

I preferred to be far away from the battle of Antietam. But it didn't work out that way. When we saw that the fight was coming, the plan was to get the women out first, on the wagon. With the armies marching in, it was getting harder to get carts and things down the road. Uncle John and I were going to follow along, as soon as he did one last thing. He wasn't our kin, but seemed like it. That's how he got the name. He decided that with just the two of us, we wouldn't have to worry about backed-up roads.

John wasn't tall and he had a long skinny face with dark circles under his pale eyes. He had light hair and he didn't shave much but he never had a full beard. I always felt better with John around. There was something about him. Before we left, he buried something in the woods. I tried to sneak around to get a peek. I was pretty curious. But he got up quickly and said, "Let's get going."

By now there were so many Rebel soldiers around that it seemed hard to believe that anybody was left down South. Some of the soldier's grey clothes were all torn up and many were shoeless, but they were in a good mood. We walked around, trying to pick our way through the lot of them, which wasn't easy. I was bored and I started kind of dodging in between John and a horse, almost like a game.

I was quick and I liked to show people that fact when I was young. Most of the soldiers smiled at me, but a few didn't care for it. As I ran along, the sun beat down on my face and I felt like things might be okay after all. Everybody had been worried because of the men marching in and I remember people being upset and quick to scold you for hardly anything at all.

Sharpsburg, Maryland was a small town. The land was full of little hills that rolled up and down among wide fields. Everything seemed so soft and peaceful. There were farms and perfect places to run and play and woods to hide in. It was everything I wanted and a great place to grow up.

The Rebels named the battle "Sharpsburg," Yankees called the battle "Antietam," after the name of the creek that ran along close to town. I never understood why one side called it one thing and another gave it a different name. Maybe it's just stubbornness and a sign of how torn-up things were. Or maybe it's just a way of owning your side of the story and hanging on to it whether you win or lose; maybe especially if you lose. I don't guess it matters what you

call something. I didn't know why people talked about the war when I was growing up. Now I wonder if maybe the only reason people talked about it was because that's all they could do. The war changed everything and people wanted to go back and change what happened but they couldn't and the truth is all they could do was to talk about it. Maybe it helped them feel like they owned it, even if they couldn't change it.

Anyway, I kept darting along and eventually John hollered for me to quit and I started walking right beside him, so I saw pretty clearly what happened next. We were walking beside some soldiers on horses and a horse got spooked. It reared, and then another one started hopping around a little. One of the soldiers cursed at it and kicked it, which I guess was the wrong thing to do because it made things worse. Before anyone knew what was happening, I saw a horse's leg fly up and kick twice. One blow glanced against the side of John's head and he grabbed his temple and reeled a little, then he was hit square on the side. He yelled some words after he hit the ground that I hadn't heard too often. Then he started to raise himself up, yelled another word that I knew pretty well, and he laid back on the dusty Hagerstown turnpike. The soldiers managed to stop the horses from walking on him and they grabbed his arms and legs and took him off, as he swore the whole time, towards a field out of the way while I followed. They sent off for a doctor a few minutes later, and John didn't argue too much with them. They gave him a couple of shots of brandy and it seemed to agree with him, but I think alcohol pretty much always agreed with John. As he lay on the soft grass in the shade of a tree I sat down beside him. He told me it would all be okay and he would "get us out of here, soon. I just need to rest a minute." I wasn't so sure about that. As we waited for a doctor, I felt afraid again, to tell the truth. I chewed on a piece of grass nervously.

Before long a doctor came up to look at John. Dr. McGuire was the fellow's name and he was Stonewall Jackson's personal physician. It turned out that John had a broken rib or two, although his head wasn't too bad. The doctor apologized for the injury, as if he had caused it himself. He said, while he was looking at the injuries, "We are here only to help maintain our independence. There is no intent to plunder or to injure civilians." I wasn't so sure about the plunder part of the statement. After the battle was over the townspeople called the armies "two-legged locusts" because of all the food and feed and supplies they consumed; although

they talked more of the Federals since they had stayed long after the end of the fighting. It took a long time for the town to recover, and one man who filed a claim with the government made the mistake of telling how the Rebels had burned down his house. He was told to file his grievance with Jefferson Davis in Richmond, the Rebel capital. Needless to say, the man never got his money. John looked sleepy and the doctor said he would send somebody along to wrap John up because, "I have men I must attend to." The doctor paused for a moment and added, "I think you had better put some distance between you and this town if you can. It's going to be a hot place tomorrow, a very hot field indeed." With that, he turned and quickly mounted a dark horse and the animal seemed to know when and where to go even without the reins or a spur, because they were quickly through the obstacles of encampment and soon vanished from sight. John decided he was going to follow the doctor's advice, and after someone helped him up and he staggered about, holding first his side, and then his head- as if he didn't know which to pay the most attention to- we started down the road. I can't say that we got all that far. We stopped alongside a white Dunker church on the edge of some woods, and John apologized to me and said he had to "sit down a spell." He walked over to the edge of the woods and leaned up against a tree. In just a few minutes he had fallen asleep and no matter how much I nudged him or how much noise I made, he wouldn't stay awake but for a minute. He always said the same thing, "Just a minute. We'll leave in just a minute," before he would nod off again. I didn't really know what to do, so I sat down beside him and before long I nodded off too, though I woke up often because of all the soldiers. After a while I quit trying to sleep and I tried to decide whether I should keep going by myself or not. I was afraid, but more than anything I just couldn't leave John. I decided I was staying with him, no matter what. What was left of the day was just a lot of waiting and a lot of racket from the soldiers who, it turned out, were starting to camp all around us. Some tried to wake John but gave up. They had plenty to do themselves, setting up camp and all. After a while John finally managed to stay awake. He tried to get up a few times, but I guess laying there had stove him up even worse. I knew he couldn't walk, even when he tried to. He gave up and sat down again, still saying that we would leave soon. He seemed addled, like he really believed what he was saying about walking out of there.

He woke up again just after dusk.

The sun had fallen, but the sky seemed yet to realize it. It was somehow still bright, like it was lit up from behind. The grass was wet as rain had drizzled on and off. Before long, John thought he might be able to walk, but some of the soldiers advised against it. They said that there was a good chance of getting shot by pickets, or that it was possible for a small fight to start tonight. John seemed to agree with them, and we settled in beside some men who were laid out on their gum blankets, talking. No one had lit fires, I heard someone fussing about it. He said that, " Even if it gives away exactly where we are, we would be warm, and I have a feeling they've purdy well got a bead on us by now anyhow."

I heard the low crack of picket fire piercing the air. It made me nervous. A man on the ground swore under his breath, whether it was at gunplay or the men talking, he did not say. He simply rolled over and sighed.

John started talking with a couple of men. The tallest was very thin and had a grizzled beard of the French style, with no hair on either side of his cheeks. His name was Quincy and the man next to him, who was squat, full bearded and barrel-chested was called Sam.

After John had traded them some tobacco for whiskey, he asked them about Stonewall Jackson. By then he was a legend and a curiosity, both north and south. The two men smiled and began to speak almost at once, and certainly of one accord, "Oh my God, lay me down!"

Quincy shook the canteen at John for him to take a drink and said, "Compliments of the U.S. Army. Ole Jack may have busted up the barrels at Harper's Ferry, but I was more nimble than most....You know how the fellow is with his religion an' all." Then Quincy slouched a bit and pulled the brim of his hat down almost over his eyes. He scowled, and in a voice I reckon he intended to sound like Jackson, he said "God has once again blessed us. Indeed sir, He has won our battles for us. We are just an instrument of His divine will, poor vessels though we are."

He snickered a little and then his voice went back to normal and he lifted his hat and straightened back up. "I'm not so sure myself," he chuckled, "If God has won all our fights.... well sir, it seems to me that I would have seen Him promoted by now. And it kindly seems like we'd hear more about him than J.E.B. Stuart." They all laughed and Quincy took the tobacco bag from John again and started rolling cigarettes. "Besides, I reckon God thinks we're damned

fools just killing each other," he said. Before licking a cigarette he looked towards us and said, "There's a story with 'Oh my God, lay me down.'" He struck a match and held it over Sam's pipe. It lit up Sam's face and I realized he didn't seem as glad to talk or be with us as Quincy. As Sam puffed and Quincy shook the match out, he continued, "It's a good story. And true as well."

He squatted down. "Back in Harper's Ferry, after we had the town to ourselves, a few of us were standing near the train tracks." He took a long drag to keep the ember going and blew out the smoke. "Well, you know how people are.... They ain't seen Ole Jack....They always want to see him. I reckon he gets almost as much writ about him in the northern papers as down home. And if you ain't laid eyes on him before, it's sort of a shock."

Sam chuckled a little and seemed to soften as he smoked. Quincy went on, "The thing is, people sometimes don't believe it's him. They have this idea of how he's going to look. Well, some fellow, a politician or something, he was all busted up but he heard Ole Jack was around. And that fellow kept pestering everyone wanting to see Jackson. He 'must see Jackson.' I reckon he had read about him and figured this was his only chance to see the man himself." Swallowing hard, Quincy began to speak again. "So eventually everyone got tired of hearing the man and when they saw Jackson riding along, they picked the man up on a stretcher so he could see. "

Sam bent down and snorted a little, almost laughing as he pulled out his knife and started to split a blade of grass from the handful he pulled from the ground. Quincy coughed and scratched his head, then said, "Well when that fellow got a good look at him, I reckon he was shocked. Real world ain't like the papers, is it?"

At that, John gulped his drink down, grimacing slightly and said, "No. I read the Rebels would give up after a battle or two and that was wrong....." He paused, his eyes getting kind of big, and Quincy laughed hard. Sam didn't laugh but he seemed not to mind too much. "Sorry," John said, "Remember, I got kicked in the head and.... You know...."

"Well," Quincy grinned, and I noticed his eyes smiling too, "I guess it was just too much for the fellow and he hollered, 'Oh my God, lay me down...'" They all started to laugh and someone nearby complained for everyone to be quiet but no one could.

After things quieted down, they kept talking and drinking. Quincy said, "Remember what you read about us?" John nodded and Quincy continued, "We read the same thing about the Yankees. "Hell, I remember my friends thinking that they had better hurry and volunteer before the war ended and they would miss out on all the adventure....." Quincy suddenly looked sad, and his eyes weren't grinning anymore. "Then I reckon they saw a shell tear through a man. It ain't adventure after that."

Then Quincy looked around and took another swig and rubbed the hair on my head. "I like you," he said. "You're good at listening.....Let me tell you boys another story....."

Later, Quincy gave me some bacon to eat before John decided that we had to try and get going. The sharp edges of the trees against the sky were gone now in the dark. I looked at the Dunker Church as we walked by it. It was mute and white and the mullioned windows looked like sad, glazed eyes in a plain face; as if it didn't really want to watch the things going on around it but couldn't turn away. With what happened the next day, it kind of makes sense now.

Although Quincy advised against us trying to get between the lines, he wished us well and we started walking again. Maybe the alcohol had helped John, because we did pretty well for a while. But we stopped by the Poffenberger farm, after a Union picket had nearly shot us. It started to rain a little bit. We lay down among the Union soldiers and before I knew it, I was asleep.

I awoke to an awful racket in the morning. It didn't take long for me to crawl under the house and make myself as small as I could. John didn't try and get me out. He stood and watched, peering through the fog like he was frozen, as all hell broke loose. I can't say I know anything about the fight, except it was as loud as a bunch of thunderstorms put together and I was scared as I've ever been.

Eventually the sounds grew more distant. When I came out from under the porch I saw John helping a woman named Clara Barton. They were preparing to help the wounded. Clara said, "Oh, there's your little friend now. He decided to come out." She was built sturdy and her face was plain and kind with high, full cheekbones and dark hair that she tied up.

"You come here little one," she said. As John smiled at me, I walked up to her and rubbed her

legs. "She bent down and scratched under my neck and I purred. "You're a good little kitty."
John said, "His name is Shady, the kids named him 'Sadie' before I told them he wasn't a girl.
Had to find something that rhymed so he would come when called."
Clara laughed and rubbed my head before she went back to work and I crawled back under the
porch again and curled up to try and sleep.