



JOURNAL ENTRY THREE

Monday, May 2, 1864

Planting and a prayer . . .

The story so far: Part outlaw and part soldier, roaming bands of irregular Confederate cavalry were a daily terror in Tennessee. Our narrator and his best friend, John, the son of a freed slave, encounter unexpected violence when John is pistol-whipped by a member of one of these bands.

Rain fell soft and gentle in the night. Now the fields wake beneath a blanket of gray mist, moon still a ghost, faint first light of day laced across the hills. I went yesterday to visit John, who's doing better by the day.

His head was wrapped in bandages.

"Just a nasty bump," he said, and I could see again the twisted face of that man in faded gray, smiling through his yellow teeth as he holstered his pistol and rode away.

There's a full day's work ahead of me but for now, Ma's got biscuits ready and we eat them, spread with wildberry jam she put up in the fall. She sits stone still, hands cupped around a mug of steaming chicory, her eyes far off, the way she gets when she's thinking about Pa.

"You'll get the seed in," she says, her eyes still somewhere else. It's not a question, but a statement borne of need.

"I'll get the seed in," I reply, my fingers already curling toward the act of placing and then covering.

"Your pa always..." she begins, then her voice just trails off.

I think about the work of living, the sweat of crops, all the things Pa would have done, but it's no use: there's nothing left for me except to get the crops in, let the weather do its best, and hope come fall the corn is tall and rich, enough to feed us all.

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My old dog Charley digs at something in the yard,
then sits back and lifts his head and howls.
I swing the barn door open and step
into the cool shade, the musty smell of hay.
Old Jed backs into his stall and snorts.
Betty shoves her nose at me to rub.

I throw hay for Jed and Betty,
then sit and put my head into my hands.
It's times like these I hear Pa's footsteps,
can smell the perfume of tobacco
in his faded denim overalls.
I know I ain't supposed to cry,
but there's so much work
and I am frightened.

Ma is quiet but I know
she wishes everything would stop,
 that he could
 ride up out of fog,
 shake the rain from his beard,
 call us all around,
 tell us stories like he used to,
 bank the fire,
 close the door,
and let the evening settle down around us like a glove.

•
Before I harness Jed, I climb into the hayloft,
lift the board that hides my treasure box,
and bring it out. Carefully, I raise the lid
and run my fingers through what's there,
until I find my grandpa's knife,

 the one I took to Gettysburg,
 that I put back when I came home,
 that cut Pa's name into a tree
 somewhere in northern Virginia,
 that also cut this lock of his brown hair
 I pull out now
 and hold
 between my fingers.

Dying on the battlefield,
he couldn't talk, but shook his head
 as if to say,
take some piece of me and keep it;
hold the memory when I am gone.

When he had breathed his last,
with one quick swipe I cut a knotted
rope of his mussed and bloody hair
and I stuck it in my pocket. And then,
before his finger stiffened,
I pulled his wedding ring
and buried it deep inside
the saddlebag to take
back home to Ma.

I watched grim soldiers
collect his body and pile it
along with others on a straining wagon,
and then move off down the rutted road
with their awful, gruesome load.

By then the rain had started, first
a mist, then steady as a summer storm.
I pulled off my hat and leaned my head,
rain soaking my hair and running
down my face until I couldn't tell
what was rain and what was tears.

“God,” I said. “You're gonna have to see me home.”

And then I turned to go.

Next Week: What God . . .

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