

THE DAMN DOG

The damn dog was barking again. Cliff opened his eyes to the dark. That damn dog. He should just shoot the bastard. Put a hollow point right between its eyes.

Of course, Sweetie Pie would object, cry, hug the corpse, and beat his legs with her small, soft fists. Nope, he couldn't do that. Not to his granddaughter.

Judy's snores got worse. Cliff rolled over and pushed her shoulder to shut her up. He saw the red numbers of the alarm clock. 2:35 Shit! He had to work in the morning! Shut-up Dog! Judy mumbled something. Damn, she had a body odor.

The barks continued. Then there was a growl. Cliff knew. He knew. Someone was breaking in.

SOMEONE WAS BREAKING IN

Cliff was ready. He knew what to do. He got out of bed, opened the drawer to the nightstand, and got out Black Beauty, already loaded. The pistol's weight in his hand felt good, calmed his nerves. He was ready. Ready to blast ass.

He went through the kitchen to get to the rear door. His plan was to go out the back, circle around the house and garage, listening carefully, approach the bastard, fire a warning shot over the loser's head just to see him piss his pants, then hold him until the police came. The warning shot would wake up Judy. She'd scream and get all panicky, but she'd at least have enough sense in that dim brain of hers to call the police.

Cliff could only hear the crunch-crunch of his feet. The dog stopped barking. Was the thief running away? He couldn't tell. The night-world was silent, moonlit, patient in its waiting. Cliff went forward. He was behind the back wall of the garage. Was the guy in the garage? What was he taking? The socket sets? His cordless drill? Did it matter? Black Beauty would scare the living shit out of him.

Cliff walked faster. The side of the garage. To the front.

THERE HE IS

Cliff stopped.

HE HAS A RIFLE

Cliff raised Black Beauty. Take careful aim. Take careful aim.

The guy looked weird. Soldier---he was dressed like a soldier. What the hell? A soldier? The man's rifle was beside his right leg, the butt of the rifle on the driveway. What kind of funny hat was he wearing? It was all crumpled up. The man-soldier stared at the garage door. Was he lost?

He wasn't wearing camou. That outfit, that uniform, looked ancient. Like Revolutionary War.

The soldier was staring at his flag. The flag Cliff had on his garage door. The Confederate Flag. It was a big one: three feet by five feet. Cliff was proud of that baby.

A UNION SOLDIER?

Cliff felt his throat muscles swallow. He was looking at a ghost of a union soldier. Standing in the moonlight, on his driveway, looking at his flag.

SHIT

WHAT THE HELL?

Cliff lowered Black Beauty. Was he dreaming this? It couldn't be real. It couldn't be. It wasn't.

The soldier was not a tall guy. The beard on his face was sorry-looking. He couldn't grow a decent beard. Cliff noticed the canteen on the hip, the dusty shoes, the frayed end of the sleeve of the blue jacket, the tears coming down the exhausted face.

The ghost-soldier was crying? Why?
Why?

The ghost-soldier moved forward. His left hand touched, seemed to touch, the fabric of the flag. His hand made the motion of trying to pull the flag off the door. He tried again and again to grip and rip the flag. But the dead man's hand was immaterial, could grip nothing real.

The dog ran from the front porch, across the driveway, crossing behind the soldier ghost, and stopped at Cliff's feet. Then it barked. Like it had done something wonderful.

The soldier turned to look at Cliff and his dog. They were twenty, maybe fifteen, feet apart. The eyes of the Union soldier examined Cliff in both a familiar and an unfamiliar way. I know of you, I've heard about you, so this is what you look like.

Cliff lowered Black Beauty to his knee.

The soldier had a long nose, a mole over his right eyebrow, thin lips. And that beard. Full in some places, empty in others. What did the soldier weigh? One hundred seventy pounds? Thin, even for someone who was what? Twenty one? Twenty two?

And that face. What was it feeling? He saw the sadness, the weary sorrow that the soldier must have carried with him for---years. And there was anger there too. The flag on the door. He was disgusted about that.

Then everything happened at once. The lost soldier advanced toward him. The anger still in his dead face. Cliff raised Black Beauty. When the dog suddenly barked Cliff fired without thinking. The blast made his ears ring and silenced everything, everything around him. Where the bullet went he did not know. The union soldier who had heard hours of cannon fire merely stared at Cliff. He slowly turned, walked down the driveway, turned left at the road, and marched into the night until he disappeared. Of course, the dog barked its commentary during the farewell march.

The front porch light came on.

"Cliff! What happened?? What happened??" Judy's words were shrieks.

Cliff did not want to explain. To hell with explaining. He walked to the front door and past a frightened Judy.

"You shoot at someone?"

Cliff threw Black Beauty on the couch.

"What did you do with the letter?" he asked.

"What letter?"

"The letter he sent me!"

"Who sent you?"

"Karl!" Damn, Judy could be stupid sometimes.

"Karl?"

Her bewildered look only made him angrier. "Yes, Karl!"

The dog continued to bark. Cliff opened the front door and yelled, "Shut-up, dog!" He closed the door. "Well?"

Judy blinked. "You mean about the genealogy thing?"

"Yes!"

Cliff waited.

"Who did you shoot at?"

"Never mind! Where's that letter?"

Judy blinked at him. "What?"

Cliff clenched his jaw muscles. “The stuff Karl sent me. It was in a big yellow envelope. What did you do with it??”

“Why on earth?”

“I want it!!”

Damn, she could be dense. If he had only thought about it he could have got into his truck and chased down that soldier. He couldn’t be that far down the road.

“I threw it in the garbage. I knew it was making you upset and all.”

“Garbage??” Cliff turned to go to the garage.

“The kitchen. The kitchen garbage.”

She meant the garbage pail under the sink.

Judy trailed behind Cliff as he flicked on the kitchen light switch, opened the cabinet door, jerked out the plastic pail, and emptied its contents on the floor. Chicken bones, wadded up paper towels, coffee filters filled with damp grounds, empty pudding cups, bread wrappers, potato peelings, and a large, yellow envelope that he immediately snatched.

He turned to the kitchen counter and carefully pulled the pages out. The typed pages that his grand nephew, Karl, the smarty-pants college kid, had prepared for him. The research Karl had done. The research about the Civil War, the battles, the units who had fought in each battle, who commanded each brigade---all the stuff Cliff had thought was just so much bullshit. And the pages of genealogical research. The people in his family. Going all the way back to England and Ireland. He turned the final page.

There was the photograph. A copy of a photograph. The original was small. Maybe two inches by three inches. And faded. Cliff held it to his nose to get a close look at all the details. To make sure. To make damn sure.

Judy stood at the kitchen table, watched, and said nothing. She knew when to keep quiet.

“Holy Mother of Christ.”

It was all there. The same beard, the same nose, the mole over the right eyebrow. The lips. It was the same guy. It was him! Him!

Karl.

“What’s wrong?”

Karl. Karl was right.

“Cliff. What’s wrong?”

He couldn’t look at her. And he couldn’t explain. What words could do it? He had been so certain, so absolutely certain, that they had fought on the correct side. He had known it to be true. Now this. This.

THIS.

He held the photograph at arm’s length to show her.

“He was here.”

Judy blinked. She waited. “Cliff, are you all right?”

“He was here.”

“Maybe you were having a bad dream.”

“He was here!! I SAW HIM!”

Cliff put the photograph on the countertop and touched the typed pages. He moved the top one aside, then the next one, then the next one. There it was. The letter. He bent down to read.

Beloved Lila,

This is my favorite time of the day, having feasted on the evening rations (ha, some feast), sitting by the campfire, listening to Corporal Hubler play one of his mournful tunes on his mouth harp, and me, with pen in hand, writing to my beloved wife. I have no news to report. The fight continues on. Will it ever end? The rebels continue to taunt us with their back-and-forth excursions, unwilling as is their wont to engage us in a full frontal assault. So we sit and wait. Captain Daughtery says fear not, boys. The big battle shall commence one day and it will be a fierce one. Have patience and courage. He is a good man and much experienced. I've been told he has seen much carnage and has seen many of his men perish on the field of battle. Enough of these dark and gloomy thoughts! My dear, I miss you daily and think upon the hour of your beautiful face. Your kind eyes. Your wonderful smile. And those lips! Yes, I must admit I miss kissing them the most! Upon my return I shall take you in my arms and bestow upon you all of my affection. It will most likely take up the greater part of a day and night! Well, I must put my pen aside. I am on guard duty. Never a task so dull yet tinged by danger. Tell my son I love him dearly and will cover his head with my kisses when I return home. I sorely miss holding him on my knee. My God bestow upon us His Grace, Wisdom, and Love. Your loving husband, Charles.

Cliff turned and saw the garbage on the floor. The last thing he needed to look at. "What's wrong?"

"Go to bed." Cliff picked up the photograph, left the kitchen, went through the front room, and out the front door. He looked toward the garage, at the spot where the ghost soldier had stood.

Cliff sat on the rocker and looked again at the photograph. Karl's report stated that Charles had died in battle October 8, 1862. Perryville. About twenty miles down the road. That's where he was headed. Back to battle. To do what? Look for a buddy? To lie down on the ground and to say to hell with it? To hell with all the fighting. To hell with everything.

His wife was twenty one when died; his son, four. How did she take it? Must have been hard for her.

Cliff recalled how mad he got at Karl. Those discussions that only made him both righteous and furious. Him shouting. Karl sort-of smiling. Karl never enlisted, like he did. Right out of high school. That would have changed his opinion on things.

Maybe. Maybe not.

He didn't like Karl's girlfriend. From Puerto Rico. Good-looking, but my God, she could talk a mile a minute. Women should speak slow.

The sorrow on that soldier's face. Charles. It was him. One of his ancestors. His people. On his father's side.

He closed his eyes. The front door opened. "Cliff."

"Go to bed."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

Everything was wrong. Everything. EVERYTHING.

He knew what the battles were like. He had read the stuff when he had visited Gettysburg. The heat, the noise, the exhaustion, the screams of the dying, the agony of dying slow, begging for a taste of water.

"Cliff."

"Judy, please."

Cliff stood. He was going to do it.

It had been up there too long anyway. He put the photograph on the arm of the rocker.

Judy watched her husband march to the garage, grab a corner of the flag, and tug. Six pan-head screws held it to the sections of the door. He had to pull hard. The flag resisted. Finally he got it off. He started to wad it up, changed his mind, and let the cloth fall to the driveway. The dog trotted over and sniffed it.

It had been up there too long anyway.

Cliff looked at the road. The road where the soldier had gone away.

It had been up there too long anyway.
