Chapter 1

The View from the Window

At the first light of dawn, flies began gathering around Inmans eyes and the long wound in his neck. T heir touch woke him immediately. He brushed them away and looked across to the big window that faced his bed. During the day, he could see to the red road and the low brick wall. And beyond them to the fields and woods that stretched away to the west. But it was too early still for such a view, and only a ray light showed. Inman rose and dressed and sat in a straight-backed chair, putting the shadowy room of beds and broken men behind him. Once again he looked through the window. It was as tall as a door, and he had imagined many times that it would open onto some other place and let him walk through and be there. During his first weeks in the hospital, when he had hardly been able to move his head, he had at least been able to watch out the window and picture the old green places he rem embered from home. Childhood places. T he corner o f a field w here long grasses grew. T he branch o f a tree on w hich he had often sat, w atching his father drive cows hom e in the evening. By now he had stared at the w indow all through a late sum m er so h o t and wet that tiny black mushrooms grew overnight from the pages o f his book. Inm an suspected that the gray w indow had finally said all it had to say. This m orning, though, it surprised him, because it brought him a lost m em ory o f sitting in school beside a similar tall window, looking out over fields and low green hills to the great height o f C old M ountain. It was September. T he teacher was a round little m an, hairless and pink-faced. H e talked through the m orning about history, teaching the older students about grand wars fought in ancient England. After ignoring him for a time, the young Inm an had 1 taken his hat from under his desk and throw n it through the window. It flew high in the air and landed at the edge o f a field. T he teacher saw w hat Inm an had done and told him to get it and to com e back and be beaten. Inm an never knew w hy he did what he did, but he stepped out the door, put the hat on his head, and walked away. H e never returned. T he m em ory passed as the day grew lighter. Inm an thought, as he often did, o f how he had received his w ound during fighting outside Petersburg, in the state o f Virginia. W hen his tw o closest friends had pulled away his clothes and looked at his neck, they had said a sad goodbye. “W e’ll m eet again in a better world,” they said. T he doctors at the local hospital had also expected him to die. After tw o days they had sent him on to a hospital in N o rth Carolina, his ow n state. There, the doctors looked at him and said that there was not m uch they could do. H e m ight live or he m ight not. B ut slowly, the w ound had started to heal. Inm an thought o f the battles he had fought in, in this terrible civil war— M alvern Hill, Sharpsburg, Petersburg. Fredericksburg was another battle he w ould never forget. H e thought back to how the fog had lifted that m orning to show a great arm y m arching uphill toward a stone wall. Inm an had joined the m en w ho were already behind the wall.

They were w ell-protected there, as you could stand up comfortably and still be in the shelter o f the wall, while the Federals* had to com e uphill across open ground. It was a cold day, and the m ud o f the road was nearly frozen. T he m en let the Federals com e very near before shooting them down. From behind the wall, Inm an could hear the sound o f bullets hitting m eat. Thousands o f Federals m arched toward the wall all through the day, climbing the hill to be shot down. Inm an started hating them for their stupid desire to die. Late in the afternoon, the Federals had stopped attacking and *Federals (“Feds”): soldiers from the northern states 2 the shooting slowly stopped. Thousands o f m en lay dead and dying on the hillside below the wall. T he m en on Inm an’s side w ho had no boots had climbed over the wall to pull the boots off the dead. T hat night Inman, too, w ent out onto the battlefield. T he Federals lay on the ground in bloody piles, body parts everywhere. Inm an’s only thought, looking on the enemy, was, “Go hom e.” H e saw a m an killing a group o f badly w ounded Federals by striking them on the head w ith a ham m er. T he m an did it w ithout anger, just m oving from one to another, whistling softly. Now, in the hospital, Inm an often dream ed that the bloody pieces— arms, heads, legs— slowly came together and form ed bodies whose parts did not match. They waved bloody arms, speaking the names o f their w om en or singing lines o f a song again and again. O ne figure, whose wounds were so terrible that he looked m ore like a piece o f m eat than a m an, tried to rise but could not. H e lay still but turned his head to stare at Inm an w ith dead eyes, and spoke Inm an’s nam e in a low voice. Every m orning after that dream, Inm an woke in the blackest o f moods. Some days later, Inm an walked from the hospital into town. His neck hu rt very badly but his legs felt strong, and that w orried him. As soon as he was strong enough to fight, they w ould send him back to Virginia. H e decided that he must be careful not to look too fit in front o f a doctor. M oney had com e from hom e and he had also received his pay from the army, so he walked through the streets and bought various things that he needed— a black w oolen suit that fitted him perfectly, a black hat, strong boots, two knives, a little pot and cup, bullets for his pistol. Tired, he stopped at a coffee house and slowly drank a cup o f som ething that was supposed to be coffee. H e sat w ith his back straight, looking stiff and uncom fortable in his black suit, w ith the w hite bandage on his neck. 3 Inm an picked up the newspaper he had bought, hoping to find som ething to interest him . O n the third page he found a notice from the state governm ent stating that deserters w ould be hunted dow n by an organization called the H om e Guard. In another part o f the paper he read that the Cherokee Indians* had been fighting the Federals. Inm an put the paper dow n and w ondered if his C herokee friend, Swimmer, was am ong the m en w ho were fighting. H e had m et Sw im m er the sum m er they were both sixteen. Inm an had been given the jo b o f looking after some cows on Balsam M ountain. H e had jo in ed a group o f m en cam ping there, and after a few days a band o f C herokee Indians had cam ped a short distance away. T he Indians spent a lot o f tim e playing a fast and dangerous ball

game, and Swim m er had com e over and invited the w hite m en to play. T he tw o groups had cam ped side by side for two weeks, the younger m en playing the ball game m ost o f the day. They spent the night drinking and telling stories by the fireside, eating great piles o f freshly caught fish. T here in the highlands, the w eather was almost always clear, and the view stretched across rows o f blue mountains. O nce, Swim m er had looked out over the m ountains and said he believed Cold M ountain to be the chief m ountain o f the world. Inm an asked how he knew that to be true, and Swim m er had simply replied, “D o you see a bigger one?” In the m ornings, w hen fog lay low in the valleys, Inm an used to walk dow n to a cove to fish w ith Swim m er for an ho ur or two. There, Sw im m er talked in a low voice, telling stories o f animals and how they became as they are. H e told o f ways to cause sickness or death, how to protect a traveler on the road at night, and how to make the road seem short. Swim m er saw m an’s spirit as a weak thing, constantly under attack, always threatening to die inside you. * Cherokee Indians: a N orth American native people 4 After many days, the w eather turned w et and the two camps separated. T hinking o f Swim m er now, Inm an hoped that his friend was not out fighting Federals but living in a hut by a rushing stream. H e raised his coffee cup to his lips and found it cold and nearly empty. Inm an guessed that Swim m er was right to say that a m an’s spirit could die while his body continued living. Inm an felt that his spirit had been burned out o f him , but he was still walking. H e felt as dead as a tree that had been hit by lightning. As Inm an sat thinking o f his loss, one o f Sw im m er’s stories rushed into his memory. Swim m er claimed that above the blue sky there was a forest w here a heavenly race lived. M en could not go there to stay and live, but in that high land a dead spirit could be reborn. Swim m er said that the tops o f the highest m ountains reached into this healing place. Now, as he sat in the coffee house, C old M ountain came to Inm an s m ind as a place w here his spirit m ight be healed. H e could not bear the idea that this w orld was all that there was. So he held to the idea o f another world, a better world, and he thought that C old M ountain was probably a good place for it. Inm an took off his new coat and started w orking on a letter. It was long, and as the afternoon passed he drank several m ore cups o f coffee. This was part o f w hat he wrote: I am coming home and I do not know how things are between us. Do you remember that night before Christmas four years ago when you told me that you would like to sit there forever and rest your head on my shoulder? N o w I am sure that if you knew what I have seen and done, it would make you fear to do the same again. Inm an stood up and folded the letter. H e p u t his hand up to the w ound in his neck. T he doctors claimed he was healing quickly, but it still hu rt to talk and to eat, and sometimes to breathe. But on the walk dow n the street to mail the letter and then back out to the hospital, his legs felt surprisingly strong and willing. 5 After supper, Inm an checked the knapsack under his bed. There was a blanket already in the bag and to these he added the cup and little pot and the knives. T he knapsack had for some tim e been filled w ith hardtack, salt pork, a little

dried beef, and some cornm eal. H e got in bed and pulled up the covers. Tired from his day o f walking about town, Inm an read only for a short tim e before falling asleep. H e woke som etim e deep in the night. T he room was black and the only sounds were o f m en breathing and m oving about in their beds. H e rose and dressed in his new clothes. T hen he put on his knapsack and w ent to the tall open w indow and looked out. Fog m oved low on the ground, though the sky was clear. H e stepped out o f the window.