



JOURNAL ENTRY TWO

Thursday, April 28, 1864
Preparing the earth . . .

The Story So Far: *Shiloh, Chattanooga, Mossy Creek, Murfreesboro...numerous battles and skirmishes have devastated Tennessee. In their wake, death, sorrow, and anxiety have taken their toll, both on the battlefield and off. Like many thousands of boys left fatherless, our narrator must take on a grown man's responsibility quickly. His life and that of his mother and sister depend upon it.*

At the crick, along the southwest fence,
I pull up and let the harness traces slacken.
Soon we must start off again,
the black earth furrowing
in long straight rows behind us,
but for now, old Jed is tired,
withers soaked with sweat.
He bends his head to drink,
flicks flies
with rhythmic sweeps
of his bushy tail.

Across the field, lifting just above the ridge,
I see the roofline of our barn,

sagged at center, gray with age.
I can almost smell the cornbread Ma
will fry up on the stove, the good white beans,
the water, fresh from the well and cold.

I stand and lean against the rough oak bark,
listen to a bullfrog grunting in the marshy woods.
Without thinking,
I move my hands along the trunk
and trace the letters of Pa's
given name
so long engraved,
the tree itself
might well have carved it
as it grew and thickened.

I shove the brambles clear and make my own way
to the narrow ribbon rushing down from Hayrick Mountain,
the water bubbling over stones
as it runs along and picks up the tang of minerals
before it scrambles quickly through our bottomland.
I kneel and splash the water on my face.

When I am done, I click my tongue;
Jed strains against the traces.

And then the steady movement of the farm,
back and forth,
back and forth,

until the field lies open like a prayer
for corn and sorghum seed.

Drifting up from hypnotic reverie,
I see a movement
in the pine brake at the bottom of the field.

A flutter in the dark fan of trees,
then a bobbing head,
and suddenly,
John, appearing out of nowhere,
struts up and leans
against the split log rails.
He's chewing on a pale leaf of grass.

Taller by half a foot than me,
he's grown big this year
since I first set out with Pa for Gettysburg.
A wide straw hat for shade,
homespun cotton shirt
half open at the neck,
dark skin glistening with sweat,
one hand raised in greeting.

"Hey," he calls.
"Hey, yourself," I holler back.

"No use sweatin' when you could be swimmin'," says John.
I can see him grinning all the way from where I am.

I turn Jed loose and amble
to where John is whittling something
from a block of hickory.

"I've got to get this field plowed today."

He nods,
then crouches
above a turtle
edging toward the crick.

When he touches it,
its head and feet pop in.

"See how he hides," John says.

Out along the county road, riders
move like shadows in the midday sun.
The soldiers slouch in worn-out saddles.

Two of them break off and,
raising billowed dust behind,
gallop toward us.

When they come near, they tug the reins back hard.
The horses, heads so quickly lifted,
pull up short and stop, their breath like raspy bellows.

"You live here?" one of the riders asks. He looks
at me, his eyes tight slits in a sunburned face.
He's wearing the jacket of the Tennessee militia,
a beat-up Rigdon-Ansley pistol in his hand.

"Yeah," I say, "It's my farm...and my Ma's."

"Your *boy*?" he asks, nodding at John.

"He's my *friend*," I say.

The man ignores me and looks across the furrowed earth.
He scratches at a raw place on his arm,
then lets his eyes drift back to me.

"Got any food?" He spits the words.

"Nah," I say, "too early even for the kitchen garden.
Yankee riders stole our pigs. Ain't much of nothing left."

He stares off toward the house and barn,
wipes his forehead with his sleeve, then turns
his head and spits against the dusty earth.

"All right," he says. "We ain't got nothin'
if we steal from our own, but you be careful,
not everyone out here is gonna be so kind."

And then, like a lightning strike,
he swings the butt
of his Rigdon-Ansley hard
against John's head.

I stand paralyzed, stunned with disbelief,
then rush to John, who's sprawled out in the dirt,
a bright stain of blood spreading through his hair.
I pull my old bandana from my pocket,
press it hard against the wound, anger
rising in me like a raging fire.

"You be careful who you choose as friends, you hear?"
And then the rider turns his horse and gallops off.

Soon, the lot of them are tiny dots out where
the highway runs along the bright horizon.

Next Week: Planting and a prayer . . .

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