself in his sleep. Most nights, I could not understand what he was mumbling about. Then one night, he complained profusely about being charged by a malicious goose. "The damned thing chased me round 'til I 'bout couldn't get a breath, pa." I giggled despite myself – such a silly memory to stand out in a hard place like this.

"That goose frightens me," he added in a very grave whisper, as if he had heard me laugh and worried that I would not take him seriously. The urgency of his whisper silenced me, and I leaned up on an elbow to glance at him. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead and his face twitched nervously. His eyes were still tightly shut, assuring me that he slept through his dreamy ordeal. Suddenly, in a quick, quiet voice he added, "I had to run." With that, he choked out a sad, broken and quiet sob.

Then, as if relieved of some wearing agony, his face smoothed over, his breathing came easily and evenly, and he was silent. I stared at him for a few moments, pitying him, and assuring myself that he now slept peacefully. I looked about at the boys and it seemed that each one slept soundly. We all feared the same thing, I knew, though it went unspoken – consciously, that is. I scanned the sleeping faces and was startled to see Charlie looking from the boy's face to mine.

His eyes locked with mine. The way he looked at me – with deep curiosity – made an impression on me that I have never forgotten. I wondered what he saw, looking at me that way. I held his gaze for a few moments. His soft grey eyes reflected what light remained in the near dark. He whispered, “He will be okay now.” And with that, he slowly rolled onto his side, facing away from me.

Charlie had a quality about him that suggested he directly understood suffering and was moved to respond to it. I stared at Charlie’s relaxed form for a moment and wondered if he always kept watch at night. The thought was oddly comforting. However, we were soon to face a ruthless, invisible killer against whom no one could train us to fight. No amount of sympathy could rightly assuage the coming affliction: the spread of disease.

The farm boy who talked in his sleep died of the measles not more than two months later in the first run of deadly disease through our camp. Most of us came from widely separated farms – bubbles of protection from the spread of disease. We had never been exposed to sickness this way, and we paid for our vulnerability. Disease spread among us like fire through a desiccated forest. We were virgin soil, so to speak. A few boys died of the measles and probably a full dozen died of dysentery. The rest of us feared that we could catch ill at any moment and be gone a moment after that. Every one of us preferred a different sort of death, or so we thought.

Dysentery took the highest toll among us, affecting almost every recruit. The condition was a horrid curse, causing the infected to waste away. The disease causes sweat to bead and drip from every pore of the skin – the pain squeezes the afflicted man’s innards, folding him upon himself in pain. Dysentery is also known as the bloody flux – bloody and relentless diarrhea – a slow and an agonizing way to die. We would later learn that a gut wound was the severest way to go on a battlefield. These were the most excruciating of all wounds, causing a

man to linger in horror for several days, praying for mercy and begging for death. Many times I was tempted to shoot these wounded – it seemed merciful. Dysentery, I think, was akin to a gut shot and as unbearable and almost always fatal.

In those days, we lived by the strength of our bodies – crafting, farming, hunting, and soldiering. Without a strong body, a person was vulnerable to poverty, for one thing, and to death, for another. Most were assigned to the humbling care of a relative. For women, the threat seemed worse. Oftentimes, women served one purpose – child birth and rearing, and nearly every woman was assigned to someone’s care, married or not. Many women paid for the vocation of child birth with their lives. The war at least inaugurated a change: women began to leave their homes, to nurse, for example, and to prove that we could perform outside of the domestic sphere. Women gradually began to realize what they demanded at Seneca Falls more than a decade before the war: an equal chance. I was getting my chance at equality a different way: by pretending to be something I wasn’t – something that was supposed to be better than what I was.

### Training

Drill during training reminded me of how my mother taught me the alphabet, by rote. We memorized every command and every sequenced movement and came to know them by heart. A soldier’s movements in battle must be instinctual – an almost involuntary flowing, like breathing – a part of his natural existence on the field. Just as we learn the alphabet and then recognize letters and read the combinations of them without conscious thought of the single elements, so goes military drill. We learned the basic elements – the commands – so thoroughly that we could carry out orders mechanically and precisely without the impediment of thought.



Our instructors, mostly regular army men, knew that we would have to perform these precise and sometimes minute tasks under fire and while in fear for our lives. The only way for the drill instructors to ensure that we would be a successful unit, was to drill us until we were numb, really. We didn't think about what we were doing. We didn't feel what we were doing. We just did it, in a sort of hazed state. Our bodies moved separately and independently of our minds. I later heard of how some soldiers could even sleep while on their feet in a night march. The body moves independent of the brain.

When hundreds of men respond together to commands, they become one immense being, like schools of fish responding, when threatened, by moving in complete unison. No one breaks the formation without threatening the whole. Our formations had to be thick and unbreakable. The key to overwhelming the enemy was to concentrate fire and to never break apart.

The most important basic drill for the Civil War recruit was, of course, the loading and firing of the rifle. Each soldier with a weapon was a weapon. If we could not load properly and fire accurately, and quickly enough, then we were not of much use. When we were issued our rifles, I took a lot of hazing from the boys. "Are you gonna fire that rifle or is that thing gonna fire you?!" They would tease me, while laughing, and cuffing each other in fun.

"What do you think?" I spat at them, trying to seem as threatening as I could while being sized by my rifle.

"You aren't much bigger than your rifle, you know," Charlie said to me, trying to hide a grin behind his feigned look of concern. "You sure you can handle that thing?"

"Just worry about what you can do," I snapped. Why did he have to state the obvious as if I wasn't aware of it? But, I suppose that I wouldn't have been so cross, if I weren't so anxious.

The rifle seemed like it weighed more than the 10 pounds it was supposed to weigh, and it was uncomfortably long. *How will I ever load this damn thing?*

Now, what made loading so difficult was that it had to be done in nine steps, or times, as command called them. With the new breach-loaders, people today might not understand the difficulty. Ours were muzzle-loaders, and it took nine steps to be sure the thing was done. Each soldier's rifle had a ramrod attached to it, beneath the barrel. We each had a hard black pouch filled with percussion caps (little gold hats is what they looked like). The percussion caps provided the spark which lit the powder and propelled the bullet through the rifle. We also had a pouch, or box, of cartridges: paper tubes containing the Minie ball as well as the gun powder. The first thing was to place your rifle, muzzle up, in front of you. Here lay my first difficulty. My rifle, well over four feet long – almost five – was an 1861 Springfield rifle. I was not much taller than the length of my musket. The damned barrel was about at my nose.

As we stood in line that first day of rifle drill and I placed the thing in front of me, muzzle up, I cringed. I could not have been but a half-head taller than the length of my musket. Most of the boys stood at least 5'7" inches tall and some were taller, like Charlie. My small frame made me stand out, ironically. A few of the boys half-heartedly suppressed snide chuckles, drawing the attention of our drill instructor, a tough old regular army sergeant named O'Connor who spoke with a thick Irish brogue and an extensive repertoire of foul language. His head snapped in my direction, and as he caught sight of me, I stretched on my toes as best I could, to a little more than my full height. It was a silly and a wasted effort. He put his head down for just a moment, shaking it in disbelief, and muttering in Irish to himself. After a brief moment, he walked toward me, looking as much like a beset man as he could, calling on Jesus, Mary and

Joseph to help him and to save the bleeding volunteer army and such and such along this line. Once he was in front of me, he leaned back on his feet and crossed his arms low in front of himself, saying, “Are you a bonny lass now? Jee-sus, Mary, and Joseph, am I to train mothers’ little darlings to fight? Little girls? God A’mighty!” I cringed. If only he knew that he spoke the truth – he didn’t, did he? – while intending to insult my masculinity.

“I am not a girl.” I barked.

“Well, now...” He judged, peering at me. He walked around me in a circle, censoriously looking me from head to toe. “There in’t much of a man about you either.”

“There’s enough,” I said dryly. Sometimes, when you are the least sure of a thing, you have to act the most convinced of it. And I calmly and firmly asserted my masculinity.

He stood directly in front of me, not more than a few inches from my face, scrutinizing me. He looked like a hard man. His skin was worn like someone who had spent too much time outdoors – leathery and brown and somewhat deeply wrinkled. He spent his time until now, I was sure, fighting Indians under the high sun in Texas. Everything from Texas has a leathery quality. His eyes were narrowed to menacing slits and the muscles in his jaw flexed. He stared me hard in the face. He breathed “God A’mighty” one more time for effect. I stared right back at him, never looking away. I could sense he was challenging me to stand and I did.

After a few moments he proclaimed “I guess there is at that,” and he walked on barking instructions. Charlie looked straight ahead, but smiled at me from the corner of his eye.

Now, the next step, once you had your musket in front of you was to get a white-papered cartridge out of your cartridge box, strapped to your belt. The Army required every recruit to have at least two opposing teeth in order to rip open the cartridge. Once you tore it open, you poured the powder into the barrel, and then you placed the bullet in the muzzle. Next, using the

ramrod, you stuffed the bullet down the barrel until it was seated on top of the powder. Once this was done, you reattached the ramrod to its place on the rifle barrel. That completed seven times. The eighth step sort of seemed more like three to me: half-cock the hammer, remove the old percussion cap, and place the new one on the cone. This is the step in which my small female frame paid off. The percussion caps were very small, no bigger than a single little green pea. While most men at first fumbled to grasp and place them, my slender fingers proved more dexterous in the task, making me, from the outset, a slightly quicker shot than most of the other boys. I never wasted time, fumbling around in the dust or grass, looking for my dropped cap. The boys' fumbling about was another curse upon Sergeant O'Connor, who would rant, "What are you damned fools doing?! Place – the – cap- on – the – cone," he sarcastically enunciated the words. "Again!" and then, in a lower tone of voice he would, of course, add a supplication to "Jee-sus, Mary, and Joseph." It seemed that once we were trained and sent to fight, any order would seem incomplete without the commander calling on the Holy Family for deliverance from his own troops.

Once we placed our percussion caps, Sergeant O'Connor ordered the ninth step, "Shoulder arms!" and then "Fire!" Again – again – again and again we drilled until every man could perform the nine steps, three times per minute. Now, think of that, nine steps – three times – in one minute, under fire and often times while on the move and sometimes at a run. The first battle would be the test of our training and with Sergeant O'Connor's instruction and cross, bewildered prayers to guide us; I did not see how we could fail.

Charlie

We rode rusty locomotive beds south from the training camp, to reinforce the army in the Old Dominion. The trip by train was short, then by water, even shorter – down the Potomac. But, once we disembarked, the march to the join the army was long. We walked four abreast. Charlie, Blakely, Hanson and I marched together, one small group in a giant formation, snaking its way up a swampy peninsula. We stretched for miles down the road, a long line of blue. I supposed our head would reach the Army of the Potomac a day before our tail. We moved like a serpent, stops and starts. March and wait. As the heat of the day wore on and the march grew longer, the formation slackened, and we walked at a saunter of sorts, ignoring martial rules and talking to pass the time.

“Where you from, little one?” Hanson asked me, sneering at my size.

“Same place you is from – Ohio. We joined the same regiment, didn’t we?”

“I ain’t never said *I* was from Ohio.” Hanson smiled perversely, showing rotted teeth covered in tobacco juice.

“Ugh.” I said quietly.

“Well, *I ain’t from Ohio*,” Blakely spoke up.

Charlie gave him an odd sideways look.

“Yes we are,” Charlie said. “Blakely and I grew up in the same town, worked the same farm most summers.”

“Why he say he ain’t from Ohio, then?” Hanson asked, giving a suspicious look.

“I grew up there, but I wan’t born there.” Blakely adjusted his story.

“Where you born then?” Hanson looked at him hard.

“What difference does it make?” Charlie asked, clearly irritated by Hanson.

“Where *you* from anyways? I mean since you ain’t from Ohio and all.” Blakely asked Hanson.

“I ain’t from nowheres. Got no ma neither, and no pa. I jus’ showed up,” Hanson emphasized the statement by spitting a thick line of tobacco juice.

What ma would want him? I thought. I wouldn’t claim him either. It sounded to me like he was trying to make something supernatural out of himself. I smiled to myself. Maybe a demon.

“What you mean you ain’t got no mama?” Blakely asked.

“Don’t want one. What good is women? They is all no good, ever’ one. Only one use for them.” He sneered and grabbed his crotch, pulling his hand up and down, while making a weird, moaning sound.

Charlie turned, blocking my view. I was glad.

“You have a mother Hanson,” he said. “You maybe ought to think about that next time you want to say or do something like that.”

“You thinks you so high and mighty. Even you is used a woman that-a way, I bet. Whar is *you* from, yer lordship?” Hanson mocked.

“Not the same place as you. But I signed up in Ohio, now didn’t I? I came here, like the rest of us, *from Ohio*.”

Charlie looked at me and rolled his eyes.

“He’s a pig,” He whispered to me. “Don’t pay any attention to him.”

“I is a what?” Hanson asked.

“You *is* a pig,” Charlie said, mimicking the way Hanson spoke.

“Well, at least pigs is good for something. What you good for, yer lordship?”

“Christ. Can you shut up?”

Hanson made a mocking bow in Charlie’s direction, rolling his arm in front of him.

Hanson made me down-right uneasy. I thought him wicked and wished him gone.

A few moments later, our line halted near a green meadow and we fell out to eat our rations and rest. Blakely, Charlie and I made it our first order of business to lose Hanson.

“What is his problem?” Blakely said as we found a spot to drop.

“What *isn’t* his problem?” I asked.

The heat of the day was still and moist and clung to all of us as we sat on our packs in a brown field. Tall, thin trees lined area, and I wondered for a moment what lay beyond them. Everyone wiped at their eyes with dirty rags, trying to stave off the sting of sweat. Cicadas buzzed loudly around us, adding somehow to the feel of the stagnant heat. The buzzards, which always followed an army on the march, came to rest, tottering on the tops of the trees and squawking at us. I hated those damn birds. They were big, ugly things with awkwardly long necks – awful black foreshadowing above us.

An orderly rode up to camp to collect men to post as guards. Blakely pulled the duty, leaving Charlie and I to pass the time alone. After a long moment, we walked a ways off and sat quietly, in the shade of a group of trees, eating our hardtack and boiling coffee.

“What the hell is this anyway?” Charlie asked, smiling, and thumping his hard cracker against the tree. The thing didn’t even break apart. We laughed weakly. The smell of the coffee comforted me – boiling coffee smelled like rest. My eyelids grew heavy and my mind wandered. The cicadas sang me to sleep. I had barely dozed off when I was woken by several loud screams.

I opened my eyes and reflexively grabbed my rifle, ready to fight. Then I saw it. The screams had come from a black girl – she couldn't have been more than 14-years-old. The men were grabbing at her and passing her to and fro, laughing and leering at her.

“Looka what I found, a-hiding in the trees over thar!” One man yelled out as he herded the girl toward a separate group of loungers. The men, about a half dozen of them, all stood up and pawed at the frightened girl, calling her “honey” and saying “ah she pretty.”

“She is a fresh one ain't she?” One man yelled out.

“Pretty 'nough to eat,” Hanson leered, grabbing the girl and biting her cheek. She screamed and cried and wiped at her cheek. I shuddered.

“Leave me be massa!” She begged.

“Charlie...” I said, staring at the men and the girl. I looked over at him.

He was standing, looking hard at the group. The muscles in his jaw flexed as he watched. He bent down, picked his rifle off the ground and marched at a heated step toward the group.

I made a move to follow him but he barked, “Stay right there, Bet!” He meant me to listen and I did.

Just then an elderly black woman came wobbling out of the trees, begging the men to let the girl go. The woman had blood on her head and I could tell one of the men had struck her when taking the girl.

“Don't worry, Auntie. We'll give her back when we is finished,” one man said. He picked up the girl, slapping her behind, and hauled her off into the trees. The girl's screams had turned into desperate sobs. A few of the men pushed the old woman back, taunting her, “No, no, Auntie. You wait here. No one wants whats under your skirts.” One man cackled and pushed her to the ground. She sat there, sobbing and begging.



“I wants my turn on that girl!” Hanson yelled, grabbing his crotch again.

Charlie reached the group and yelled at them to let the girl go. “No one is having a turn!”

He spat at Hanson.

Several of the men backed down, but many more still stood – a greasy looking lot of criminals, I thought.

Made confident by the presence of the others, Hanson said, “Says who, yer lordship?”

“Let that girl go god damn it,” Charlie demanded. “What is wrong with you people?”

“We ain’t had a woman in a while,” one of the men said as if in a casual conversation.

“That *girl* is not a woman. She’s just a child.”

“Either way, we is having her,” one man said and stepped in front of Charlie. “You planning on stopping us?”

The elderly lady heaved herself to her feet and desperately grabbed Charlie’s arm. “She jus’ a baby, massa.” And then she broke into a sob against Charlie’s chest. “I know,” he comforted, and then he set the woman from him, placed his rifle on the ground, faced the man to his front and hit him, hard, in the face with a closed fist. The man fell to the ground, moaning ‘Christ A’mighty. He hit me.’ Blood spurted from his nose. The other men grabbed Charlie and held him.

The girl’s screams and cries stopped in the woods, as several of the men, including Hanson, pounded away at Charlie. I ran to help him but one big man knocked me down, laughing and saying, “Better not!” I watched helpless as they beat Charlie down. Two or three of the men would hold him while the others punched, kicked and slapped him. He was bloodied and senseless but still kept throwing punches when he could, never hitting anyone. The men laughed and finally knocked him to the ground. He fell like a ragdoll.

“Now we is gonna have that girl, ever’ one of us,” one of the men said and kicked Charlie hard. They all laughed and walked toward the woods where the first man had carried the girl away. Hanson turned from the group and walked back to Charlie. He bent low and said, “Not so high and mighty now.” With that he stood, bowed and laughed, walking away toward the group.

I ran to Charlie and turned him over. One of his eyes was swollen shut and his face was covered in blood. He moaned a little at me and was clutching his sides. I had a sudden urge to cry, but stopped myself. I ran to get water and something to wipe his face with. Eventually he stood on shaky legs and stumbled back to our spot under the tree with me. I placed a poultice over his eye and watched over him, glancing every now and then to the woods where some of the men had taken the girl.

Every so often a man would come out of the tree line, adjusting his trousers, laughing and patting the other men on the back. I saw Hanson head into the woods eventually and I shuddered. The girl, who had not made a sound in a while, began screaming not long after Hanson walked to where she was. It was a pained scream, and I imagined most of his pleasure was derived from torturing her.

Charlie shifted a little and I looked at him. His uninjured eye open was open, watching, and he hissed under his breath, “They aren’t human. ‘Specially not him.” I just nodded and turned to look back at the tree line again.

About an hour or two after it all began the last man came from the woods and looked at the old woman, who sat on the ground, waiting and rocking back and forth, sobbing a little still. He said to her, “All right, Auntie, we is done with her now. You canst have her back.” The old woman stood and wobbled back into the woods where the girl was. I heard her cry out, loud and long, “Oh my baby! What is they done to you?!” The men laughed.

“I am going over there,” I said to Charlie, but he had closed his eyes again. I stood and walked past the men toward the woods.

“Lookie who decided to have a turn wit her,” one of the men laughed. I just kept walking into the tree line, paying no mind to them.

The old woman was bent over the girl, crying and wiping at her with her apron. The girl lay limp, not making a sound. Her dress was pulled up over her chest and her thighs were bloody and blackened with bruising. Her face was swollen and blood trickled from a cut under one of her eyes. The little meadow where she lay was oddly peaceful and brightly green. Birds sang in the trees.

When the woman saw me, she pulled the girl’s dress down over her thighs and said, “No, no, massa. She in a bad way.”

“I want to help,” I said softly. “It ain’t right what they did.”

“Why did young master let them do it to her?” She sobbed.

“I am not your master. Let me help her.” I walked over to the pair and bent down to see the girl better. She was awake, but staring blankly at her companion with a shadowed look.

“We’ll need fresh water and rags,” I said. “I will go get them.”

The old woman grabbed hold of me and begged me to stay. She figured that I was their only protection and would not let go of me. Just then, I saw a man break into the clearing out of the corner of my eye. I reflexively bent over the girl to shield her broken and exposed body – the old woman cried out – and then I looked over at the intruder.

“Blakely!” I cried in relief.

“What happened?” He asked. “What happened to my—who did that to Charlie? What happened here?”

“They raped her Blakely,” I said, uncovering the girl. “Charlie tried to stop them.”

“Jesus,” he breathed. “Is she alive?”

“Barely.”

“Do you live around here?” Blakely asked the old woman.

“Yes. You knows—” She began, but Blakely cut her off.

“I will take you and the girl there. Bet, can you help me carry her?”

“I think so,” I said.

Blakely came to his knees by the old woman and whispered something I didn’t catch. The woman nodded as if she understood something of grave importance and glanced at me with a keen eye.

“I’ll go grab a blanket. It will be easier to carry her that-a-way,” Blakely said.

A few moments passed and he returned with the blanket, out of which we fashioned a sort of stretcher to carry her on. She cried out a little when we lifted her on to the blanket. Blakely whispered, “Shh...it’s okay now, little love. No one will hurt you.”

We walked for nearly an hour when we came to the outskirts of a farm well north of the meadow. I could just make out a set of cabins and a big white-columned house in the distance. Blakely and I set the girl down gently and he told the old woman to go find folks who would help her from there. We had to go. She understood. She nodded, hugged him and thanked us. “God bless you, both.” With that, she hobbled off and we turned to head back to our regiment.

Along the way, I told Blakely everything that had happened. How the girls screams had woken me. How the men, including Hanson, had beaten Charlie up when he tried to stop the rape.

“He’s always saving someone,” Blakely said quietly and looked down at the ground as we walked.

When we caught up with the regiment, the march had resumed. Charlie managed to keep up and looked a sight better, but I could tell he was still sore. Hanson wasn’t with him. Blakely and I fell in step.

“You all right?” Blakely asked him.

“Tolerable, but just,” He smiled weakly.

“Thank you for trying,” I said, looking at his battered face.

“Poor attempt,” he quipped, placing a comforting hand upon my shoulder.

“There were too many of them.”

“I had to do something. That girl is probably ruined. Did she live?”

“We took her home,” Blakely said. “She is in a bad way.”

“Home?” Charlie shot Blakely a questioning look.

“We jus’ took the two of them close to their place and sent the granny to get help from there.”

“I would like to kill those men,” Charlie said.

“You and me both.”

As the march wore on into dusk, we grew quiet, waiting for the order to fall out for the night. I couldn’t stop thinking about what those men had done to the girl. I didn’t think I would ever get the sound of her screaming and the sight of her, lying in the woods, bleeding, out of my head. It tortured me. I wished I could forget. My hands trembled, trying to keep a hold of my rifle. I wanted to throw the damn thing down and run away, back to Indiana.

Sensing what I was feeling, Blakely whispered to me, “You shouldn’t have to see things like that.”

When he said it, it sounded absurd to my ears, though I know he meant well. “Why am I any different from that girl? I shouldn’t *see it*? Those men should not have done that to her.”

Blakely just nodded and grew quiet again.

A few more steps and the order to fall out travelled down the line. We walked off to rest for the night, wearied and sore. I pulled picket duty and left to my post, first making sure Charlie would be all right. At least he had Blakely with him. I walked past Hanson and the half-dozen men who had raped the girl. My stomach churned and my throat burned with the threat of bile. Hanson leered at me and asked, “How’s his lordship faring this evening?”

“*Shut up*,” I said and walked on quickly.

He yelled after me, “Best keep yer mouth shut when you ain’t got those two ta watch over ya sissy!”

Everything there in the dark of my forward picket position seemed more threatening that night. I felt surrounded, not just by an enemy to my front but by one now to my rear. The girl posted with me. I mean to say, she never left my mind. I think I cried a little there in the dark, from fear or sorrow or both. The night after dusk seemed black now. I couldn’t see far enough, into the darkness. The quiet seemed more threatening. Something lurked. Every sound brought me to attention. My heart pounded so loudly that it distracted me as I sat trying to hear in the night.

*What if they ever discovered my secret?* The thought convulsed me. I knew I was going to stick close to Charlie and Blakely. God forbid anything happen to them. My palms sweated and I wiped them on my trousers. *Nothing can happen to them.*

“Bet?”

I jumped and screamed out a little, fumbling to bring the butt of my rifle to my shoulder, before I recognized Charlie’s voice.

“Jesus Charlie! You scared the devil out of me. What are you doing?”

“Wanted to come out and set with you a while. I can’t sleep anyway.”

“Can you do that?”

“No one saw me. I don’t think it makes much difference. Blakely’s asleep.”

“Well, all right then,” I feigned indifference, but I was relieved. My muscles relaxed and I felt at ease.

“I want to ask you how you are doing – I mean, after what happened today?” Charlie peered at me through the darkness. The moonlight reflected in his eyes and outlined his tall silhouette.

“I’ve never seen men do anything like that before, Charlie. I didn’t know that they did...” I trailed off.

“Most men don’t. Those few are bad apples – rotten. They will all be gone within a couple months, I am sure. We maybe ought to just stay away from them – first battle, they’ll show their true color and run off. Only cowards and no-accounts do what you saw today.”

“What about you?” I asked. “How are you faring? You took a beating.”

“I am going to kill Hanson, if he stays. I don’t know how, but I am going to do it.”

We both grew quiet and listened to the crickets and the low conversations of the men behind us in the camp. Eventually an officer of the guard came along and told Charlie to get back to camp. He left me reluctantly. I was sad to see him go, but I only had about 20 minutes left on

my forward duty. Twenty minutes of apprehension. Time goes slowly when you are alone and afraid. Might as well have been 20 days.

As I walked back to camp, I passed by Hanson sleeping in the open, wrapped in his dirty blanket and snoring loudly. So vulnerable, I thought, touching my bayonet. *God he's an ugly cuss.* I stood over him for a few minutes, wishing I were a bolder man. I suppose I didn't want to let my repulsion for him turn me criminal, and I walked off, letting the opportunity slip. Anyway, I thought, there's no honor in killing a sleeping man, even Hanson.

I approached the spot where I had left Blakely and Charlie and I heard them in a quiet conversation with a couple of men I recognized from Company C. I could just make out what they were saying. A low fire crackled, lighting the group.

"Look now. We all know about her. We are the only ones, as far as we know. We have to keep her safe. What happened today – well, my God. We'd have to kill someone." Blakely said.

"I *would* kill someone. Liked to have killed them today," Charlie added.

"Just keep close. Keep an eye out," Blakely said.

"For what?" I asked as I walked up to the four of them.

Every one of them started when they heard me, except Charlie. He just glanced up at me without expression. One of the men from Company C cleared his throat, and the other just stared at his feet in an awkward manner.

"For those rapists," he said. "Gotta keep a distance from them. Can't trust those types."

"We're just talking about what happened today," Blakely added. Then, to the boys from Company C, he said, "Well, fellas, we all best turn in now." He stood and held out a hand to the men.



The two men stood, stretched, clasped Blakely's hand, and bid us goodnight. I never gave another thought to what I had overheard. I was too tired to think of it, and soon forgot.

### Turner's Gap

After we reached the Army, we spent the rest of our time on the Peninsula marching in retreat. We fought the Rebs back the way we came, through murky bottomlands and abandoned farms. I thought it would have been better had we stayed in the Capitol city, since it seemed that was where we were heading anyway. Our officers told us it was a 'change of base' but we knew it for what it was: we were running with our tail between our legs. Some of the boys in our regiment harassed the other soldiers about the defeat.

"If'n we had been here, we'd a whupped them Johnnies!"

We camped stubbornly, boxed into a spit of soggy land by the Rebels. Little Mac refused to accept defeat and we loved him for it. But the situation was untenable. We were sent, little by little, away from General McClellan back to the northern parts of Virginia. A constant dark blue and metal trickle of soldiers retreated. This summer and fall of the war was our first season in combat, and we jumped into the chaos, from the gates of Richmond all the way back into the Union State of Maryland.

The rolling blue hills, dark green fields and shade trees in Mary's Land were lovely and in summer. The farm roads we marched down were lined by fresh split-rail fences bordering pretty, patchwork farm land, thick with tall corn ready to harvest and wheat and colorful orchards of ripe fruit. After Virginia, the north was a beauty to behold: fat, ample land. Nothing was in lean season in Maryland. Early September found us camped a ways outside Frederick, 'chasing' down the invading Rebels, as much as camping implies chasing, that is. Seldom had

we been so comfortable, and never had we such friends in Virginia as we found in the unionist counties of Maryland. If this was war, we were all for it.

Ladies from the county came out to watch our drills during the day, carrying woven baskets of sweet breads and pitchers of lemonade and ice. They were brightly colored clouds of silk and ribbons, floating at the edges of the fields, fanning themselves and waving to us. I envied them their layers of soft dress, pantaloons and cooling crinoline. Seeing them made me more aware of my deception. I scratched consciously at my wool jacket and examined my dirty, ragged fingernails.

“Ick,” I pouted, balling my hands into fists to hide the grime.

“Hello boys!” A group of three brightly clad young women called out to us invitingly.

“Well, hello ladies!” Blakely called back, tipping his cap at them and winking, before Sergeant Amos cussed him and corralled him back into line with the flat of his bayonet.

“Back into line, soldier! Nothing but grief over that-a-ways,” the Sergeant barked at Blakely while eyeing the ladies suspiciously.

“Come see us when you are done, soldiers! We have homemade pie and sweet lemonade!” The gal who spoke out waved a lacey hand to Blakely. She had yellow, wispy hair rimmed by a shiny pink bonnet. Her cheeks matched the bonnet: a rosy, healthy color.

“Bring your friend when you come!” She called to Blakely, nodding in Charlie’s direction. Charlie smiled. The other girls giggled, clasping each other’s arms and leaning in to excitedly whisper to each other. I rolled my eyes.

After drill, Blakely rushed to clean up, splashing himself down with cool water, and chattering about the girls.

“They were a pretty bunch, weren’t they? Got homemade pies, too. Woooo-eee! You ever see so much color walking around?”

“My god,” I muttered under my breath.

Charlie grabbed a wash rag and began wiping sweat and dirt from his face, and rinsing his hair without saying a word. He put on a clean white shirt and tucked his wet hair behind his ears.

“Not you too,” I sighed.

“Why not? Might as well have some fun while we can.”

“Ugh,” I said, plopping down on the ground, producing a brown puff of dust, and grumbling.

“You coming?” Charlie asked as they turned to walk off.

I just stared at him, scowling under the dirty rim of my kepi.

“Suit yourself,” he said and shrugged.

I couldn’t help but stand up as they walked off so I could watch them approach the girls. The pink one looped her arm into Charlie’s, smiling and chattering away at him, fanning her face furiously. He paid close attention to her words, politely bending his head to her. A couple other gals linked arms with Blakely, and the group walked off to the shade of the trees to picnic. I flopped down onto the ground again, sitting cross-legged with my elbows on my knees. I rested my chin on my fists and stared off in the direction they went, sulking and mumbling about *silly girls who don’t know how to do anything*.

I sat there a long while like that, trapped in the dirt on my skin. I couldn’t stand it another moment and I grabbed a bucket in a huff, filled it with cold water from a nearby barrel and scrubbed at my dirty hands, meticulously cleaning every fingernail, cursing the filth. I scoured

my arms, and my feet, and dumped water over my head, soaping and rinsing my hair. I grabbed a rag, doused it in the water, and wiped away the sweat under my shirt. When this was done, I threw out the cloudy gray water, fetched more, and repeated the process. I scrubbed until my skin was ruddy and almost raw. Even then, it seemed like it was not enough. Digging around in my packs, I found a clean shirt and underclothes. I climbed into our tent with the fresh garments. There was not enough room in there to stand or to maneuver around much. I grunted and cussed as I managed the change in jerky, tight movements, pushing against the walls of the tent. Finally, I put my smelly wool trousers back on, and then I lay there, staring at the yellowish roof of the tent, breathing hard. My eyelids grew heavy and tears welled up. *What are you doing out here?* I asked myself. *What else could I do?* I answered. I frowned, crossed my arms, and turned on my side, drifting off in the first cool of evening. The last thing I saw was the pink girl, looping her arm with Charlie's. I bet she smelled nice.

I hadn't dozed long when Blakely came back to our camp to fetch me. I heard his footfalls and saw his shadow on the tent wall seconds before he stuck his head in and told me to get up and put my jacket on.

"Those gals invited us to a barn dance, and you're coming," he said, tossing my wool jacket at me. "There's going to be food and cider and pretty country gals to dance with."

"Blakely," I barked to slow him down, "what makes you think I want to dance with a gal? I don't think I want to dance at all."

"Get up, sour puss. You're a-coming. We already decided it. We came back here to get you."

"Come out of there, Bet! Or we'll drag you out." I heard Charlie's voice call out menacingly. Blakely laughed.

“Have you two been drinking?” I eyed Blakely suspiciously.

“Maybe a little. What of it? Let’s go!”

I crawled out of the tent and the two of them abruptly hauled me to my feet.

“Now see here!” I complained. “What’s all this?”

Blakely shook out my jacket and placed it over my shoulders while I protested the whole affair. Charlie smiled and said, “Well, don’t you clean up nice,” and set my forage cap onto my head at a slant. I grabbed it and pulled it down to my ears, annoyed. I was sorry the dirty thing was back on my clean head. I barely had time to stuff my feet into my shoes before the two of them herded me off toward the road. I was still fumbling with the buttons of my blue jacket, running along with the two of them flanking me, when I heard laughter and music carry from a brightly-lit tall red barn. I stopped short. The two of them ran on for a bit and then Blakely turned back to get me. When he reached me, he was breathless. I grabbed his arm.

“Blakely!” I whispered, pulling at him. “I cannot do this! Are you serious?”

He grabbed my arm and said in a comically serious tone, “Yes I am – quite. And yes you can. Only – don’t drink too much and when you dance remember to *lead*.” He guffawed like he had just said the cleverest thing.

“Ugh!” I cried out as he dragged me along. I decided he was going to hear about this later.

We slowed our pace as we walked into the barn. The doors were open wide on both ends to let the cool night air blow through. A band composed of a banjo, spoons, and a couple fiddles played music at the near end of the wide floor, while couples twirled around the middle. Food and drink flowed from the other end. Everywhere, flowers decorated the barn, in wreathes and bouquets and strings. Candles and lanterns lit the interior with a yellow glow. The smell was

sweet and cool and pleasant – fresh evening air, newly mowed hay and warm food – even with all the bodies in constant, flowing motion.

The pink girl and her companions broke from the crowd and floated toward us. She held out a hand to Charlie and he grasped it, bowing in a ridiculous manner. She sighed and fanned herself. *Good Lord*, I thought.

“Bet,” he said, “This is Miss Emeline White – her mother is our hostess.”

“Hello,” I said, looking her from head to toe. She had changed into a dark blue evening dress, the most prominent feature of which was a low cut décolletage rimmed with white lace. She had short sleeves and wore white flowers on her pale wrists. She held out a hand to me, and I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to do with it, so I shook it like a man’s, pumping it hard. She looked surprised and her body jerked with the movement. “Well!” She muttered, clicking her tongue in disapproval. I heard Blakely chuckle behind me. I turned and glared at him.

He pushed past me and said, “Bet doesn’t know how a man ought to handle a lady.” He turned and winked at me.

*I could slap you right now*, I thought.

With that he introduced me to Emeline’s two friends, admonishing me to be gentle. Charlie laughed, but Miss Emeline didn’t find it so funny. Blakely promptly led one of the girls to the dance floor. I wanted to grab him and make him stay, but he left and I stood there awkwardly with Charlie and Emeline. He had a drink in his hand, tapping his foot to the music and she smiled up at him. I forgot about the other girl as I glared at Charlie.

“Shall we?” Emeline purred at him, pointing to the dance floor.

He set his drink down, slipped his hand around her waist and led her away, turning one time to look at me and chuckle, nodding at the other girl standing with me. That’s when I

remembered she was there. I almost jumped out of my skin when I realized how close she was to me. Her name was Jinny and she was a tiny little thing, thin as a board and long in the face. Every inch of skin on her face and arms was covered with brown freckles. Her skin beneath them was a very pale peach color. She looped her arm into mine and squeezed. I pulled away from her and straightened my sleeve, looking at her awkwardly.

“Are you shy, soldier boy?” She smiled at me, showing a full mouth of crooked white teeth. “Maybe you want ta go outside in the fresh air whar it’s quiet?”

“The air is fresh enough in here,” I stammered, stepping back.

“Oh, come along now,” she cajoled, pulling me out the doors with her.

An older woman with dark hair, wearing a black silk dress, watched with intense interest as Jinny led me outside. I think I must have flashed her a desperate *help me* look because she smiled and shook her head, chuckling lightly as she set a tray of cakes down.

I heard her call to someone, “Looks like Jinny finally got one!” Laughter rang out. *This is damn awkward*, I thought.

Once we were outside I pulled away from Jinny and sat on a barrel just outside the door. I watched Charlie twirl Emeline around on the floor. She sparkled and smiled and delighted everyone. I fumed. *Did she have to be so damned pretty?*

“That’s my cousin, you know?” Jinny said.

“What?” I asked, still watching Charlie.

“Emeline – Emmy – is my cousin – distant one anyways. She a beauty, I knows it. But, looka here. Your friend already gots her. You might as well take me.” With that she pressed a breast against my arm.

I shot up and pulled away from her, knocking the barrel on its side. I stood on the other side of it, trying to keep it between us.

“I don’t think I ought to *take you*,” I spluttered at her. I could feel myself blushing.

She giggled and chased me around the barrel. “Maybe I oughter take you! You’d like that!” She shrieked and cackled and jumped over the barrel, knocking me down beneath her.

I struggled to free myself. I was buried in silk and ribbons and petticoats. I grabbed at the layers, trying to come up for air. I managed to set her from me after a lot of awkward fumbling. I sat there on the ground next to her, catching my breath and watching her straighten herself, smiling and preening.

“Good god,” I breathed.

She leaned into me and whispered, “You can kiss me if you want.”

“I *do not* want,” I said and began to stand, but she pulled me down onto the dirt next to her and planted a wet kiss on my mouth. It smelled like fried chicken and tasted like hard cider.

“Ack! Ack!” I cried out, wiping at my mouth. “Stop it!”

“Jinny!” A voice of authority carried from the doorway. “Get up this instant and remember yourself young lady!”

The older lady in the black silk dress towered over us, scowling fiercely at Jinny. I could detect the hint of a smile playing at her lips, though. She was a handsome woman with bright eyes.

Jinny stammered, “Yes’ m!” She rose to her feet straightened her dress, brushing the dirt off, and smiled down at me. Her eyes glowed in the dark and I thought she looked a little like a hungry cat. She curtsied in my direction and giggled.

“Now!” The lady barked and Jinny ran off, back into the barn.



When I looked after her, I saw Blakely just inside the doorway, off to the side, looking at me, clutching a drink in his hand, and laughing. I glared at him. He just chortled harder and raised his glass to salute me, grinning wildly. I threw dirt in his direction and growled— an empty gesture since he was too far away for anything to hit him, but it made me feel better.

“That girl is insatiable,” the lady sighed as I got to my feet. She smelled like lemon, and her dark hair was back in furious bun like a scolding old maid might wear. Feathery wisps escaped though and danced gently on her white cheeks in the breeze.

“I am Maria White, Emeline’s mother,” she said, shaking my hand. “I believe I saved you just then.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” I said, brushing my trousers off. “Bet Lee.”

“Walk with me please,” she said.

I nodded and we walked into the dark a ways from the barn. The music and laughter grew faint. The swish of her dress soothed me. She reminded me of my mother, all quiet and composure and kindness. We walked a short while before she said anything, but I could see her studying me. I was thankful for the cloak of darkness.

“Bet Lee,” she said.

“Yes’m?”

“Bet – Bet – Bet...Short for Elizabeth?”

“Ma’am?” I was startled.

“Come now, child. How any of these fools have not figured you yet is beyond me. I knew you for what you were the minute I set eyes on you,” she smiled kindly at me. Her eyes sparkled in the darkness.

I was comforted but still thought I ought to keep my secret. I stayed silent, listening to the crunch of our footfalls and the sweet-sounding distant call of a whippoorwill.

“Well, I ought to tell you that your secret is safe with me,” she said, clasping my arm. “You poor dear, why are you pretending to be a soldier? Hanging around with these brutes?” She clicked her tongue. “Just look at you!”

“I want to ma’am,” I looked at her, gauging her reaction. I thought in that moment that I could trust her. “My name is Elizabeth. My middle name is Leigh. My daddy died at Bull Run and my Uncle run me off our farm.”

“Oh – the beast!” She cried. Maria had a flare for the dramatic, I could tell. “Men!”

“Emeline’s father died on the Penninsula,” she said. “Left me the farm and enough to get by, comfortably. But, don’t you have anyone else who could’ve looked after you?”

“No’m. I look after me,” I said.

“Of course, of course,” she comforted, patting my arm.

“How’d you know I’m a girl?”

“You look it,” she said. Smiling, she added, “And who can miss the way you look at that other soldier – the tall one? Honestly! Are these men blind? Best be careful, Elizabeth. You’re obvious.”

I blushed in the dark.

“Oh,” was all I could say.

“It is all right dear,” she chuckled. “He is handsome and you are a woman, after all. But, now he is in Emmy’s clutches. She has a way with men. She has her eye on him.”

“You think so?”

“She does, but I think he is just too polite to let her down.”

I hoped she was right.

“Anyway, now is the time for young people to have fun, to laugh and dance and love before...” She trailed off, looking far into the darkness.

“We best head back,” she whispered.

She turned me about and we headed back toward the barn. Before we were back in the light, she turned me to her, placed her cool palms on my cheeks and said, “Be careful, dear, not to be obvious. Boys don’t look at each other that-a-way.”

“Yes’m,” I said. “I will be. Thank you.”

I was sorry our walk was done. It was a relief to be with another woman, one who knew my secret. I watched her walk away, black silk swaying to and fro. I decided to stay out in the dark of the shadows at the side of the barn and wait for Blakely and Charlie. I’d had enough *barn dancing* for one night. I picked a dark spot and sat on my haunches, watching couples emerge from the barn to walk hand-in-hand and whisper and steal hurried kisses. I wondered how many of the boys who came out would live a month. I was in a mood and brooded.

I thought to get myself some of that hard cider to relax my mind when I saw Charlie and Emmy walk out of the barn and in my direction. I froze where I was, watching the two of them intently. She leaned into him, hanging on his arm and on his every word. I couldn’t hear what he was saying. I sat very still, barely breathing, afraid they would see me. They didn’t, as far as I could tell. Emmy stopped and turned to Charlie. He smiled down at her. She was speaking low and sweetly. She tilted her head up and offered him a kiss. He stepped back and she became angry, marching off in a huff.

He stood there a minute, removed his forage cap and looked up at the stars.

“What are you doing over there, Bet?” He asked suddenly.

I stepped out of the shadows and said, “Waiting for you and Blakely.”

“Come back in with me and have a drink,” he cajoled. “It might do you some good. I know I need another.”

I walked back into the barn with him. Emmy stared darts into him and I smiled despite myself. *Guess that didn't work out for her.* We walked over to the barrels of cider and helped ourselves to glasses full. I took a big swig. It was sweet and harsh all at once and burned as it went down, but it warmed my body and I could feel myself relaxing. Charlie smiled at me, drinking his cider, deep and long.

“That Miss Emmy is something,” he said. I rolled my eyes at him. “She is pretty, but she knows she is. Seems to know a little too much about men for my taste.”

“Hmm,” I said. *Good* I thought.

“I like a girl who is more than a pretty book filled with blank pages,” he said, taking another big gulp of his cider. “I like a girl who can do something more than bat her eyelashes and whisper sweet thoughts.” He glanced at me and then back at the dance floor.

Couples spun past us, flashing colors and laughing voices.

“My mama is one of them,” Charlie continued in a quiet voice. “She is a walking work of art, nothing much more. She was sweet and kind when I was little. All bitter and angry inside and mean outside last I saw her. She ought to have known how to do something for herself so she coulda felt happier. Just let everyone else do *for* her and *to* her and resented them for it.”

I stared at Charlie's profile. I had never heard him talk about his past before. His words were slow and a little slurred and his eyes were glassy. I scanned the room, looking for Blakely. I thought it was high time we get Charlie back to camp, while he could walk. Blakely was nowhere to be seen, probably out promenading with the girl he danced with.

“I’ll probably never see my mama again,” Charlie said softly.

“Sure you will,” I tried to comfort him. “This war can’t last forever.”

“I can never go home,” he mumbled, finishing off his second glass of cider. He pulled a gold locket on a chain from under his collar.

“She always wore this,” he said. “Has a lock of my hair in it, from when I was a boy. She threw it to the ground at my feet when I said I was leaving.” He poured another glass of cider and drank from it.

I set my glass down and stood up. “We ought to head back to camp,” I said. I wished there was some way I could comfort him without being found out. For now, I knew I just needed to get him back to camp, away from the cider and the women.

Charlie looked up at me, without expression. He just stared into my eyes for a long moment, set his drink down and stood up. He pointed to the door and said, “After you.” I could see he was not steady on his feet. *Ought to be an interesting walk back to camp.* I wished I could find Blakely, but I never did. So, I supported Charlie as he stumbled back with me.

“You shouldn’t have drank so much cider,” I complained to him, trying to hold him straight as we walked.

“Wall,” he slurred. “Why do you do what you do?”

“What are you talking about?”

“What’d ya do when that skinny girl tried to kiss you?”

“Good Lord! I pushed her away of course!”

He chuckled and asked, “You ever been kissed?”

“Not before tonight anyway,” I grimaced.

He just laughed and said, “‘Bout time somebody remedied that! Didn’t think it woulda been that little gal.”

“Oh Jesus,” I whispered. “Can we just get back to camp?”

As we approached the tents, Blakely came running up behind us.

“Why’d y’all leave me?” He stammered, bending with his hands on his thighs, trying to catch his breath.

“Charlie is drunk,” I announced, annoyed at his just-too-late arrival on the scene, and I handed my load over to him. Charlie leaned heavily on him, eyeing me through half-closed lids.

“Where were you?” I demanded of Blakely.

“I went walking with that girl,” he said and smiled rakishly.

“I just bet you did,” I accused.

“Walking!” Charlie laughed. “I was walking with a girl, too.”

“All right,” Blakely said to him. “Best to just keep quiet, Charlie.”

We tried to maneuver him into the tent, but he grabbed Blakely and whispered, “I can’t lay in there tonight. Too close a quarters.”

“All right then,” Blakely said. “Shush about it, though.” And he situated Charlie out near the front of the tent, wrapped him in a blanket and sat there until he fell into a quiet, deep sleep.

The next morning – a cool, crisp, mid-September day – dawned quiet and still. Couriers on horseback galloped to and fro, frenzied with activity – a sure sign of an impending move. Soon, an officer on a nervous bay conveyed marching orders. He watched, stern-faced, while his orders were delivered to the brigade. His horse pranced and pawed at the dirt, lending to the air

of urgency. Charlie and Blakely gulped down the last of the coffee and we struck our tent, packing quickly and lightly for the move. Ordnance wagons delivered ammunition, and then we knew how this march would end. We would be in the front lines of the march and so in the front lines of the battle – our first such experience. Nervous excitement ran through our ranks as we lined the road. Men fiddled with their uniforms and supplies, hurriedly straightening themselves out and preparing for the trek. Every one speculated about where we were heading.

“Well, I suppose it’s ‘bout time we went after them Johnnies,” one man said matter-of-factly. “Too bad we have to leave here to do it.”

The order to march finally passed down the line – *right shoulder arms, march!* – and we advanced westward mid-morning toward the soft slopes of South Mountain. As I looked ahead, I could see the front ranks of our column, steel bayonets flashing in the sun, up and down, dips and heights, ravines and rises. Many more men followed behind than were in front. The iron clank of men’s accoutrements and the constant, soft tramping of our feet – thousands and thousands of us – created a steady music for the march and a cloud of dust that followed us. The air cooled and the trees grew thick as we climbed a steady rise toward the Boonsboro Gap.

An excitement travelled down the line as we neared the Rebels atop the gap, holding the thoroughfare there and defying our column. Couriers galloped up and down our line, ever busy with the commotion of carrying orders as the fight neared. We felt the first shock of cannon – vibrations in the ground and in the air travelling through us like electrical currents. Autumnal leaves floated down from the trees, knocked loose by the shock of it. The booming thunder followed and we grew intent, prodded to march faster toward the sound. We double-quickened up the green slopes and fell into line of battle with one smooth, spreading motion – filed out to the left and right of our line – hundreds and hundreds of men to either side: a blue wall forming

to push against the enemy. Skirmishers marched well to the front, prodding the enemy and starting the brawl. The Rebs were entrenched, waiting for us to come to them, daring us to come to them. And we dared – up the gap in battle formation.

Cannon exploded above us, ripping through the air, raining bits of hot metal and chunks of debris down on us, tearing through the trees. We reflexively ducked – the whole line, dipping its head down like one giant being, moving steadily forward against metal like a hard, driving rain – determined. I looked to my left and right and saw men falling from the line. I heard the gruesome thud as metal balls met their marks, tearing men asunder, dropping them like rag dolls – their bodies dotted the grass. Dark blue heaps twisted and writhing on the green ground. Charlie and Blakely marched forward on either side of me, shoulder-to-shoulder, pressed in by the mass of us. The Rebs took aim and poured a volley of musket fire into our formations. They were shooting high. We rushed forward to a position in the open, took aim, and returned fire. Musket balls buzzed everywhere, whizzing and whirring all around us. A single step in the wrong direction meant death.

A ball tore through Charlie's sleeve, burning his skin. "God damn!" he yelled, grabbing his arm and wincing with pain. We had to go on against instinct. My hands trembled and my eyes burned with sweat as I reloaded, reloaded, reloaded and took aim, again and again, methodically counting out the nine steps. Up through the trees and a field of tall corn we slowly chased the stubborn Rebels, at a steady walk, firing as we went. We could see that we outnumbered them and we felt the momentum of it – our weight coming to bear – a ceaseless tide pushing against them.

The fight escalated, and I grew frenzied, steadily discharging my weapon – no longer counting out the steps. I forgot to remove my ramrod after reloading, shooting it off toward the



Johnnies. It made a strange metal whistling sound as it sailed away from me. Blakely gave me a funny look, grabbed another off a dead man, shouting “God damn, Bet!” as he handed it to me. Just then a Minie ball tore through his right hand, ripping the little finger to shreds. “Christ!” He cried, grabbing a cloth out of his shirt pocket and wrapping it tightly around the wound. His blood immediately soaked through the improvised bandage.

“Are you all right?” Charlie shouted at him, barely making himself heard above the din.

“It’s hot here!” He shouted back, grimacing from the pain. “I don’t know if I can shoot now!”

Just as he shouted a cannon ball tore through the trees to our front and right and knocked a man’s legs out from under him, sending them sailing into the air, blood and bits of dark meat flying everywhere. He screamed and dropped, bleeding out and crying in agony. The men around him stalled for a moment, shocked and demoralized by the sight. But the lines behind them surged forward, forcing them to press on. Men flowed around the body, moving on, with each group slowing to stare in morbid amazement as the legless man died.

The Rebel soldiers fought hard as they gave ground, dogged in defeat, firing from behind trees and from out in the open, never turning their backs to us. The farther we pushed, the more Rebel wounded we encountered. We exchanged fire just yards apart. I could see their faces – dark grime on lean, hollow cheeks. They looked like hungry, violent scarecrows, amuck on the field. Any closer and we would be at bayonets. A bullet sailed past me at close range, whistling in my ear. I ducked and another knocked my cap from my head. I could smell the tang of my burned hair and the odor of spent gun powder, forced to stand in fear and reload under fire. A cloud of smoke covered the field, floating to the trees above us. Covering and then uncovering

our enemies. Chaos reigned as the smoke curtain fell and then lifted, over and over, with each volley.

As the veil of smoke lifted for the last time, we saw the Rebels counter attack us, shrieking like barbarians. The sound ran through me like a bounding shock, goading me to run. Down our line the order carried: *Charge bayonets!* Fear shot through me like ice and I felt the blood drain from my face. My hands tingled like they had fallen asleep and I blindly fumbled with my rifle. I stared as the Rebels came on, closing the space between us in one mad, ceaseless charge. Charlie yelled to me, “Stay close Bet! Whatever happens, stay close!” I couldn’t speak or look away, I just nodded and prepared for the wall of gray to hit. They slammed into us with a hammering force. I was knocked backward and fell, hitting the ground hard enough to knock the wind out of me. I could hear the crack of muskets striking men, splitting bone, and the mad cursing of the men.

I sat for a moment, suspended in time on the ground, watching Charlie and Blakely, back-to-back, fighting off a couple bearded Johnnies. Charlie locked rifles with one, wrestling back and forth, grunting and swearing until he pushed the Rebel away from him and onto the ground, instantly shooting him at close range. The body rolled onto its side and settled at my feet, eyes raised in useless appeal to the heavens. Blood flowered on his jacket front, spreading outward. I kicked him away, fumbling back from him.

I clutched my rifle and got to my feet just as an enemy rushed me. He held the barrel of his rifle and tried to club me with the stock, but I stopped his thrust, using my rifle as a shield. Then we were locked together, rifles hard against each other, pushing and pulling, rumbling and cussing. He was a head taller than me, but his face was just a little above mine and he was grinning wickedly at me – cocksure of himself and I could see why. The muscles in his jaw

flexed menacingly. His face was lean and deeply scarred – cold testament to his prowess – and his dark eyes bore into me, looking down on me, scorning me. In a moment of raw fear and breathless determination, with the momentum of it, I pushed myself back from him and knocked his gun hard enough to make him lose his grip on it. Despite myself, I screamed out a little, like I had just pissed off an older boy on the playground and I knew I was going to get it. His rifle flew off to the side of us and hit the dirt, twirling as it landed. We watched it, and he turned back to me, cussing loudly and scowling at me. *Oh my God, I'm dead*, I thought in terrified resignation.

I froze where I stood, suddenly unsure what I should do and positive I was done for no matter what I tried. He grabbed my rifle, flailing me about like a ragdoll and wresting my gun from my grasp. I stopped when he released me. My lungs burned and felt tight. I fought to catch my breath, barely able to stand, as he aimed my rifle and fired it at me. The trigger made an empty, clicking sound. I hadn't reloaded it. He cursed and threw the rifle down, charging me. He hit me hard, knocking the wind out of me. I scrambled when I landed in the dirt, trying to get away on my hands and knees, but he pounced on me and grabbed my hair from behind, hitting the sides of my face with his bony fist. I was afraid I would be knocked senseless. Blood dripped onto the ground from a cut on my face and I could taste it in my mouth. I knew of only one thing I could do now. I pushed at him, twisted and turned, until I was facing him. I heard Charlie through a haze of pain, yelling at Blakely to *get that dirty bastard off of Bet!* I wriggled until I faced my antagonist. He had that same wicked grin on his face and I noticed his teeth were brown with tobacco juice. He smelled like wood fire and body odor. He held me to the ground with one hand. When next he raised himself to strike me, I slammed my knee into his groin as hard as I could.

“You little son of a cuss!” He yelled, moaning and rolling onto his side. I scrambled to my feet, and saw that Blakely had levelled his rifle, ready to shoot him. I realized then that the Rebels had retreated back the way they came and my man was left behind. Charlie had rushed forward with the momentum of it and was walking back toward us, dirty and bloodied, turning a couple times to watch the retreat and shouting “Huzzah!” with the other men.

“Gawd damnit,” the Reb cursed under his breath, kicking at the ground in disgust at his capture.

We sent him to the back of our lines and turned about to continue to pursue the enemy. Patches of woods at the gap hid them, and we were never sure what was in front of us. We moved up slowly, skirmishers in front, groping for contact. Bursts of gunfire sounded at contact and a full engagement would follow. Slowly, we pushed the Rebels back from the gap this way, leaving trails of wounded and dead men. We pushed them into a valley on the opposite, western, side of South Mountain. The sun lay off to the west, but refused to set on our terror – our groping, finding, fighting and dying until dusk dropped a starry curtain on the madness and we lay in our lines, listening intently for sounds from the enemy through the dark of night. Sporadic rifle fire to our front signaled the last nervousness of contact -- a dying away of the day’s fight and the promise of a new one tomorrow.

We patched ourselves up by firelight. My face swelled in the places it took the hits. Charlie’s burn blistered and leaked. Blakely’s finger was gone completely, and the stump hurt him terribly. I thought he ought to go to the camp hospital. But he refused.

“My mama taught me how to patch myself up. Besides, the doctors are likely to kill me, trying to fix nothing but a gone finger. I’ll take my chances here.”

We sat by the campfire, hardly speaking at all, late into the night. Every one of us had to digest the battle in our own ways. As for me, I did not see how all three of us could survive many more such days. We were likely to have another tomorrow and another a week or a month from today. I thought bitterly about how it seemed it would go on forever until we were all dead. I looked at Blakely's face. He stared at the flames of the fire, slowly dozing off and then jerking awake. Charlie watched him, fiddling with a stick in the hot ashes at the edge of the flames.

"You okay?" He asked Blakely.

Blakely looked at him and nodded. "Close fight today," he said. "God damned hot."

Soon, we were ordered to douse our fires. We shook our heads at this order, knowing full well that the enemy knew where we were, and we, of course, knew his whereabouts. No matter, though. Some dandified officer decided we ought to try to hide our already-obvious position, and so we passed the rest of the night in a pointless and miserable darkness. I turned onto my back and look up at the dark sky. It was alight with stars -- far off splendors sending sparkles of light far into the night to fall upon us in our fatigue and sorrow.

"It's beautiful," I whispered, stunned at the heavens. But Charlie and Blakely had already fallen asleep, and I lay alone under the brilliant sky, wondering if I would be here to see it on the morrow. When the whole camp grew quiet, I lay listening to the distant cries from the field hospital. Men screamed to the heavens for mercy. It sounded like there were thousands of them. I glanced over at Blakely, relieved he had stayed.

The next morning dawned with a dazzling golden light, blinding our tired eyes. We awoke tense, grimy, and ready for action. We soon discovered, however, that *our* Rebels had retreated in the night -- gone west toward Sharpsburg to join the rest of the Confederate Army.

We also learned before an hour was out that we were not going to follow up our success. We would sit on our half-measure of laurels, in a beautiful, useless little valley west of South Mountain, at least for the time being. We watched other Union units march past us – at the route step. They marched magnificently accompanied by regimental bands, neatly banging out the “Battle Cry of Freedom.” *The Union forever! Hurrah boys! Hurrah! Down with the traitor!* The troops’ accoutrements clanked in harmony. We sulked as we watched, sure that they were going to follow up our success and gain our credit – in their clean, smart uniforms.

“*Why we just sitting here?*” one man grouched, followed by others, and others again. “We oughter follow them Rebels. *We had ‘em on the run*”

The day wore on as thousands of men marched passed us, and it began to rain – big fat drops falling and spattering us a few at a time. They clapped against tree leaves above us. Night came on and we lay in the rain, miserable and disenchanted with command.

“What do you suppose is happening that-a-way?” one man asked, nodding in the direction the troops has passed.

“Think they found the ‘federates up thar yet?”

“Why ain’t we headed up thar? God damned off’cers.”

We speculated long into the night, but no one had anything better to offer than a good guess. We could only wait out the night and the rain and hope for answers to come with the morning.

### In Camp

Each battle I fought in meant something more to me, I suppose, than it did to other soldiers. *I had to prove I was a man – had I been a man I might not have had to prove I was one.*

Although, I have to say that most men I knew in the Army spent a lot of time also trying to prove that they were worthy of the designation. At any rate, most of the boys learned to trust me in a fight. No one could call me a coward, whatever else I might be. That late season of 1862, my regiment was encamped among some pines to the south and east of Antietam, inching our way, barely, after the retreating Rebels. We saw some contained, sharp fights, but never bagged the lot like most of us thought we should have.

Late one night, Charlie, Blakely and I sat around with a few other boys, stoking our campfire and speculating about what the Army had in mind for us. Earlier that evening, we went to mess to get our dinner. The men suddenly struck up a call we hadn't heard before:

*Soupy, soupy, soupy without any bean,  
Porky, porky, porky, without any lean,  
Coffee, coffee, coffee, without any cream.*

We took delight in repeating it and damning the quartermaster. We damned the officers, too, for good measure, never damning Little Mac, though. "Damn Colonel So-and-So," we'd laugh, "he's a dandy, if I e'er saw one! Jim Dandy....Jim Dandy run—a—way. Run the wrong way." The fact that we were allotted a dram of whiskey added to our irreverent reverie. The same dram, however, made some unfortunate soldier nearby lonely for home; and, although it was supposed to be forbidden in camp, he began to sing "Weeping Sad and Lonely" with tremulous emotion.

*Dearest love, do you remember*

*When we last did meet,  
How you told me that you loved me,  
Kneeling at my feet?*

*Weeping sad and lonely,  
Hopes and fears how vain!  
When this cruel war is over,  
Praying that we meet again.*

Now every man around the fire forgot the officers and, suddenly, remembering those they left at home, a singular look of despondency crossed every face. An eerie silence descended and only the lonely man's words sounded out in the suddenly grim darkness of our bivouac. That is why the song was banned from camp – it was considered bad for troop morale, and rightly so. A couple soldiers, coming off picket duty, walked up to the camp, breaking the spell. The men approached us and one of them said loudly, "It's the damndest thing!"

The other man said, "Tell them. Tell them."

"Well, boys, I was talking to a fella from Indiana who says his brother was at Shiloh. Well, his brother said that when they was treating the wounded thar, they com'st across a woman! A woman soljer! Goddamned, ain't it?"

The men all began to chatter, flush with this news. Blakely glanced at me. A smile played at the corners of his mouth.

"I heard that they was a woman – who was supposed to be a man – but she had a baby in one camp. When she had it, they figured her."



The man standing next to the soldier who made this comment cuffed his shoulder, laughing, "Course they did."

"I would know a woman if I saw her!" said one. And spitting a brown stream of tobacco juice, he groused, "Damn fools."

I snorted despite myself. "Would you know a woman if you saw one?" I asked.

"Jesus, Bet," he said, "Course I would, wouldn't you? What's that supposed to mean anyway? You think I ain't knowed me a woman afore?"

"Ah nothin'," I smirked, "You'd know a woman if you saw one."

"Well, godamn, no woman could fit these battles. She may dress like a man, but she ain't gonna fit like one. Christ."

Charlie perked up at this comment and added, "I suppose no *ord'nary* woman could fight." He pulled his cap down over his eyes, but I could see a smile on his face in the shadows.

"Course not!"

We soon found ourselves back in Virginia, plodding along after the enemy down toward the Rappahannock. Winter dawned cold and uncomfortable and we camped near Fredericksburg, growing more restless and homesick as time went by. Each winter day promised to be just the same as the next, with few exceptions. One good thing about a steady winter encampment is that it allowed pay and mail to catch up to us.

The fall out to receive pay meant we would, at least, have a little money in our pockets, and could go to the sutler and buy little necessities, like lye soap or paper and pencil. The very fortunate among us would find a way to buy spirituous drinks or some decent home-cooked food from a local farmer. That is, if a local farmer friendly to us invading Yanks could be found.

Luckily, some liked our greenbacks more than they valued their southern bent. A couple years into the war, the local farmers had nothing left to give, either way.

The armies had ruined the Virginia countryside, marching and camping and trampling the land to dust. Anywhere an army the size of ours camped, the land for miles around would be stripped of wood, for burning and building. Anywhere an army the size of ours marched, the grass beneath our tramping feet would be turned to dust and dirt and the roads to unstable mud runs. If it rained, the roads became useless, impassible messes of sucking muck.

Most men sent a little pay home – some sent near all of it – every time we received it. The fact is, though, we didn't receive our pay on anything like a regular schedule. We could deal with that, but most could not deal well with the delays in receiving mail from home.

Mail call seemed more important than pay to most soldiers. The value of word from home – of the longings of loved ones – buoyed the men. To know that someone – a mother, a father, a sister, or a sweetheart – worried for your safety and wished for your return gave a worth to the drudgery of camp life. We were heroes to someone, even here in the mud and refuse and the repetitious boredom. We belonged to someone. Someone who watched for us, prayed for us, pined for us. And yet, at mail call, we could sense among us those whom belonged to no one, like me.

The only family I had left when Daddy died could hardly be called family at all. They were calculating people who saw me merely as a means to an end – a way to get Daddy's land. I tried to make myself an obstacle, rather than a way, by refusing to marry my cousin, and their meanness grew more intense. My uncle intended to own and control my father's farm. If I was going to give up my father's farm, I would rather not have to marry my own cousin on top of it. I decided I would rather give up everything Daddy owned than remain with that family, and yet,

no loss feels as painful as the loss of belonging. When Daddy died, I at least had our home and memories to console me. I loved that pretty piece of southern Indiana – I surely belonged there.

When I left Indiana, I was adrift with nothing mooring me to the earth but the hope I could pass as a man and make my own way in the world. Mail call reminded me that I was alone, but I assuaged myself with the knowledge that I was also free to do as I thought right for myself. I traded belonging with family and a piece of homeland to belong here in the ranks of the long-suffering Army of the Potomac, and I was learning that I would rather be here. When General McClellan later left the Army after Antietam he wrote a farewell to the troops in which he reminded us that we had in each other “the strongest associations which can exist among men...” I thought it true. I knew I loved Charlie and Blakely like I’d never loved any of my real family, except perhaps my own dear father. In the midst of the struggles we faced together they became my brothers. We fought to keep each other alive.

Charlie never received mail, either. I could see he did not belong to a distant home or family any more than I did. We stood aside, watching the men eagerly collect pieces of home. Charlie had a particular look at mail call, an aching etched on to his face, a countenance of deep thought. He would focus his attention at nothing particular on the ground at his feet but glance up from time to time with furrowed brows and a clenched jaw. Maybe he wished for word from someone back home, one that he knew wouldn’t come.

I asked him once why he never received mail. He chuckled softly and said, “Probably the same reason you don’t: I had to leave home for good. My mother turned me out because I disagreed with her about – well – certain principles. We had differences. She refused to acknowledge something I knew to be true. So, she told me I a stranger to her from here on out.” I wondered if he remembered telling me about her at the barn dance. He looked down at the

ground again, and pulled the gold locket, which I noticed now that he always kept close, from beneath the breast of his uniform.

He clicked it open and looked at it for the briefest moment, and said “I couldn’t agree with the way my mother treated people and she couldn’t agree with me not agreeing. Anyway, I have reason to fight for the Union.” He shook his head as if banishing a thought and gently clicked the locket closed. He looked sideways at Blakely, who sat close by whittling a thick stick to a sharp point. Blakely smiled at him, nodded, and affectionately cuffed his shoulder. Charlie sighed lightly, and then glancing back at me, asked, “What about you, Bet? No one writes to you, either.”

“Well, my family thought I ought to do one thing and I thought I ought to do another. So I lit out.” I raised my chin defiantly and playfully smiled. Charlie’s mood seemed to lighten and I quipped, “Who needs to be told what to do or who to follow or what to believe? Can’t we decide for ourselves?” The irony was not lost on us. For whatever we left behind, the Army definitely told us what to do and who to follow and practically even told us what to believe. In life, if you can choose nothing else, you sometimes can at least choose your master, whatever that might be, and we chose a hard one.

Charlie smiled at me and, softly chortling, said, “I wonder what it is they wanted you to do. I can’t imagine anyone thinking they ought to try to tell you what to do. I would never try.” He winked. I could tell he wasn’t expecting me to offer details. After a quiet moment he said “The only family I have now is here with me.” He looked at Blakely, and something passed between them. Then, he watched the boys anxiously gathering and reading their mail, while he reverently cradled the locket in his closed palm the whole time as if it were a sacred religious symbol. From time to time he would glance at me and smile reassuringly.

### Blakely's Last Battle

We awoke, as usual, before first light. Camp stirred to a cacophony of coughing, always the harsh cough of the men – the rooster call of an encampment. Low voices speculated the day's coming work. A fight was brewing. We were seasoned and could smell it in the air – the acrid burn of determined fear. I stretched where I lay in the tent and turned toward Charlie. He had already crawled out. I gathered my thoughts and steeled them against the day. Out in the predawn darkness, I found Charlie stoking the fire, preparing to fry his ration of salt pork.

“Mornin’ Bet,” He smiled weakly. His usual good humor absent. The blue of his Union uniform had turned yellowy gray with summer’s dust.

“Hello Charlie,” I chimed back, trying to seem brighter than I felt. “Heard anything?” “Seems the Rebs have positioned themselves behind some works, a couple short miles yonder, and we have to move ‘em out. Soon.” Charlie pulled a little bruised red apple from his pocket, wiped it in on his shirt sleeve and held it out to me.

“Where on earth did you get that?” I asked incredulously.

“There’s an orchard not far from here. Pretty picked over. I figured they wouldn’t miss this one.” He smiled. “Take it.”

I reached for the apple and the memory of the first time we met rushed in on me like a wave. Back on that bright day up in Ohio, Charlie had purchased a shiny, ripe red apple at the grocer’s and given it to me before recruitment. And here he was offering me this pale little shadow of what was. I hesitated but Charlie pushed the apple toward me. I grasped it reverently, not knowing if I wanted to eat it or save it as a memento.

“You gonna eat that or what?” Charlie asked with a wink, recalling our first meeting. I bit into it with sorrow. I wished I had saved it instead.

“Listen, Bet,” Charlie said, “I’m wanting to tell you something, just in case...”

“Don’t,” I snapped. “Don’t do that Charlie. It’s bad luck.”

He looked at me for a moment and I could see the words tenderly poised on his lips.

I whispered, “I know, Charlie. You don’t have to say it. Don’t say it.”

He wanted to tell me that he knew my secret. I could sense that he had known all along and had been helping me to guard it. I wondered if he knew that first day, on the steps of the grocer’s. I looked down at the apple and remembered. I remembered he had seemed amused. At me? Had he figured me for a girl right off?

A moment of comfortable silence passed before Charlie stood up and stretched his tall frame. He smiled down at me and chuckled, “Well, all right then, Bet.” He walked off toward the wood line and I watched him go. I wished, for this one moment, I could wash and soften my skin, dab on some lavender water, and follow him into the woods. I longed to be close to him as a woman is to the man she loves. I laughed cynically at the thought of the things I actually had done with Charlie throughout the years of war. What could he think of me? What kind of girl goes around killing Confederates?

As I sat absently munching on the apple, Blakely trotted up to the campfire and greeted me in a harried tone.

“Hello Bet,” He stammered. He breathed hard and looked frightened. Sweat pooled at the base of his throat, above his collar bone. He crouched down next to me and whispered, “I went and saw my mama last night. Just got back.” He pulled a dirty kerchief from his pocket, shook it out, and wiped sweat from his forehead.

“You did?” Blakely’s audacity always amazed me. His mama was a slave on a plantation not far from the camp, but Blakely’s skin was a pale olive color, allowing him to pass for white.

“Yes, but...” He looked around to be sure no one listened. “I wasn’t alone. Goddamned if Hanson didn’t follow me.”

“Jesus, Blakely!” I cried. Hanson was the meanest, most low-down soldier among us, always looking for a victim, someone to fleece in some way, as long as it was easy.

“Shhh!”

“Does he know?” I whispered, truly afraid for my friend.

“He knows and he is not far behind me. Sneaky son of a bitch.”

“You should have killed him in the woods,” I spat. “Why didn’t you kill him?”

“Kill who?” Charlie asked and we both jumped, not knowing he had walked up behind us. He looked hard at us.

We didn’t get a chance to answer Charlie. Hanson came running into camp, excitedly shouting to groups of soldiers, who gathered around to hear. He seemed drunk on the power of his new-found knowledge.

“Blakely’s a dirty nigger! Saw it myself!” Hanson shouted. “He was a huggin’ on his black mama last...”

Hanson didn’t get to finish his sentence. Charlie rushed him and forcibly slammed him into a nearby tree—knocking him senseless. I ran toward the pair and stood close by. I thought to clasp Charlie’s arm, but he grabbed a bunch of hair at the top of Hanson’s head with one hand and held him tight to the tree with the other.

“Listen here, you dirty no-account,” Charlie spat venomously, “Not one more word or I promise you, it will be your last. Do you understand? He’s worth 20 of you! I swear...” He

shoved Hanson against the tree one more time and then let him slump to the ground. For good measure, he violently kicked him. I jumped back.

Charlie turned to the soldiers who had gathered round when Hanson started shouting. “He’s a goddamned fool and a coward!” He shouted. “You all know Blakely! There’s gonna be a fight today and we need him. Hanson can go to hell!” Charlie stood to his full height and let his words stand tangible—a challenge in the air. His eyes promised blood and everyone knew we’d have enough of that today. To a man, they backed down. They knew Blakely, whatever else he might be, was a good fighter and a decent man. He was the best friend I had, gentle somehow even in this mean war.

The sun rose with reluctance in the East. I wondered if perhaps the Morning Star knew we would die this day, and intended the delay. The long roll sounded not long after Charlie walked away from Hanson’s crumpled form. The camp quickened. The boys ran all about, gathering battle’s accoutrements, throwing out playing cards and stiffening for the challenge. Some kissed leather-bound Bibles or letters from home before stuffing them into blouse pockets. The Bible, at least, was a practical thing – if it was thick enough, it could stop a bullet. A letter from home couldn’t save you.

Line after line formed in the open field, at the edge of the woods. The boys took just a few minutes to fall in. An eerie stillness fell over the field – humid, uncomfortable silence. Turkey buzzards circled above our heads. “Now that’s god damned demoralizing,” one man remarked loudly while pointing at the circling scavengers. “Some of us is dinner tonight.” Low supplications to heaven sounded from various spots along the line. Must be the new men, I thought, no amount of praying will help a man in a place abandoned by God. The call rang out,



“Fix Bayonets!” Little doubt remained about the desperation of the moment. The clank on clank of metal fractured the tense silence. My palms sweated as I clasped my bayonet and fixed it to the end of my musket. Charlie stood to my right and Blakely stood to his. I looked at the two of them. Charlie looked straight ahead of where we stood. An angry determination sparked his gray eyes. Blakely, still spent from his run back to camp, fidgeted trying to straighten his uniform. He looked one time at Charlie. I could see he worried about him. Charlie glanced at Blakely and offered a weak smile and an encouraging nod – an attempt to comfort his friend. We could hear the battle, rolling ever closer to our position from the north of our line.

Hanson stumbled up to the line, glaring at Charlie. I saw Charlie take note of where Hanson stood but not give the least show of regard for the glare. With any luck, Hanson would take a bullet this time around.

The low, prescient rumble of cannon sounded to the west of our line, the direction we faced. The battle had rolled down from the north. Experience told me that the cannonade to our front marked the softening of the Rebel position. I always wondered about the business of firing artillery on the enemy line before we charged it. Wasn't it more like a warning to the enemy to prepare for our inevitable appearance? Damn the artillerists – messengers of death, safe behind their beasts.

“Forward! March!” sounded down the line. With a steady step, our lines heaved forward. Charlie, Blakely and I marched near the front. An officer on horseback and his aides rode some yards in front of us. When they reached the line of the woods, they were forced to dismount. Brambles and new growth littered the old forest floor—too much for the mounts to navigate. The officer slapped his horse's hindquarters, sending the frightened animal galloping to the rear.

“Wish he’d slap my ass and send me to the rear.” One man quipped. No one laughed. I swallowed nervously. My mouth and throat had dried out and grown thick and sandy. I reached for my canteen, remembering belatedly that I had forgotten to fill it. My hands shook so it was difficult to replace the lid.

Our line entered the woods and immediately lost formation. Officers and file closers shouted themselves hoarse, trying to yell the line together. The best we could do was stick with a few of the men to either side of our position in line and try not to get out ahead. Charlie, Blakely, and I moved together along with several other men from Company B. Charlie suddenly ducked out and to the left, heading toward Hanson. I figured that Hanson was about to get his. I smiled.

An officer yelled, “Quick step, boys!” We charged through the woods, men ducking here and there to escape a low-hanging branch or tripping over brambles and cursing the woods. I was struck by the absurdity of it—damning nature—when lead projectiles buzzed fiendishly above our heads. *Curse the woods, will you?* I mused. Fragments of wounded trees rained down on us. Men cursed the officers, eager for the opening of return fire. I chanced a glance back at Charlie. He had collared Hanson.

The lead balls of the enemy’s muskets found their marks and men dropped like rags. The dull, meaty thud of contact fazed no one. We were veteran troops. What I could never get used to, though, was the screams of the wounded—prolonged cries for relief. Sometimes the wounded would grab at us, begging us not to go on, crying for mothers and sisters and sweethearts.

Blakely and I went forward through this chaos together. Within 100 yards of the works, we could see the gray backs popping up to fire. The officers at last let us loose and we fired manically. Some Rebs collapsed along their line and slid down the forward side of their works, some writhing in agony, others unmoving. Our position was exposed, but we gave at least as

much as we got, and at the quickstep, too. The outnumbered enemy wavered and fired as they moved backward from their works. “Charge the bayonet!” an officer in our ranks bellowed.

“They’re runnin’ boys! Press them!”

With a resonant “Huzzah!” rumbling down our line, we charged to the foot of the works. The bearer had fallen there, and Blakely grabbed the flag, waving it wildly above his head. He ascended the works and shouted something incoherent to the boys. We shot a volley in the enemies’ faces. The enemy turned and retreated madly to their second works. Blakely charged down after them, and I stayed close beside him. Salty sweat and acid gun powder obscured my vision. I frantically wiped my eyes, afraid to lose sight of Blakely. When I last saw Charlie, he had grabbed hold of Hanson, who tried, as always, to run to the rear.

“Not this time,” Charlie raged, grabbing hold of him and dragging him along. Hanson looked about. He became frenzied in his attempts to escape Charlie’s grasp, to no avail. How was Charlie supposed to fire, holding on to Hanson?

The Rebs reached their second line of works. The gaping black void mouths of several cannon roared to life from the line, ripping holes in our scattered formations. Grape shot — canister filled with metal balls, turning the cannon into giant, deadly shotguns. Blakely turned to me and screamed, “Get down, Bet!” His cry was punctuated by a booming detonation in front of our line. I dropped to the ground and heard the hit. Dirt and debris rained down on me, pinching my exposed skin with shards of heated material. I could smell the wool of my uniform burning in the little places. I lifted my head to look around me. The detonation deafened me, and the battle passed by me in silent, slow motion. Blakely still grasped the flag, standing in full view of the enemy. I watched as a ball tore through his sleeve and another through the flag he held aloft. Still, he stood, encouraging the boys to hold their ground.

“For God’s sake! Get down!” I yelled, frantic for his safety.

I tried to reach for him and pull him down, but just then another detonation roared in our front. More debris flew out and hit me. The arm I reached for Blakely with was now covered in blood and chunks of red slop. I grabbed Blakely’s leg and yanked. He gave without any effort.

“Christ, Blakely!” I yelled at him.

I looked over at his prostrate body. His head was gone from his shoulders and blood spurted in cloying little waves from his neck.

“Oh Jesus!” I cried in the guttural half-mad pitch of horror, common in this place. “Oh God...” I gave in and lay there, next to him, crying while soldiers ran past me, charging toward death, or worse. I half covered his body with mine as if to protect it. No use now. Someone yanked the flag from Blakely’s grasp to carry it on. His dead body wrenched forward, bringing me back to the moment. I managed to raise myself to my knees, never taking my eyes off of Blakely. The ground was slippery with his blood, the smell sharp and sweetly metallic. A slow shake built up from my core and transformed my body into a mound of panic. I held on to reality from a far-off place, looking down, seeing my trembling hands tenderly covering Blakely’s severed neck with my cloak. I rocked back and forth, crying and clutching my folded legs, whispering Blakely’s name over and over – an incantation meant to return him to me.

“Get up, Bet! You can’t stay here. We’re exposed!” All of a sudden, as if in a dream, Charlie was there, prodding me to get up and move on. I looked up at him and cried, “Blakely!” Black gun powder ringed Charlie’s lips, giving him a deathly appearance. He glared at me with consternation. His eyes filled with frustrated tears, streaking down his face, leaving wet paths through the dirt of battle on his face.

“I know. I saw, but you have to move. Now!” His voice roared at me. I snapped back to the moment.

He still had Hanson in his grip, dragging him along. I couldn't believe my eyes. How did he make it this far, dragging that ass along? How the hell did he discharge his weapon? The cannon to our front roared to life again, followed by a sharp, crackling volley of musket fire, and Hanson twisted free of Charlie's grasp in one rounding, ducking movement. Charlie spun around and caught a slug of grapeshot in his upper left arm. He fell to the ground, bleeding out. Hanson was gone in an instant, running toward the rear. My heart stopped and I felt paralyzed. I crawled over to him.

The bone in his upper arm was shattered and took the appearance of a ghastly dark red and mushy mixture of soft tissue with slivers of white bone. He was barely conscious. “Charlie...what do I do?” I asked, bending close to him. His face went ashen, then white, and his eyes struggled to focus on my face, on the trees above, and on the boys running past us, pursuing the enemy, in groups of twos and threes. Eventually, his gray eyes grew dull and rolled back into his head. He grabbed me with his uninjured arm. His grip was weak. He couldn't speak, but I knew I had to apply a tourniquet. I untangled the twine I had saved from my old trousers. My hands shook violently as I worked to save him—so much rested on this one chaotic moment in time.

“Get...out...of...,” he choked at me with great effort.

“I have to get you out of here first. You can't stay here!” I objected. He tried to shake his head in protest, but I ignored him. I rose to my feet and grabbed him by the shoulders. He cried out in pain and I winced. Bracing every ounce of strength I had left within me I pulled him from the field of fire into the tenuous safety of a nearby group of trees as quickly as I could. He passed

out and I fell to the ground next to him. My heart beat into my throat and I let out one long, broken sob. “Live...” I whispered next to his face, my dirty tear drops fell to his cheeks. His eyes fluttered open and he grabbed onto me again.

“Leave me.” He commanded. And with that, he passed out again.

I pushed myself up with a determined grunt and stumbled away from him. Senseless emotion wouldn't serve either of us at this moment. I looked around, desperately aware at last that I must leave him here, alone. I muttered heated words to God, demanding Charlie's safety. I glanced back at him and, through maddened tears, saw how completely vulnerable he looked, passed out and oblivious, shielded only by blackjack.

His dark hair was wet and dirty and gumming to his forehead and temple. Reddish-brown dirt and shadowy gun powder covered his face. I knew his arm was ruined. At best, it would be useless, if he lived. One way or the other, the war was over for Charlie. I mumbled curses under my breath, damning the world and the pitiless men in it. I grew intense and alight with anger, hard and ready to extract vengeance for what had happened to us.

The battle moved some yards ahead of where he fell. The most I could do for him now was to fight to keep the Federal lines surging forward. I turned and ran forward as fast as I could. I felt finished and desperately tired at the moment of Charlie's wounding, but now anger fostered a different animal in me, one that moved despite my exhaustion – one that rushed to kill or be killed.

I caught up with the regiment. It had stalled at the edge of a wood, where the Rebels were making a determined stand surrounding and behind a red-brick structure. Small sections of the

brick building lay, smashed and crumbling. Their artillery now tore through the trees surrounding us. They were overshooting – for now – soon our lines would be in their sights.

The crackle of muskets added frightening tenor to the deep boom of the cannons. The enemy kept up a steady fire by squad, and moved forward. Men fell all along our lines as the enemy artillery adjusted aim and deadly round missiles tore through our formations. All along the line, the officers yelled to the men to plug the gaps vacated by the dead and wounded. Our artillery could not support us from the woods behind and it was clear that our position was quickly becoming tenuous.

We retreated in an orderly manner, stubbornly refusing to flee the Rebel resurgence. Every few yards, we dressed our lines and returned fire, but the Rebels defiantly pushed forward, determined to regain the ground we had chased them from. The zip, thud, zip, thud of the enemies' bullets inundated our formation, knocking men down all along our line. The Butternuts were firing by rank now, keeping up a steady and discouraging onslaught. I do not remember ever fighting so hard to keep a piece of ground behind me and clear of the enemy. I am sure that in this fight I managed my three rounds a minute and perhaps then some.

All down the shattered line, the officers yelled out, "Fall back, boys! Fall back!" I screamed at the boys. "Turn and fire! Turn and fire, goddamn you!" I bawled until I lost my voice and could only choke out single-syllable remonstrations. To give way meant to give Charlie over to the enemy, to be shipped south to a God-awful, starvation prison camp where his wound would fester and he would die for sure. Blakely would end ignominiously in an unmarked trench, after being stripped clean. I was determined to protect them, and yet I knew I could not fight the whole Confederate Army on my own. Eventually, I had to accept the inevitable.

We would certainly lose the ground we gained. I decided to run back, to the rear, and move Charlie while I still had a chance to. God willing, I would have enough time to drag him off to safety. Lieutenant Hoke saw me break and run and aimed to hit me broadside with his sword.

“Get back here, Corporal!” He yelled after me.

“I have to move Charlie, Lieutenant! We’re losing ground. I have to get him out of the line of the retreat!” The Lieutenant turned back toward the line and I figured that his inaction meant that he had granted me permission. I suppose he knew better than anyone that I was right. That was the last time I saw the Lieutenant. The retreat ended for him shortly after I left. The boys said he was wounded at least twice before he took one square and merciful through the heart.

I ran hell-fire toward the trees where I had left Charlie, quickly glancing in the direction of Blakely’s body. What I saw stopped me dead in my tracks. A rebel bullet whizzed past, inches from my head and slammed into a tree near where I stood, but even such a close call barely registered in my mind. The scene unfolding before me riveted my attention. Hanson bent low, rifling through Blakely’s pockets, murmuring insults. “Where do you keep it, nigger? I want it. You got no need for it now.” And then the bastard chuckled. He actually chuckled – a low, wicked sound foreign even on this field of madness. It seemed to me as if the Devil himself had come up from the netherworld.

I could only guess that Hanson somehow knew about Blakely’s stash of money. He was saving every dollar he earned, secretly sewn into the lining of his coat. He intended to purchase his mother’s freedom with it. Perhaps he shared this information with his mother last night and unwittingly with the cowardly thief as well. My insides burned with every moment of



indignation and disgust thrust upon me and my comrades by this low-down dog and I strode resolutely toward him, leveling my rifle for a clear shot. “Stand up, Hanson!” I shouted with as much authoritative depth as I could muster. Hanson shot up, obviously scared witless, intending to run, until he recognized me.

“What you want, sissy?” He sneered.

“Get away from Blakely! So help me God, I will kill you! I may kill you anyway. Get!”

“Not until I find that money. You can go to hell.” And with that he bent low again.

“Goddamn you! I am not going to tell you again!” But it was no use hollering. I was no more a threat to Hanson than if he knew I was a girl. Blood drained from my face, heating my hands and my arms. My muscles tightened and shuddered as I walked toward him, then suddenly calmed.

I levelled my rifle. My heartbeat slowed. I fired a round into his left knee. He buckled, cursing and damning me to hell. I charged then like I never had before. I can only recollect the sound of my feet hitting the ground and my heart pounding in my ears. Intense anger shook and propelled me. It was him or me, and I felt damn sure it wasn't going to be me. Hanson rolled onto his back, grabbed his rifle and aimed it at me. He shot and missed. Figures, I thought with scorn. It was probably the first time he shot it on a battlefield. He started to reload. I ran toward him and was upon him in a matter of seconds. I thrust my bayonet deep into his gut. He exhaled in a long moan.

“You stupid shit. You killed me.” He hissed at me.

“Not soon enough!” I spat. “I should have killed you a long time ago. Charlie was hurt under your hand.”

“Serves him right...you don't even know nuthin', do you? He's secesh!”

“You shut your mouth!” I screamed at Hanson. I pulled my bayonet out of him and he began to bleed profusely. I turned to walk away.

“You’re a girl.”

I turned back, stunned at his words.

“That’s right. I know everyone’s secrets. Heard Blakely tellin’ it all to his mama last night. Your Charlie boy didn’t tell you his secret. He came north with Blakely. They is brothers! Got the same pap.” Hanson tried to laugh but instead spit up blood. “He’s a goddamned secesh!” The words bled from his mouth.

At that, I turned and raised my rifle above his head. With calm resolve I said to him, “Secesh don’t fight for the Union and neither have you.” In one frenzied moment of inexplicable clarity, I steeled every ounce of strength I could and brought the butt of my rifle down upon him, smashing his skull. His blood spurted up onto my arms and spattered my rifle.

I felt his warm blood dripping from my rifle onto my trembling hands. I threw down the rifle as if it would strike at me and wiped my hands on the back of my blue jacket without looking at them. I did not want to see his poisoned taint on my skin. I stripped out of my blood-stained jacket and threw it to the ground by his body, and then picked a clean rifle off of a dead man. I would carry none of Hanson with me. I had done him and that was it.

As I turned to walk away, I heard a sad whimpering at my side. The stray mutt that Hanson had adopted as his own early on, stood cowering and whimpering at me. I had forgotten about this little brute. Where’d he been all this time? His big black eyes looked from me to his dead master and back again, his brows shifting dolefully.

I looked at Hanson’s mutilated body and at the whining dog. The mongrel was as alone as I was now. Awareness rolled over me like a fever. *What had I done?* My stomach felt hollow,

carved out. I heaved. Tears rolled down my cheeks and I wiped at them frantically. I refused to cry for Hanson.

I could hear the retreat drawing closer and rushed toward the place I had left Charlie. His body was gone, though, and I became disoriented, thinking I had somehow forgotten where I left him. He could not have left on his own. “No...no...no...” I repeated desperately to myself, leaving the trees and looking hysterically about for the right copse. I realized with uncontrollable anguish that I was in the right spot and Charlie was gone. Despite myself, I began calling out his name, running from place to place. I entered the copse one last time to look for clues. He must have been carried out because there were no marks as if he had dragged himself.

I stopped, too stunned to move on.

I screamed, loud and long, at nothing and at everything, protesting the bleeding world. I couldn't stand to lose Charlie. I couldn't stand not knowing where he was or who took him and to God knew where. The ache overpowered my senses. I fell to my knees in the copse and noticed a spot where he had bled. I ran my fingers through it and wept. The gold locket lay in the dirt a little ways from where I kneeled and I snatched it from the ground, clutching it to my breast. Blakely was dead, Charlie was gone and likely dead or dying and I was alone. Nothing could be worse than to be alone. I wished for that moment to follow my friends to the grave.

What had Hanson said? They were brothers? If that was true, had Blakely told Charlie my secret? Why didn't Blakely tell me? I scoffed at myself, believing a fool like Hanson.

I saw the boys running past me at full retreat. All semblance of order had disappeared. The Rebel yell rang through the woods. The momentum of our retreat pushed me along, and I lost sight of the spots where I last saw Charlie and Blakely. It seemed as if the war, now, was mine alone.

## The Search

Within a couple weeks of the battle, Captain Cooper granted my request for leave to search for Charlie in the military hospitals in and around Washington, D.C. The Captain could see that I had grown useless. The battle had shelled me out, leaving me hollow and lonely. I felt as though I were already somewhere else, searching for Charlie in the depths of some place unreal while mourning, mourning, always mourning Blakely. The pain of it turned me desperate and restless and senseless. I had to leave but remained tethered to the camp, like a dog on a chain that reached only so far and not far enough.

I tried the chain, leaving camp, risking punishment, and blindly walking off. Some man among us would always find me, gently lead me back to the camp, while shaking his head and clicking his tongue with pity for me. “Now you just stay here laddie,” he coaxed as he set me next to a campfire. Always, the flames mesmerized me for the moment – I saw everything in them, burning. We all burned. The Captain, I guess, decided he would let me go, since it seemed I would go anyway. No one had the heart to punish a broken man out of his senses and nearly as helpless as a child.

I set out at a run just as soon as I garnered permission and headed toward Aquia Landing near the Potomac, well to the north of our camp. I planned to check in on any field hospitals between our camp and Aquia Landing and then catch a steamer north to the capital from there. I walked up through the old battlefields of Eastern Virginia. War had scarred the land. The walk north was a ghostly one, filled with shadow trees and desolate chimneys. Only the most stalwart inhabitants remained in this deserted no-man’s land. Gardens of bones lay bleaching in the sun, decaying shreds of uniform hanging off of them, sometimes swaying in the breeze – the only

movement. Even though it was the evening of summer, most of the land looked dry and brown like winter. There was no more sad, lonely, or dead place.

Carrion-eaters had high feast here among the men left behind and buried in shamefully shallow graves, quickly and carelessly dug. I remembered the man who had joked about how we were dinner for the scavengers. The occasional cavalry patrol passed by, kicking up dust and wheeling about to ask my business, but, other than that, the area seemed oddly empty after having hosted so many hundreds of thousands of combatants for so long.

The land paid the highest price. It lay, for the time being, as dead as any soldier buried on it – emptied of everything but obvious loss. The nothingness smothered and oppressed me. I walked along the Richmond, Fredericksburg & Potomac train tracks for a few miles and watched as cars and beds laden with supplies and cannon and soldiers passed by, heading south to fuel General Grant's bloody push in that direction.

When the war began, the green soldiers on their way south sang and drank and teased each other and kissed the ladies along the way. These men, headed south in the fourth year of the war looked grave, were in earnest, and made hardly a sound at all.

I grew lonely on my walk. The land reminded me of a dark Washington Irving tale – an eternal Hallows Eve, an unending day of the dead. I thought to sing to myself to pass the time and calm my nerves. The land haunted me, accused and mocked me with its barrenness. I hummed at first, glancing about me in all directions, afraid to anger the dead. The bones seemed to move to life, stand in animated formation with one another, only pieces and parts with shards of clothing – blue, gray and butternut fragments.

I stopped walking and stood as still as the departed, breathing hard, every muscle tensed, afraid to move and anger them. The high heat of the day threw ghostlike waves of visible heat

from the ground, and I squinted to look at the bones again, shaking my head and coming to my senses, as much as I had left anyway. When no regiment of the deceased formed to charge against me and silence my doggerel, I sang the words aloud, trying to ward off my fears. My choice was an ironic one, I suppose:

*In the beauty of the lilies, Christ was born across the sea  
With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me;  
As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,  
While God is marching on!*

I hadn't the heart to sing the chorus. *Glory! Glory!* I did not feel like singing praises in such a place. I thought about just how the war had transfigured my friends. Blakely lay somewhere, anonymously, without a head, and stripped of his dignity and a decent burial; and, as for Charlie, I knew not what had become of him and could only hope I would find him alive, or not. One way or the other, I needed to know. And, as for me, I murdered a man. Imagine singing about the *beauty of the lilies* and *Christ* in this land we had all ruined. And anyway, what is *murder* during war? I wondered. I only regretted, as I walked glancing into the shadows, that I did not kill Hanson before Charlie could be hurt.

As I turned the next bend along the tracks, I saw up ahead of me the white tents of an encampment, awash and oddly bright upon the deadened land. I could hardly control my steps when I recognized the green and yellow flag of a field hospital, hanging limp in the humid heat. My heart jumped to my throat. I *felt* it beat for the first time in months. Charlie could be lying over there, so close to where I was now. As I approached the camp, I was stopped short by the

muffled cries of the wounded and the delirious. These were not the shrieks of a battlefield – the first cries of tremendous pain and shock, but the muted, drugged moans of ache and bewilderment. I slowed my step long enough to steel myself to what I would see in the camp.

I could not have prepared myself. Even though I had seen unspeakable wounds on battlefields for two and more years, the hospital site stunned me. Men lay all about in every form of grotesque mutilation or deadly illness. The men who remained in this camp consisted of those too injured or too ill for the trip to Washington – most were considered hopeless cases. Some were double amputees, some suffered with typhoid and diarrhea. A few poor fellows suffered with both. I saw at least one man missing his lower jaw. As I walked along, I looked into each face, hoping to make out Charlie. These men took grotesque form. They all sweated profusely, faces swollen and contorted with pain.

The smell assaulted my senses, the mordant tang of dying men, the neglect, the bloated forms and stench of infection; defecation and body odor. I pulled out my kerchief and covered my nose and mouth, fighting back the urge to gag. I looked out, past the tented hospital grounds, to the abandoned farm fields, where the bones lay, that I had crossed and thought of how much lovelier the dying and lonely land seemed now that I was faced with dying and desperate men. My eyes watered, though I wasn't sure if I wanted to cry or if the smell caused the tears. The war was everywhere, killing everyone I loved.

Those men conscious enough to recognize that I was nearby begged me to help them. Some begged me to kill them and end the anguish they lingered in. All wanted two things: mercy and water. Sometimes I thought the two were one in the same.

One young man I came across could not have been more than 15 years old. He was wasting away, lying hopeless in the steaming Virginia sun. His right arm had been amputated at

the shoulder and he suffered awfully with a fever. He lay crying and speaking to his absent mother, assuring her that he would be all right. He would be home in time to help harvest the wheat, he mumbled. She need not worry herself. I bent low to hear his words and offer comfort. I whispered, "What is your name, soldier?"

In a moment of sudden lucidity, he looked at me, and said "Who are you ma'am? Can you help me?"

I recoiled and looked about. Seeing no one could have heard him, I asked, "How can I help you?" and added, "I am a soldier, too."

"No, ma'am," He moaned. "You cannot be. I need water – please."

At that, I took the lid off of my canteen and poured some water into his mouth. Half of it just poured back out of the corner of his dry lips. He was too weak to drink. He was a brown-haired boy with half-closed, watery dark eyes beneath thick brown lashes. His face was dirty and flushed from the fever. A row of light freckles danced across his thin nose and speckled both his cheeks. I wondered how many times his mother had playfully kissed those little marks.

I reflexively grabbed my kerchief and gently wiped smudges of dirt off of his cheeks, lovingly dabbing the cleaned freckles with tepid water from my canteen. He looked like a little child. He smiled weakly at me while the precious water trickled out of his mouth.

"Thank you," He breathed. "Stay with me. I shan't last much longer. I don't want to die alone." He stared hard at me with cloudy eyes, compelling me.

"What is your name?" I asked again.

"March Fellows," he whispered. "Illinois."

"Hello March from Illinois. I am from Indiana. That makes us neighbors." I smiled.

"Why do you think I am a woman?"



“Because you are and I am glad for it. Now can you get mother, please?” Just like that, he slipped back into his delirium. I grabbed his left hand and held it tenderly. I sang a lullaby that I thought that his mother may have sang to him at some time in his short life. He smiled, lovingly cooed at his mother and peacefully slipped away. I sat holding his limp hand for a few moments, praying that I would not find Charlie in this place. For if I did find him here, then his case was likely hopeless. I stood to leave the boy, covering his face with a piece of his blanket and silently praying for his mother.

I continued my search through the field hospital, stopping as often as I could to comfort the tormented men, keeping a mental list: boys from each corps of the Army of the Potomac, soldiers from as close by as Pennsylvania and Ohio and from as far away as Minnesota and Wisconsin – too many to remember. They covered the ground and filled the tents, row after miserable row, interminable lines of despair – dusty blue uniforms and bloody bandages. I picked my way through them, knowing I could not help so many and passing by with blame on my head. I felt ashamed of my despondent attitude, seeing these men left here to die alone and without camaraderie.

People back home, I imagined, read casualty lists over morning coffee in the comfort and safety of home, mourned the dead, and promptly forgot about the thousands left wounded. But when the wounded ended up back home, I decided, they would not be so easily forgotten, hobbling about on crutches or with an armless sleeve pinned up. Some men have lost their minds and would wander through their remaining years, shadows of who they were before the war, wary of everything. Some wounds are obvious, others are less so. Someday the people who stayed safe at home would be faced with this Army of wrecked men, shaming them by their presence.

But, for now, while the war dragged on, they lay here, agonizing and dying while the armies steadily marched on to kill and maim and feed this factory of misery. Among the men I saw in that field hospital, I did not see one wounded man who would not have been the luckier to die as Blakely did – immediately and painlessly. That fact oddly comforted me. At least Blakely would never lay here, in the squalor and near-neglect of this place.

I walked on in a silent daze. The suffering became a muffled background. After a while, I somehow found the clerk's tent. I walked in quietly and stood waiting to be noticed. A small man, thin and not more than five feet tall, looked up from his make shift desk. Adjusting his dirty wire-rimmed glasses with a quick movement, he asked, "Can I help you?" He looked down without waiting for my response. He was entombed in paper work, piles of it, and he never set his pen down. Just kept working and waiting for me to speak.

"I am looking for a wounded man."

He clicked his tongue and whispered under his breath, "Jesus." And then, aloud, he said, "Take yer pick," while fanning his hands, palms up, out over his great piles of paper.

"A *particular* wounded man," I said, as if I needed to clarify that point.

"He got a name?" He said with sarcastic emphasis.

"Charlie Black, Ohio."

He shifted through the mounds of paper surrounding him, saying "Ohier, Ohier" over and over until he found a certain pile. "Here we are then. Ohier. What name?"

Where the hell was Ohier? This man grated on my nerves. I wanted to correct him, tell him that it was pronounced O-hi-o.

"Black." I repeated Charlie's last name and watched anxiously as he scanned the pages with a bony, twisted finger.

“Black, Black, Black,” He repeated, scanning several pages. “I have several with that last name. What were his first?”

“Charlie,” I whispered, afraid to say it and have him find the name.

“Beg yer pardon?”

“His name was – I mean, is Charlie.”

He scanned again. Then, at last, “Nope. No Charlie Black here. ‘Less he’s one of them unknowans. If’n he ain’t, and he ain’t dead somewheres else, he’s probably in Washington. May be dead thar. G’day.”

*Christ*, I thought, *what an ass*. All he saw was lists of names, cold names. Probably never saw a battle or suffered a wound or a loss in this war. I left without a word. Least he could be decent, I thought, as I stood outside his tent, adjusting my cap and looking about trying to decide which direction would aim me at the Capitol city.

I took a steamer up the Potomac to Washington. We landed mid-day in high heat. Countless supplies – cannon, horses, foodstuffs and crates – and men – crowded the wharf. *How many dead men?* I thought, looking at the fresh troops shuffling on to steamers for the trip to the front. Wounded men from Grant’s campaign lay to one side, waiting to be loaded into ambulances and sent to the city hospitals. I pushed my way through on the streets, walking toward the city. The avenues were even hotter, dustier, and more crowded than when my regiment came through on our way to war more than two years ago. It was all hot noon, horse shit, brown dust and pressing bodies. I thought cynically that since everyone was off in Virginia dying, there ought to be a lot fewer people here now, not more. I grimaced at the thought of what sort of people inhabited Washington, profiting off of the ones who were doing the fighting. The

place smelled like stagnant water, refuse, and horse flesh. A military band played upbeat airs somewhere off in the distance. *Really?* I thought scornfully. *No need for all that anymore.*

I walked fast, pressed in along the crowded streets. I choked on it. The city grew like a plague, and I wanted to stay as clean of it as I could. War is an immense machine, grinding forward and driving people to its vocation. For every regiment of men wiped out on the battlefield, some bastard profits, safely behind the lines in a place like this, skulking and maneuvering. War destroys *and* builds. It robs *and* enriches. The country prospers from the force of the engine, milling the youngest and the best of us to feed its growth. I wanted to punch at the people crowding me. I hated them, shrouded here in the safety of the dirty city, while men like Blakely and Charlie paid with their lives for it.

I found a bent, old man sitting outside a grocer, leaning heavily on a wooden cane, and I asked him if he could point out the nearest military hospital. He looked like he was a hundred years old, and that made him seem the least menacing to me – just a benign old man, too old to pitch in. Dark spots covered his worn hands, and his knuckles swelled into knots. He held a horn up to his ear, motioning at me to repeat what I had asked.

“Wall,” he drawled loudly as if the whole world was as deaf as him, “about two blocks north a here thar’s a one.” He eyed me suspiciously and commented curtly about my healthy looking state.

“What *you* needin’ a harspital fur?”

I just stared at him, meeting his eyes and refusing to be accused. He peered back at me through squinted, milky eyes, and cocked his head to the side in a reproving manner. I sighed once, looked down and shook my head. Then, I turned about smartly and marched off in the

direction of the hospital without another glance at the old codger. *Christ Almighty*, I thought as I walked away.

The hospital covered at least three blocks – an immense repository for broken bodies spit out by battle. A city of tents surrounded the main building – each one housing a number of men recovering from wounds. I thought derisively that those politicians and rich men in the city ought to be made to walk through here every day and face what they wrought – count something besides their gold and their laurels. Victory, *if* it be, would be purchased by what lay both here and dead on the field. There had to be thousands of wounded men lying in these wards – an entire army of them. I knew I couldn't look through every tent and hospital room – it would take too long and I couldn't stand it anyway – and so I found a nurse and asked directions to the clerk's office.

The registers room was in the lower level of the hospital – a small, gray and stuffy space housing piles of records detailing every known patient treated at the facility. Sunlight shined in through a window, lighting thousands of flecks of dust which floated everywhere chaotically. The clerk, a friendly man who lost his right eye at Antietam, searched diligently for Charlie's name, taking nearly a half-hour to do it, thumbing through random piles of papers and neater, boxed files. Just the same, he came up empty. He looked disappointed.

“He didn't come through here,” he said. “Is there any way he could have been an unknown? Was he conscious?”

“He sewed his name into his coat,” I offered. The last time I saw Charlie he had his jacket on. Thinking back to the image of him, lying broken under the trees where I left him, pained me too much, and I didn't linger on it. It flashed in my mind for barely a second, making me flinch.

“There are a few more hospitals in the city. I will tell you where to find them.” He grabbed a blank sheet of paper from his desk and began to write, explaining as he jotted directions down. I stared at a wide dark scar that trailed down his cheek from his empty eye socket. *My God*, I cringed – too fascinated by the wound to pay attention to what he was telling me as he wrote.

Just then the door opened and an older man, wearing a white apron stained with blood, walked in and sank heavily into a wooden chair. Sweat plastered his thinning white hair to his head, and he wore steamy wire-rimmed spectacles which had slid to the end of his sharp nose. His shirt sleeves were rolled above his elbows. He didn’t seem to notice that the clerk and I occupied the room. He stared fixedly at his shaking hands and then rubbed them together to steady them.

“Doctor Parsons,” the clerk greeted him quietly with a questioning look.

“I just need to sit a minute,” the doctor exhaled, removing his glasses and rubbing at his eyes and forehead. After a couple minutes, he wiped his glasses with a rag and replaced them on his nose, looking over at the clerk and me.

“Doctor Parsons is one of our surgeons,” the clerk said to me by way of introduction.

“Who is this?” The doctor asked, trying to manage a smile.

“This here’s a soldier up from Virginia, looking for his pard,” the clerk replied.

“Was he wounded?” The doctor asked.

“Yes,” I answered, thinking it a stupid question. *Why else would I be looking for him here?*

“What sort of wound did he take?”

“Grape shot, upper left arm,” I offered, weary of what the good doctor would have to say about it. “Broke the bone.”

“Hmm,” the doctor sighed, looking oddly at the blood on his apron and then rubbing his hands together again. “Look. You’re wasting your time, son. No man can survive a wound like that without immediate care. Maybe not even then. If you didn’t find him in a field hospital right after the battle, you’re not going to find him.” He stood up and shuffled over to me, placing a steadied hand on my shoulder and looking me dead in the eyes, communicating the gravity of what he said. His eyes looked droopy and bloodshot. “Your friend is surely dead. Sorry, young man.”

With that, he turned and, looking down, he walked out of the room, softly shutting the door behind him. It clicked shut, and I stared at it. The clerk cleared his throat awkwardly and handed me the directions to the other hospitals, saying sympathetically, “Just in case.”

As I walked away from the records office and out into the open air, surrounded by the tents, I thought to defy what the doctor had said. I wanted to run through the tents, screaming Charlie’s name loud enough to *make* him be there. I felt a surge of the maniacal run through my veins. It was wrath and misery and defiance surging in me – a shock through my body, bursting to the surface, trying to tear through my skin. I rubbed my arms hard with shaking hands and growled under my breath with a gasp. I stood there, suspended in time, fighting insanity by squeezing my arms to my body and holding on tightly. The tents seemed to spin around me, canvas-colored military sentinels mocking me, jabbing at me and accusing me of letting my friends die. I wanted to scream at them and kick out. I locked my legs beneath me, planting my feet stubbornly to the ground, waiting for something to explode from inside me.

In the midst of this tiring struggle, I felt a hand come to rest softly on my back and I jumped away from it, turning to look at who had entered my trance. A young woman in a nurse's apron stood holding a glass of water out to me. Her countenance seemed soft and perceptive.

"Are you okay, soldier?" She asked, eyeing me tenderly. Her voice seemed to come from some far-off place. It had a quiet, pensive quality.

I didn't answer, but just took the water and drank it all like an animal. Streams of it rolled down my chin. It was cold and brought me back to where I stood, washing away the irrational for the moment. When I was finished, I looked at her through clear eyes.

She placed a hand on my arm and smiled at me. She was a homely little thing with a long face, thin lips and small eyes. Her dark hair was tied tightly behind her head and tucked into a net. Her face was deeply pock marked, probably from a childhood disease. And yet, she was the most beautiful thing in this city, I thought.

"Better?" She asked, gently rubbing my arm.

*How can it ever be better?* I thought. I wished I could explain it to her.

"Yes," I replied, exhaling. "Thank you." I couldn't manage a smile, but just looked at her without expression. As I held out the empty glass to her, my hand shook hard.

She took the glass from my hand and squeezed my arm one time, smiled kindly and walked away. I watched her go, wishing *she* was all of us. *Might not be in this mess*, I thought. I looked down at the paper with the directions to the other hospitals that the clerk had written out for me. I still clutched it tightly. My fist shook and the paper was crushed within it. I breathed in, full and long, relaxed and opened my hand, pausing just a moment to look at the wrinkled, sweat-moistened paper. I smoothed it out slowly and reverently, thinking about the chances I might find Charlie. I read and re-read the directions without purpose. I knew of a sudden that I



wasn't going to find him. I felt a sedative sense of relief rush over my body as I let go of the idea. "I'm sorry," I whispered tenderly as I dropped the paper to the ground, watching it fall softly on the green grass. I walked away with tears rolling down my cheeks, feeling re-connected to the world. I found my tether to reality and held on. Charlie was dead, and I couldn't change it.

I wandered through the hurried city for at least an hour without intention, not thinking about much until I happened upon a seamstress shop and millinery. I watched women go in and out of the little building front for what felt like hours. Their high-pitched conversations and laughter seemed inane to me, but I liked it. Their voices tinkled like bright little bells on the dull brown street. I felt fatigued and dozed, half aware, to the pleasing sound of it, sitting at the edge of the avenue. I did not sleep long before a couple of soldiers nudged my shoulders to rouse me. I stiffened at the intrusion.

"You got papers, boy?" One of them asked me.

I stared at him, blinking hard a couple times at the sun.

"I – said – *You got papers boy?*" He annunciated. "Where you supposed to be?"

"Yes," I replied, licking my dry lips with my tongue. My mouth felt like sand paper and tasted like the dust on the street. I pulled out the pass that Captain Cooper had signed and handed it to the pair. The one who had asked the question yanked it out of my hand a little too harshly for my taste.

"Jesus," I said, giving him a cold look. "*I got a pass.*"

"Watch your mouth," he scowled at me and snapped my papers open, scanning them in an unmistakable self-important manner. He was a tall, skinny boy with blemishes all over his face and big teeth. *What's he all uppity for?* I wondered scornfully. After a long while, he

handed the papers back to me, looking disappointed. I guessed he wanted to arrest me. *Too bad*, I smirked.

“Well, go about your business and get back to your regiment,” he barked and walked off. The other soldier followed obediently at his heels. I watched them trudge off, while I yawned deeply and rubbed the sleep out of my eyes. I stood slowly, stiff and sore. As I stretched up, I remembered the dress shop across the street. I looked over at it, and then down at my grubby old uniform. I patted my breast and dust puffed out—a little brown cloud of pungent ‘dirty.’ I grimaced.

*I think I am about done with this thing*, I thought, fingering my tattered coat seams. I didn’t care about deserting. I had given all I could, and I didn’t want to go on in the regiment without Charlie anyway. If I dressed as a girl again, no one would ever question me. I looked over at the shop one more time and decided then and there that my war was finished. I walked quickly across the street and into the store. The door banged shut behind me, calling uncomfortable attention to my arrival. I stood awkwardly frozen in front of the entrance. Some of the women inside looked at me inquisitively. One or two obviously thought that I shouldn’t be in the shop, looking at me reprovably down slender noses.

“Can I help you?” One woman asked, smiling amusedly at me. It was obvious that she was the proprietor of the place.

“Yes. I want—I mean, that is, my sister wants a new dress,” I lied to her.

“Well, don’t you think you ought to bring *her* in here to get it, then?” She smiled.

“No’m,” I stammered. “She is in Indiana. I want to send it to her—a present.”

“Well,” she chuckled, “How am I supposed to know how to tailor it?”

“We are twins,” I blurted. “Just measure me.”

“Young man,” she drawled out behind a mischievous grin, “Your sister has different—well—parts.” With that she ran a slender white hand above her chest, in case I didn’t catch her meaning.

“I could tell you how big they are,” I shot back.

The other women in the shop gasped indignantly. A couple younger girls giggled at me and blushed. *Honestly*, I thought, rolling my eyes. Two of the older, plumper women left the shop in a huff, clicking their tongues at me as they passed by, mumbling something about country folk from the Midwest.

I kept my gaze fixed on the seamstress.

“Please, ma’am,” I implored. “I haven’t seen my *sweet* sister in almost three years and I would like to send her a gift. ‘Case I don’t make it.” I used my status as a soldier-sure-to-die to gain her sympathy, and I poured it on thick.

“I don’t have much time to wait for it either,” I added. “My leave is over soon. I have to go back to the front.” I looked down and scuffed pensively at the floor with my shoe.

“How soon?” She asked, wide-eyed.

“A week,” I replied, and she gasped—not because she was concerned for my safety, but rather because she thought I was asking a miracle of her. I quickly added, “It doesn’t have to be anything fancy. It could be a real simple dress. And she’ll need all the underclothing, too—and a bonnet.”

“Okay, slow down. One thing at a time, and I will see what I can do,” She sighed. “First, find a fabric your *sister* would like.”

I walked over to the neat piles of fabric, ignoring the way she had said *sister*. I really didn’t care anymore. I examined the boards of fabric, stroking them appreciatively. They were

soft, clean, smooth and light; none were scratchy and ugly like my wool uniform. Every imaginable color from pale peach to sun yellow and bright burgundy lay folded in the careful stacks. *No Union blue*, I smiled. *I've seen enough of that color*. I suppose I would have taken just about any fabric without any real consideration—well, almost anyway. I intentionally stayed clear of pink-colored fabrics, remembering Emmy White with disdain. I eventually came across a very simple, sky-blue cloth, wrapped around a board at the bottom of a pile. I jimmied it out and ran my fingers over it—a light, pale cotton. I liked the color blue of it. It looked like the summer sky over Indiana, and it matched my eyes. I pulled an end loose and wrapped it around my hand, smiling at the smooth, cool feel of it.

“This will do,” I said to the seamstress, holding up the board of azure fabric like a trophy.

“You have simple taste,” the seamstress said. I think she was disappointed that I had not picked out something more costly.

Late into the evening, she measured me and helped me pick out white, light-weight cotton underclothing for my sister. I was conscious of my foul uniform the whole time and more than a little embarrassed by it. I was sorry the seamstress had to get so close to me to take my measurements. She was a beautiful woman with long chestnut hair tied back in a loose braid that ended at the middle of her back. She had dark eyes and pale skin. I guessed she was not much older than me. Her hands were small and pale, moving deftly as she worked. I spent the time admiring how she moved—all elegance and efficiency. Finally, she showed me a table of bonnets my sister might want with her dress.

“Your *sister's* head akin to your's as well?” She asked, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

“I suppose it is.”

“Which bonnet then?” She asked, and I picked up a plain white one with simple edges of lace and a blue ribbon.

She placed it on my head, adjusting the ribbon and lacey edgings. A couple old cronies dressed in black happened to walk past the shop window. They slowed, looked at my uniform and then glared at us with bewilderment. The seamstress giggled and pulled the bonnet from my head, twirling away from the window. I laughed despite myself and a wave of silliness ran through me. I bowed handsomely at the ladies, and they raised their proud noses, turned and hurried on their way.

When at last the seamstress had all my measurements and we had chosen all the trappings that go into a woman’s garb, she sunk into a chair, still clasping a measuring tape, and told me to come back in five days for the dress. I smiled and thanked her kindly. As I turned to leave, she called out.

“Where are you staying *soldier*?”

“I haven’t figured that out yet,” I told her as I paused in the doorway.

“I have an extra room,” she offered. “Normally, of course, I could not offer such a thing to a man—*that* would not be good for my reputation—*but* I think we both know that I am not inviting a *man* to stay with me.” She eyed me closely, expecting, I think, some sort of reaction to her cleverness. I looked down at the wooden boards of her floor and sighed.

Looking up at her again, I smiled and said, “I suppose I’ll take that room.”

“You’ll have to dress like yourself, of course, for my sake,” she smiled brightly, seeming excited like a girl whose favorite cousin just came for a visit. “You can wear some of *my* clothes. My name is Anna.” I told her my name—my real name, with a smile. At that, she grabbed my

hand and led me to the rooms above her shop, chattering away excitedly, demanding that I tell her *everything* about myself.

“Why are you dressed like a soldier? Have *you* been in a battle? Didn’t *anyone* figure out that you’re a girl? Oh—and did you ever get *wounded*?” She looked horrified.

*Ugh*, I thought, resigned to my fate.

### Becoming Elizabeth

Anna made becoming a girl again simple enough. My hair hadn’t been cut for a while and was almost shoulder length. I bathed and washed it out, and Anna brushed it emphatically for me. She tied a ribbon around my head to hold the softened strands back from my face, placing the over-large bow of it on top of my head. I stared at myself in a looking glass, tilting my head from side to side and screwing up my face. The ribbon looked absurd.

“Stop that,” she admonished me. “You’re not helping!”

“It’s just—I look so—weird,” I giggled, plucking at the bow.

“You *look* like a girl,” she scolded, knocking my hand away. “It isn’t weird at all. You’re a beauty, Elizabeth. Honestly!”

She rubbed some sort of sweet-smelling oil on my hands, diligently softening my calloused spots while I told her about my disguise, and the war, and Charlie and Blakely. She asked sadly how Blakely had been killed, and I decided to tell her outright. I told her in graphic detail about grabbing Blakely and dragging him down and then seeing that his head had been blown off. I described the blood pouring from his severed neck, and his body jerking unnaturally. I had made her love him like I did, sharing my memories, and then I let her lose him the same way. I was trying to give it away. She stared at me wide-eyed, got to her feet, clutched her mouth

and ran outside. *Big mistake*, I thought, as she vomited in the yard, bent over and sobbing violently. *It's not like you were there*, I thought. *What the hell?*

“Well, what do you *think* happens in war?” I asked her, annoyed at her delicacy.

She just looked at me, accusing me, with an ashen stare, of unnecessary meanness.

“Don’t tell me anything like *that* again,” she choked out.

I shrugged indifferently and walked back into the shop, feeling a little heartless—and spiteful toward her. I was jealous of her innocence and it made me pitiless. I let the door slam shut behind me so that she would know that I didn’t care one whit.

She didn’t speak to me for the rest of the evening. I missed her still company, and I realized I would have to treat her like a woman and tender what I said to her, careful not to offend her gentler sensibilities. The next day, she worked more diligently on my dress, only saying a handful of perfunctory words to me. I thought sadly that she was now anxious to be rid of me. I felt badly, and I decided that I ought to say something to alleviate the pain I had caused.

“Anna?” I approached her quietly and contritely, not sure if she would have me.

“Hmmm?” She didn’t meet my gaze, but kept working.

“I am sorry. You have been good to me, and I should have been careful about what I told you. I have forgotten the way things should be, you know? I have forgotten what a woman is,” I smiled. “Please forgive me.” I took a single step forward toward her.

She stopped working, set the fabrics down, and sighed heavily. “Well, I should tell you, that I am *not* a ninny Elizabeth—it is just that— my husband was killed at Spotsylvania on the 12<sup>th</sup> of May.”

I didn't even know she was married. I guess I spent all our time talking about myself. Sometimes, I think, I felt like my own story was the *only* story—I was too consumed by it. “You were married?” I asked surprised. Nothing in her home even indicated that a man had ever lived there. No clothes or boots, no tobacco pipe, no posed daguerreotype. I looked around, thinking I must have missed something.

“His name was James,” she said, “and he was a fine man. We married just before he left. I *love* him. They never returned his body to me. I don't even know where he is buried. I don't know how he died or if he had comfort. I heard tell that the bodies were piled high at Spotsylvania and that wounded men were buried underneath. When you told me about Blakely, *it was my James I saw.*” A single tear rolled down her cheek.

“Were you there? I mean—at Spotsylvania?” She asked.

“I was,” I replied, remembering the utter horror of it. Dead men actually standing after the battle— propped up by the piles of men killed around them.

“Can you tell me?” She asked, her dark eyes pleaded.

I thought back, searching for a memory that would not hurt her, avoiding visions of Charlie and Blakely. Suddenly, I remembered an oddity I hadn't thought about since that day.

“I remember—music,” I said, looking back in time. I left the shop in the moment I remembered. I was on the field. “The Rebs are singing—they are *god damn singing*. I can hear it over the guns and the shouts.” I started to sing in a broken, absent manner, “*We are a band of brothers and native to the soil...Hurrah! Hurrah! For Southern rights! Hurrah!—Northern treachery—rather than submit to shame, to die we would prefer...*” I trailed off, watching men fall around me—a near panic running through my blood. “They are getting what they *prefer*,” I whispered vehemently with disdain. “They're *losing* the war—they know they are losing. Men



are dying everywhere. We are murdering each other wholesale, and they are *singing*. Damn demoralizing is what it is.” When I stopped talking, a quiet settled over the shop. Only the sounds from the street carried in—carriages and muffled shouts. She stared at me for a minute, looking uncertain of how to react to what I had shared.

“Oh,” was all she managed to say.

“Every one of us that day at the works fought harder and longer than I had ever seen,” I offered. I walked to her and placed my hand on her shoulder. “Be *proud* of James.”

She cried softly, resting her head against my hip. Her face was swollen with grief. “I have no grave to comfort me,” she whispered. “I—cannot lay—flowers on his resting place. I do not know where James is.”

I cupped her chin and lifted her gaze to meet mine. Her skin was soft and moist from the tears. “But you *do* know where he is,” I smiled tenderly at her. The words sunk in and she lifted her gaze heavenward for a moment, as if she thought to see him there. When her eyes met mine again, I added “Here is someone, with you now, who was *with him then*.” I lovingly stroked her smooth hair. She clasped my hands and sobbed hard into the evening. When she had spent her grief, I brought her hot tea and sat with her through the night. We remembered them, in the comfort of the near dark. She had lost her James and I lost Charlie and Blakely, and we were probably the only two people in the world who understood the pain—there in the soft glow of candle light and the settled silence of the night. Near dawn, we fell asleep in each other’s arms, holding on to what remained.

I stayed with Anna for almost a year. Sometimes, I thought I might never leave her. One late April day in 1865, as we sat eating our evening meal, we heard church bells peal through the

city—hundreds of them. We could hear a band, drumming out *Hail Columbia!* somewhere far in the distance. Soon other bands joined in and people paraded through the streets, shouting and singing *victory!* We rushed out of the shop and onto the street and were quickly caught up in the marching. People hugged us and clasped our hands and pushed us along.

“Have you heard, Ladies?! Lee surrendered!”

“The war is over! Huzzah! Long live the Union!”

“Your menfolk will be home soon Missies!” At that Anna and I exchanged glances, smiling thoughtfully. It only then occurred to me that Anna had never worn black. I asked her about it and she smiled and laughed, “James couldn’t stand the color!”

“Oh—let’s be happy tonight,” she admonished me. “Now we know that they did not die in vain! We won, Elizabeth! *We won!*”

A tall, dapper-looking man nearby shouted, “Yes we did!” and kissed Anna square on the mouth. She wiped it away and laughed hilariously. The man, half mad and mostly drunk, spun about on his heels and marched off, tipping his hat and thanking her.

“You’re welcome!” She shouted after him. I laughed despite myself, and Anna threw her arm around my shoulders. “See now?” She cajoled.

As the revelers marched down the street, dragging us along, I thought about my regiment down in Virginia and wondered where they were and what they had seen. How many were left? *If they came back through here, would someone recognize me?* Would I be able to keep myself from running to them and clutching them all in relief? Thoughts of them ran through my mind as I was jostled about by the crowd. Late into the night and until the next day, the city rejoiced—heady and surreal. *It really is over*, I thought, *Can it really be over?* I remembered a time when I was sure it would never end, and I thanked God that I was wrong.

Our regiment left Ohio with close to eight-hundred men in 1862. By the time it marched down Pennsylvania Avenue in triumph after the war, about two hundred of those men remained alive and whole. I watched for them as the troops passed by in the grand procession. Anna and I found a spot on the street to stand and celebrate the troops as they marched past in formation. We waved white handkerchiefs and blew kisses to the men. I felt the absence of Charlie and Blakely in ways I find hard to explain to this day. As I watched the jubilant troops, I pictured the three of us, smiling, alive and happy, in the march down the avenue. No amount of time thinking on it can help the words crystalize. I was empty. Everything I wanted in life to that point was buried with them, wherever they were. Like Anna, I could never really be certain and that cut me to the quick. In one way or the other, I would always be fighting that war, retracing my steps and trying to save my friends. The day they died would never leave me. Whenever I closed my eyes, I was a ghost in Virginia with Charlie and Blakely. I missed Charlie's constant strength and the twinkle in his eyes and half-cocked smile. I always wondered what might have been. I missed Blakely's mischief and steady presence. Mostly, I missed belonging with them. I think no one is as lonely as a soldier alone. Even Anna could never understand that.

In the months following the war, I bade a tearful goodbye to Anna and returned to Indiana, knowing I had to come to a decision about how I would live the rest of my life. My uncle treated me like a foreigner. He was afraid I would try to stake a claim on my father's farm. I didn't want to stay. He was right about one thing—I *had* become a stranger to this place. I could not reconcile who I was with who I had become. I could never go back. No chance remained that I would become some happily married farm wife, content with the domicile. After what I'd done and seen, that thought now was absurd. I had saved nearly \$300 and decided to

catch a train to St. Louis and head west from there. Some veterans from Indiana by the name of Carr – a father and two sons – had settled in the Pacific Northwest on the southern end of Puget Sound. I felt like I could not get far enough away from the painful places, but the Puget Sound, it just so happens, was about as far as I could get and still be in this country. First, I would pay a visit to Blakely’s mama and tell her what had become of him and about how much I loved him. I hoped, as well, that a return to Virginia might somehow assuage some of my anguish – give me a chance to stare down my pain and all that.

### Blakely’s Mama

I found her on the same plantation where she and her son were enslaved. She seemed care worn and older than her 35 or so years. Her face bore lines of unease as deep as scars. She was a thin, little woman with light brown skin. I could see beauty in her face, veiled by age and sorrow. Her hands were thick, calloused and well-used and seemed out of place on her slim body. She sat on the porch of a ramshackle little one-room cabin, rocking slowly in a wobbly, white-washed chair and humming while she snapped peas. When she saw me walking toward her she set the work down, wiped her hands on her soiled apron, and smiled warmly at me like I was an old friend, though she could not have known me.

“Hello miss,” she said and nodded at me lovingly. I felt at ease and sat on the steps at her feet. The heat was oppressive and I removed my bonnet to fan my face. I smoothed back my hair and turned to her.

“I knew your son, ma’am. I come to tell you that he wanted you to be free. He loved you. He was a good man.” No words seemed adequate to describe Blakely, and I felt my throat

tighten with emotion. Anyway, she knew him better than I did. I faltered. I looked around at the neglected grounds of the yard and the slave quarters. She seemed almost alone here, with what remained of this world falling down around her. I looked long into her face, searching for traces of Blakely.

“Why are you staying here?” I asked, still fanning myself and looking at the wrecked farm. The big house was half-burned to the ground, the yard surrounding it overgrown with tall weeds. Farm tools of all sorts lay abandoned by the cabins, rusting away. A lifeless garden of stumps lined the drive to the house. She saw where I looked and said, “Yankees used ‘em.” Most of the slave quarters were falling in upon themselves. I looked behind where she sat, at her little cabin, and sighed softly.

“It not so bad.” She just smiled at me and offered me some water. As I drank the cool liquid, she eyed me, smiling. After a moment, she told me that she chose to stay on the farm after the war. I figured she was waiting, still, for Blakely’s return. I asked her if she was.

“Oh, no, honey. I knows he’s kilt. I can’t leave this place – this my home. This is where I delivered Blakely. I wants to be here. I still sees him, playing in this yard. Him and young massa. *They was a pair*. No. I wants to stay. They gone and I stays. No reason to leave now. I gots me a little garden and some peace.” She assured me. “Missus long gone to live with kinfolk in South Carolin’. This my home.”

I asked her how she found out about Blakely, and her answer stunned me. “I seen it. I followed Blakely back to the Army after he visited me. I so worried about him. I seen young master take his bullet. When you dragged him, I followed. Some of the boys from the farm come with me and we carried him off, Miss. I had to save him, at leas’ him.”

*I'll be damned!* Hanson spoke the truth. Charlie was a southerner, after all. Blakely's mother watched the news sink into my thoughts.

"Where is Charlie now? What can you tell me about him? Do you know who I am?" I had so many questions and a busting of hope. She put up a hand to slow my questions.

"Well, now, Miss. I don't know where he is. He was Massa's son. His papa the same as my Blakely's, you know. I found him a sufferin' in the trees and, like I say, we carried him home. Poor young master Charlie. He didn't agree with the folks keeping Blakely. He said we should be free. He told Missus she shouldna' keep his brother that way. Now, the Missus – his mama – she call him a traitor and she don't want him round, so I's nursin' him in secret. He was bad off, that boy. He was mumblin' nonsense 'bout a girl he left on the battlefield. He beg me to find her. Look like *she find me.*"

She leaned down and patted my shoulder in a motherly manner. "My Blakely tol' me 'bout you. You gots to know that young massa knowed you was a girl – he knowed it all along – and he loved you. Blakely thought he shoulda tol' you so, but Charlie jes' want to he'p you protect your secret. He know that what you want, Blakely say."

"Where is he?" I urged her, anxious with hope. I couldn't help glancing expectantly all around the yard and surrounding building while I waited for her answer. I heard laughter carry from around the corner of the cabin. The sound caught me by surprise. I thought we were alone. A toddler, not more than three years old and bare-footed, came bounding around the corner, giggling and delightedly screeching. The little boy's mother rounded the corner, crouched down, playfully chasing him. When she saw me, she stopped short – wide-eyed with fright – grabbed the boy and ran off. It was the girl that the men had raped back on the Peninsula in the early years of the war. I stared after her. The child, bouncing about in her arms as she ran away,

had fair skin and curls the same color as Hanson's hair. I wanted to call out to her, but I sat stunned.

"She scared of everyone white," Blakely's mama said, clicking her tongue. "She ain't said two words since Blakely brought her home. Almost died. Then she have that baby. Refused to leave. She afraid of the world."

"What is she doing here?"

"This her home. She Blakely's cousin. Her and that fool grandmother of hers thought the Army would free them. Looka what happen instead. Lucky they didn't give Charlie and Blakely aways."

I sat remembering that day and suddenly wishing I had not seen the girl again, though I was glad she lived. I realized just how much Charlie had risked, trying to save her.

"Where is Charlie now?" I asked quietly.

"Well, Miss, thing is...the Missus she discovered I was a keepin' him in my cabin and she tol' me I best get that traitor along off her land or she gonna call the Confedrates to deal wit him and sell me South for sure. Massa Charlie heard her an' said he not gonna jeperdize me. He lef'. He was in a fever an' he lef', Miss. I ain't seen him since. He wasn't well. I afraid he's beyond now."

I knew she was right. We both grew quiet and sat in the heat, sipping cool water and staring at the charred house. She picked up her bowl of peas and started snapping again and humming. I stayed there on the porch with her for a long while, fanning myself, listening to the rhythm of her work and feeling close to Blakely. I pictured Charlie in that big house, *his* house, and out in this yard and on these fields. I had somehow found my way to his childhood home and

wanted to just soak in his spirit for a while; here in the quiet on the porch with the *only* woman I supposed who loved those two more than I did.

### Saying Goodbye

I left her there on the porch, hugging her tightly before I walked away. She smiled and patted my cheek, telling me how much Blakely loved me. I walked away weak with grief, but ready to move on. I turned one time to wave at her, but she had gone back to her snapping and didn't notice. I hesitated, looking long at the place before I strode away.

I rode out to the battlefield where Blakely and Charlie died. Night approached and the battlefield looked gray; the grass was a shadowed, dark green. Rusting accoutrements still littered the area. It felt too quiet, too abandoned. An eerie energy ran through me, and I stayed on the horse, guiding him slowly across the ground, through the trees. In a wide clearing, I found the Confederate works. I stood in them, atop the horse, and looked across to where I think Blakely had fallen. I saw it all—him rushing forward, carrying the flag. I saw myself screaming at him to get down, dragging him to the ground. I saw myself bawling on my knees next to his dead body, senseless. *And I saw Charlie*, pulling me back from the abyss and taking his wound.

I nudged the horse forward, toward the trees, looking for the spot where I had left Charlie. I found it easily—it was much too clear in my mind not to know where it was. I dismounted and bent into the spot, resting on my knees and running my fingers through the grass. I took the gold locket out of my skirt pocket and dug a hole in the ground. I kissed the locket one time and buried it there, where Charlie was. I smiled and said, “She was a fool not to want you, but I know what it means to you.”



I stood up and brushed dirt off the front of my dress. I looked above where I stood at the tall tree tops, swaying gently in the breeze. "It's a beautiful place," I whispered. I placed my palm on one of the trees, it felt rough and cool. I stood for a moment, breathing deeply and feeling myself letting go.

"Well, I think you ought to know that I love you, Charlie," I whispered into the dusk and walked away.

I rode to Richmond and caught a train north. No one who saw me now would ever catch a glimpse of Bet the soldier. He was at least as dead as Charlie and Blakely. The experience of being a Union soldier changed me forever, though. There were things I'd seen that I could never share at tea with a group of women. What a sight it would be if I did tell the faint-at-heart about these things. I imagined all the smelling salts coming out to revive the offended. I thought of Anna and smiled brightly. No one but another fighting man, *or Anna*, would understand.

I boarded another train in St. Louis to head across Missouri, at last knowing I was leaving the war behind me, in the physical sense anyway. Virginia would become a distant land and eventually, I prayed, a distant memory. Perhaps the loss of Charlie would soften as the years passed. I carried him and Blakely with me. I would never forget them, but maybe one day I could remember without the pain. The train was full of passengers heading west – I imagined most of these people had need for a geographical change after the war, a place without reminders.

I walked down the aisles, thoroughly enjoying the soft swish, swish of my dress – the cool air of it – and the men tipping their hats to me. I was a lady, after all. *Thank God for it*, I thought, smiling to myself. Some of the men along the way rose and offered their seat to me, but I thanked them and ensured them I would find a spot. They should keep theirs, I insisted. To a

man, they looked disappointed. I suppressed the urge to chuckle at them. Nearly toward the end of the second car, I noticed an empty seat across from a man who looked to be napping. His hat was pulled down over his eyes, covering his face completely. His left arm was missing, and his sleeve was pinned up at the shoulder. A war wound, I thought. We all carried a wound – visible or not – from those years. His legs were stretched out in front of him and he looked at ease.

“I beg your pardon sir. May I pass?” I asked, sorry to disturb him. I noticed his boots – Union issue and covered in dust. His white shirt looked crisp and clean, though. He wore light brown trousers and leather suspenders. I couldn’t see any feature of his face under his wide-brimmed hat, pulled down as it was. It was hard not to admit, though, that his appearance interested me – something vaguely familiar.

At the sound of my voice, he started a little and pulled his long legs in closer to his seat. He sat very still, as if he didn’t dare move. Just barely tipping his hat up with his right hand, he said, “Pardon me, Miss.” The familiar sound of his voice caught me quick and I hesitated where I stood. *Are you haunted now, Elizabeth?* I scolded myself. *Will you hear his voice everywhere?* Then, as he sat upright, his haversack rolled off of his lap, spilling the contents, among which were two red apples. I felt stunned. *Apples, of course.*

I laughed at my own sentimentality. The man sat unmoving and seemed disoriented by my sudden appearance at his feet, bending to scoop up the apples. As I handed them to him, his gray eyes met mine. I froze in stunned recognition, almost afraid to trust my own eyes.

“Charlie...” I barely whispered his name, afraid to say it aloud or to believe it too much.

A surprised and knowing smile crossed his lips. His gray eyes flashed and searched my face, lingering on the light wisps of hair tumbling from my bonnet. He reached out and caressed a lock between his fingers, saying with a smile in his voice, “Would you look at that?” Suddenly,

my heart, absent for so long, returned from a field in Virginia to its place inside of me. I could breathe, deep and long. I reached out, and lightly touched his empty sleeve. I softly whispered, “You made it. Do you know that it’s me? It’s me: Bet.” He chuckled lightly, moved his hand to affectionately brush my cheek and said, “Well, my God. It is you, and, I hope you don’t mind me saying so, but you look a sight better than the last time I saw you.” I laughed in utter relief and fell into him.