



INTRODUCTION

Contrary to popular opinion, the South was not unified in its support of slavery or of the mounting pressure to secede from the Union during the years leading up to the Civil War. This reluctance was especially keen in the border state of Tennessee, where there were few slave owners and a strong allegiance to the United States. Originally settled by fiercely independent pioneers, the northeastern part of the state was home to proud families who toiled to raise crops with the sweat of their own brows. And there were many who were kindly disposed to their darker brothers and sisters, some of whom were “Freedmen,” slaves who had either purchased their freedom or who had been granted freedom by their former owners. In the small mountain communities of northeastern Tennessee, such as fictional Silver Bluff, small pockets of these free black families lived and worked side by side with white families on small plots of land. Tennessee did not secede from the Union until after the war began, but thousands of Tennesseans did fight for the Confederacy. They fought because they loved their independence, their land, and their state. The father of our storyteller is such a man.

JOURNAL ENTRY ONE

Friday, April 15, 1864

Spring in Tennessee . . .

From the front porch, stretching south, our fields run for eighty rolling acres: cropland, pine brakes, stands of white oak, meadows laced with deep blue gentian, black-eyed Susan, Indian paintbrush waving in the sun.

My pa worked this farm, and his before him, long years turning good, rich earth, planting seed and watching corn and sorghum thicken in the fields. Behind the house, Ma’s kitchen garden, green quilt of twisting vines and creepers, flowers in the sun.

Just beyond, the forest hums with thrushes, a lazy buzz of insects. East, across the valley, looms Hayrick Mountain, gray ghost of stone and leafy notches.

If I close my eyes, I can see my father walking up the winding path from town, gunnysack slung over his left shoulder, black-powder musket resting on his right.

But when I open them my mother

stands before me, dark hair pulled back.
Sunlight, like a halo circling, makes her
seem to shine, angelic, sad. She sighs.

“My son, my son. What we got is what we got.
It’s you and me, your little sister, and this farm to feed us
all.”

Midday sun dances on the weathered railing,
a light breeze ripples wild grass along the road,
and she holds my head against her bosom,
rocking me and rocking me and crying.

“But Ma, I don’t know that I can do it,” I tell her.

“You can do it,” she says. “You can do it.”

And then she slips inside, the shadows
swallowing her like silence.

Hours pass. It’s late.
Dusk settles on the farm.
Inside the house, I hear my mother humming,
Little Sister saying lessons in her solemn way.
I get up from my rocking chair
and push the old door open.

My sister puts her finger to the line she’s reading,
looks up at me, smiles sadly.

“Is Mama gonna be okay, you think?” she asks.

I run my fingers through her hair.

“You study now,” I say,
pour a cup of water, and go back out to sit,
rocking as the sun sinks through the coppery sky.

I’m fourteen years old,
but ages older
than I was a year ago.

I think about last summer, going with my father
up to Gettysburg, the way he lifted his hand toward me,
then slumped into the dust and died.

The shadow of his hand, all the things he left undone,
fall on me now, and I’m scared.

A tear
forms in the corner of my eye, but
I won’t break down.
I won’t.

I drag my sleeve across my face and grit my teeth.
I’ll get the crops in.
The rest is up to God.

Next Week: Preparing the earth . . .

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