

*Ghosts, shadows on the moon, dark red liquid, lifeless limbs, soulless bodies, these are not the kind of things that haunt a man after midnight. No, when I close my heavy eyes at night the only thing that remains to keep me from sleep is a long grassy field. Somewhere in the distance there is the whiney of a horse and among the tall grasses, on the white breath of every flower, lies the hard eyes of a dead man. Each one a comrade, each one a mirror reflection of me, only frozen, like still water on a moon lit lake.*

Along came evening like a long black cat, a-stretching by the by a picket fence, when the boys came a-hopping along onto the porch. They were a-yelping and a-clamoring, filled with the fever of the full moon. Now I knew Meta was mostly busy with the baby and I knowed there'd be no stopping the boys from their wildness tonight, the moon being high already and the summer airs a-calling.

"Pap, Pap," the youngest was shouting, a-grabbing onto my trousers, "Pap tell us one of your ad-vent-t-t-ures!"

"What's you say, Edie?" I asked real sweet-like, "What'ch you all a-clamoring about for?"

"Oh Pap," James said, seating himself on the ground by my left, "You know right well. Tell us a story about the war!"

"Ah," I sighed, taking little Edwin upon my knee, "That old thing again? Hain't I told you most of it?"

"Pap!" Edwin whined, holding his wee fists to my chest.

"Oh all right," I sighed, giving in. There are a lot of things you don't talk about when you come home from war; a lot of things you intend to hide in yourself. Most things you must keep buried deep to keep yourself from becoming a broken thing. Up until now I had only told the boys of triumph- about how I was in Ashby's Calvary. How we'd all been honorable and proud to die. "Where were we?"

"A day or two 'for the battle of Gettysburg,'" Harry reminded me, leaning against a support on the porch.

"Yes'm," I sighed, looking out into the long meadow before me, watching the fire beetles zoom, "How could I forget?" I paused a long while before starting again, lost in the recollections of those days. "Well, as you know, it was not long before that we had fought with General Stonewall Jackson in the Shenandoah country. That was when we began making our ways North. We were still going by Ashby's Cavalry, though he had died last year. However, as commanding officer, I didn't see no harm in the name sake and the boys were mighty proud of it."

"You always say that Pa," Harry said, smirking.

"Well, yes'n. But it's important to remember- Ashby was a good and brave man; even Stonewall said so. Anyhow, as I was saying, we, the- 7<sup>th</sup>- "

"Calvary of the Army of Northern Virginia, under General J.E.B Stuart-" the boys interrupted.

"If you know that story so well, why don't you tell it yourselves?" They were silent. "Anyhow, it was under Stuart that we began our campaign into Pennsylvania..."

The boys were excited about going up into Yankee country. It was as if we could taste the sweet wine of victory if only we whipped those Yankees, just once, in their own country. It was all going fine when General Lee sent orders to Stuart to go around the Yankee army. So we did, and we didn't have no problems either. Except for maybe a scuffle or two here and there. Nothing too serious. However, we didn't arrive into Gettysburg until July the 2<sup>nd</sup>, and the rest of army had been fighting a day hence.

So we really didn't get to our fighting until the third day into the battle. Now General Lee, who as you well know, was the head of the Army of Northern Virginia, sent us with General Stuart and three other brigades to try and swing the Yankee's right off the hill. However, when we was just out of Gettysburg, a-fixing to come up behind the union, we ran

into Yankee Calvary. Virginia's seventh never got to see Lee's great failure, which I can tell you, I am mighty thankful for, but we did fight in neigh, the biggest cavalry battle of the whole war right along side it."

"Pap, what are you going on about? 'Lee's great failure'?" Edwin asked, looking up at me with wide, sad eyes.

"He mean's Pickett's charge, hain't you ever heard about that?" James said to his brother.

"Pap, what was Pickett's charge?" the little one asked.

"Never you mind boy, let me tell you about the battle. Now it was an hour 'for noon when we came onto Chess Ridge. The green just stretched and stretched for as long as my eye could see. Up a bit was the Union line. They were narrowly seated on some fences and I could see we widely out numbered them. I knew though, that meant nothing, because they had the higher ground and a few more cannons than we did. However, being a true Virginian, I had no doubt in my mind that we would beat them. Together, we Virginians were invincible and could overcome all odds. At least, that's what we told ourselves.

The air that afternoon was hot and stretched out over your skin like a wet cloth. I remember how the boy's wiped their brows in the sun and how some of them tentatively polished their guns, waiting, none of them yellow, but all of them sensing the gravity of things. The horses were tense; they knew that a battle was a-coming. A few of them neighed, raising their legs up or shaking their manes. There was no wind in that meadow, so the smell of our sweat lingered around us, it didn't settle out. Lee had put out four guns, each gun facing the points of a compass. Our line was settled in an L. We were the short tail, sweeping out to the left. All men were stiff and ready, our eyes like a hawk's on the General.

What came next was artillery fire, so we bent down low, all of us and the animals. I knew that at any moment, the Yankee artillery could crush me or take out any number of my men and horses. There was no order to charge or even move, only to keep the fire going, and to

keep low and a-waiting. I was afraid. All of us were. Left and right of me, my comrades were already dropping, for the Yankee fire was better than us and our guns, only two of which were facing a good direction were hitting the Union line. But, we kept ourselves low and kept the fire a-coming. The field was getting hard to see, for the weather was hot and humid, so the smoke clouds hung low and didn't settle. The fog made it hard for the artillery boys to see the Yankees, so there was no telling how much damage we'd done. This ruckus seemed to last on forever. Then, along about one, more Yankees arrived, this time with rifles. Finally, Stuart gave the order to charge the Union directly.

The very moment before the General gave the order, the whole company, including the animals held their breath. The silence was thundering, time did not move proper, it flowed little by little like molasses from a jar. I remember Stuart's cool face and how dignified he looked atop his horse, Virginia, who was still underneath him. Then, it that one swift movement, that one yelp, the whole company bounded ahead. We came a-running on horseback, our pistols loaded. I hung low along side old Storm as we charged into the field. The field let up to a fence and a farm, where we commenced the battling. Coming right up to the Yankees, who were also on horse back and also had guns. When the whole company came a-charging through, we scattered the union line.

Then, some ways up the hill I here this call, 'Come on, you Wolverines!' and so I look up. Suddenly, a cloud of Yankee horses comes stampeding down the hill. Now, I don't know how many of them there were, I speck near five hundred. And we were so close too. Some had out their pistols, others their swords and even their carbines. Suddenly, there was great chaos. I saw my comrades, men I had come to call brother all around me fight and all around me fall. I saw someone not far in front of me take down the Yankee general's horse. There was so much chaos that I hardly knew what was upon me. My mind was blank mostly; I just kept my gun aimed and the bullets flying. When I hain't any more bullets, I was a-slashing as many as I could. I kept my eyes on the enemy, only stealing little glances at the men around me, deeply engaged in battle. Then, the Union broke the fence, and came in. I saw my brigade was retreating, so I did my best to turn old Storm around. However, Storm was too plum scared to

move back, and I realized our reinforcements were moving in anyway so I held. And boy was I glad I did, for with the help of the other brigades, we broke the Union again and they called retreat.

There were a great many casualties on our side. When I looked about me, I saw the bloodied bodies of my brothers, and the mangled corpses of their steeds. I remember my brothers' blank faces, and their hard, dead eyes. I got to thinking about how our whole effort might be for naught. I was a' feared that my Virginia, as I knew it, would be lost and my brothers' deaths would be in vain. Finally, Stuart called for another charge. We held up our swords, and in the gleaming noon sun, and came at them again. The Yanks fired their artillery on us, but we moved too swiftly to be stopped. On two sides, our men came a crashing in onto the Union. Again, I head a cry from the Yanks, 'Come on you Wolverines!', this time another voice.

I can't tell you how long we kept up that final charge. Lord, it near seemed forever. Many a good man fell from his horse and was crushed. I could feel our line collapsing as we were closed in on from the left and the right. On three places the Yankees held us, not allowing us to break their line. But we held them for a long time. Such so that when the order was given to withdraw, they did not pursue. That was our battle of Gettysburg." My voice cracked on the last words.

"Pap?" James asked, a-looking at me dead in the eye, "is that...?"

I nodded. I couldn't speak anymore. The weight of that day held my whole skull down. Harry gave me a sad look, "Come on," he said to his brothers, "Why don't we go inside and sleep a piece?"

"But I don't want to," Edwin cried, holding me close with his wee hands.

"Edie," Harry said, holding out his hand to his brother.

"It's alright," I whispered, holding my boy close, "We'll come in soon."

James and Harry went inside then. I could hear the baby cry and Meta soothe her. I could still see the fire beetles zoom across the field and I could see that the moon was still high. Little Edwin looked up at me in the moonlight, his eyes still wide and sad. His wee fist touched my face, wiping away a lone tear from my cheek.

“Pap,” he said, “don’t cry. It’s all over now.”

I looked down at him and held him closer, seeing the eyes of the dead in his own little face. I could see their eyes in the moon, and in the glittering light of the beetles. They were all ghosts now, those men I fought with. Men I had called my brothers, where were they now? Under the ground or in the wind? How was I to know. I didn’t feel them around me, like I did when they were alive. I only felt their eyes on me, making sure I was worth to live. “Is it?” I asked in a whisper. “Will it ever be?”