

BLAKELY'S LAST BATTLE

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We awoke, as usual, before first light. Camp stirred to a cacophony of coughing, always the harsh cough of the men—the rooster call of an encampment. Low voices speculated the day's coming work. A fight brewed. We were seasoned and could smell it in the air—the acrid burn of determined fear. I stretched where I lay in the tent and turned toward Charlie. He had already crawled out. I gathered my thoughts and steeled them against the day. Out in the predawn darkness, I found Charlie stoking the fire, preparing to fry his ration of salt pork.

"Mornin' Bet." He smiled weakly, his usual good humor absent. The blue of his Union uniform had turned yellow-gray with summer's dust.

"Hello Charlie," I chimed back, trying to seem brighter than I felt. "Heard anything?"

"Seems the Rebs have positioned themselves behind some works a couple short miles yonder, and we have to move 'em out. Soon." Charlie pulled a little bruised red apple from his pocket, wiped it on his shirt sleeve and held it out to me.

"Where on earth did you get that?" I asked.

"There's an orchard not far from here. Pretty picked over. I figured they wouldn't miss this one." He smiled. "Take it."

I reached for the apple and the memory of the first time we met rushed in on me like a wave. Back on that bright day up in Ohio, Charlie had purchased a shiny, ripe red apple at the grocer's and gave it to me before recruitment. And here he was offering me this pale little shadow of what was. I hesitated and Charlie pushed the apple toward me. I grasped it reverently, not knowing if I wanted to eat it or save it as a memento.

"You gonna eat that or what?" Charlie asked with a wink, recalling our first meeting. I bit into it with sorrow. I wished I had saved it instead.

“Listen, Bet,” Charlie said, “I’m wanting to tell you something, just in case...”

“Don’t,” I snapped. “Don’t do that Charlie. It’s bad luck.”

He looked at me for a moment and I could see the words poised on his lips.

I whispered, “I know, Charlie. You don’t have to say it. *Don’t say it.*”

He wanted to tell me that he knew my secret. I could sense that he had known all along and had been helping me guard it. I wondered if he knew that first day, on the steps of the grocer’s. I looked down at the apple and remembered. I remembered he had seemed amused. At me? Had he figured me for a girl right off?

A moment of comfortable silence passed before Charlie stood up and stretched his tall frame. He smiled down at me and chuckled, “Well, all right then, Bet.” He walked off toward the wood line and I watched him go. I wished, for that one moment, I could have washed and softened my skin, dabbed on some lavender water, and followed him into the woods. I longed to be close to him as a woman is to the man she loves. I laughed cynically at the thought of what I actually had done with Charlie throughout the years of war. What could he think of me? What kind of girl goes around killing Confederates?

As I sat absently munching on the apple, Blakely trotted up to the campfire and greeted me in a harried tone.

“Hello Bet,” he stammered, breathing hard and looking frightened. Sweat pooled at the base of his throat, above his collar bone. He crouched down next to me and whispered, “I went and saw my mama last night. Just got back.” He pulled a dirty kerchief from his pocket, shook it out, and wiped sweat from his forehead.

“You did?” Blakely’s audacity always amazed me. His mama was a slave on a plantation not far from the camp, but Blakely’s skin was a pale olive color, allowing him to pass for white.

“Yes, but...” He looked around to be sure no one listened. “I wasn’t alone. Goddamned if Hanson didn’t follow me.”

“Jesus, Blakely!” I cried. Hanson was the meanest, most low-down soldier among us, always looking for a victim, someone to fleece in some way, as long as it was easy.

“Shhh!”

“Does he know?” I whispered, truly afraid for my friend.

“He knows and he is not far behind me. Sneaky son of a bitch.”

"You should have killed him in the woods," I spat. "Why didn't you kill him?"

"Kill who?" Charlie asked and we both jumped. He looked hard at us.

We didn't get a chance to answer. Hanson came running into camp, shouting to groups of soldiers, who had gathered around to hear. He seemed drunk on the power of his new-found knowledge.

"Blakely's a dirty nigger! Saw it myself!" Hanson shouted. "He was a huggin' on his black mama last..."

Hanson didn't get to finish his sentence. Charlie rushed him and slammed him into a nearby tree—knocking him senseless. I ran toward the pair and stood close by. I thought to clasp Charlie's arm, but he grabbed a bunch of hair at the top of Hanson's head with one hand and held him tight to the tree with the other.

"Listen here, you dirty no-account," Charlie spat, "not one more word or I promise you it will be your last. Do you understand? He's worth twenty of you! I swear..." He shoved Hanson against the tree one more time and then let him slump to the ground. He kicked him for good measure. I jumped back.

Charlie turned to the soldiers who had gathered round when Hanson started shouting. "He's a goddamned fool and a coward!" He shouted. "You all know Blakely! There's gonna be a fight today and we need him. Hanson can go to hell!" Charlie stood to his full height and let his words stand tangible—a challenge in the air. His eyes promised blood and everyone knew we'd have enough of that today. To a man, they backed down. They knew Blakely, whatever else he might be, was a good fighter and a decent man. He was the best friend I had, gentle somehow even in this mean war.

The sun rose with reluctance in the East. I wondered if perhaps the Morning Star knew we would die this day, and intended the delay. The long roll sounded not long after Charlie walked from Hanson's crumpled form. The camp quickened. The boys ran about, gathering battle accoutrements, throwing out playing cards and stiffening for the challenge. Some kissed leather-bound Bibles or letters from home before stuffing them into blouse pockets. The Bible, at least, was a practical thing—if it was thick enough, it could stop a bullet. A letter from home couldn't save you.

Line after line formed in the open field, at the edge of the woods.

The boys took just a few minutes to fall in. A silence fell over the field. Low supplications to heaven sounded from various spots along the line. Must be the new men, I thought, no amount of praying will help a man in a place abandoned by God.

The call rang out, "Fix bayonets!" Little doubt remained about the desperation of the moment. The clank on clank of metal fractured the silence. My palms sweated as I fixed my bayonet to the end of my musket. Charlie stood to my right and Blakely stood to his. I looked at the two of them. Charlie looked straight ahead of where we stood. An angry determination sparked his gray eyes. Blakely, still spent from his run back to camp, fidgeted trying to straighten his uniform. He looked one time at Charlie. I could see he worried about him. Charlie glanced at Blakely and offered a weak smile and an encouraging nod. We could hear the battle, rolling ever closer to our position from north of our line.

Hanson stumbled up, glaring at Charlie. I saw Charlie take note of where Hanson stood, but did not give the least show of regard for the glare. With any luck, Hanson would take a bullet this time around.

The low rumble of cannon sounded to the west, the direction we faced. The battle had rolled down from the north. Experience told me that the cannonade to our front marked the softening of the Rebel position. I always wondered about the business of firing artillery on the enemy line before we charged it. Wasn't it more warning to the enemy to prepare for our inevitable appearance? Damn the artilleryists—messengers of death, safe behind their beasts.

"Forward! March!" sounded down the line. With a steady step, our lines heaved forward. Charlie, Blakely and I marched near the front. An officer on horseback and his aides rode some yards in front of us. When they reached the line of the woods, they were forced to dismount. Brambles and new growth littered the old forest floor—too much for the mount to navigate. The officer slapped his horse's hindquarters, sending the frightened animal galloping to the rear.

"Wish he'd slap my ass and send me to the rear," said one of the men. No one laughed. I swallowed nervously. My mouth and throat had dried out and grown thick and sandy. I reached for my canteen, remembering belatedly that I had forgotten to fill it. My hands shook so it was difficult to replace the lid.

Our line entered the woods and immediately lost formation. Officers and file closers shouted themselves hoarse, trying to keep the

line together. The best we could do was stick with a few of the men to either side of our position and try not to get out ahead. Charlie, Blakely, and I moved together along with several other men from Company B.

Charlie suddenly ducked out and to the left, heading toward Hanson. I figured that Hanson was about to get his. I smiled.

An officer yelled, "Quick step, boys!" We charged, men ducking here and there to escape a low-hanging branch or tripping over brambles and cursing the woods. I was struck by the absurdity of it—damning nature—while lead projectiles buzzed above our heads. Curse the woods, will you? I mused. Fragments of wounded trees rained down on us. Men cursed the officers, eager for the opening of return fire. I chanced a glance back at Charlie. He had collared Hanson.

The lead balls of the enemy's muskets found their marks, and men dropped like rags. The dull, meaty thud of contact fazed no one. We were veteran troops. What I could never get used to was the screams of the wounded—the prolonged cries for relief. Sometimes the wounded would grab at us, begging us not to go on, crying for mothers and sisters and sweethearts.

Blakely and I went forward through this chaos together. Now within one hundred yards of the works, we could see the grey backs popping up to fire. The officers at last let us loose and we fired manically. Some Rebs collapsed along their line and slid down the forward side of their works, some writhing in agony, others unmoving. Our position was exposed, but we gave at least as much as we got, and at the quickstep, too. The outnumbered enemy wavered and fired as they moved backward from their works.

"Charge the bayonet!" an officer in our ranks bellowed. "They're runnin' boys! Press them!"

With a resonant "Huzzah!" rumbling down our line, we charged to the foot of the works. The bearer had fallen there and Blakely grabbed the flag, waving it wildly above his head. He ascended the works and shouted something incoherent to the boys. We shot a volley in the enemies' faces. The enemy turned and retreated to their second works. Blakely charged down after them, and I stayed close beside him. Salty sweat and acid gun powder obscured my vision. I frantically wiped my eyes, afraid to lose sight of Blakely. When I last saw Charlie, he had grabbed hold of Hanson, who had tried, as always, to run to the rear.

"Not this time," Charlie raged, dragging him along. Hanson looked about. He became frenzied in his attempts to escape Charlie's

grasp, to no avail. How was Charlie supposed to fire while holding on to Hanson?

The Rebs reached their second line of works. The gaping, black mouths of several cannons roared to life from the line, ripping holes in our scattered formations. Grape shot—canister filled with metal balls, turned the cannon into giant, deadly shotguns.

Blakely turned to me and screamed, “Get down, Bet!” His cry was punctuated by a booming detonation in front of our line. I dropped to the ground and heard the hit. Dirt and debris rained down on me, pinching my exposed skin with shards of heated debris. I could smell the wool of my uniform burning in places. I lifted my head to look around. The detonation deafened me, and the battle passed by in silent, slow motion. Blakely still grasped the flag, standing in full view of the enemy. I watched as a ball tore through his sleeve and another through the flag he held aloft. Still, he stood, encouraging the boys to hold their ground.

“For God’s sake! Get down!” I yelled.

I tried to reach for him and pull him down, but just then another detonation roared in our front. More debris flew out and hit me. The arm I reached for Blakely with was covered in blood and chunks of red slop. I grabbed Blakely’s leg and yanked. He gave without effort.

“Christ, Blakely!” I yelled.

I looked over at his prostrate body. His head was gone from his shoulders and blood spurted in cloying little waves from his neck.

“Oh Jesus!” I cried in the guttural half-mad pitch of horror. “Oh God...” I gave in and lay there, next to him, crying while soldiers ran past, charging toward death, or worse. I half covered his body with mine as if to protect it. No use now. Someone yanked the flag from Blakely’s grasp to carry it on. His dead body wrenched forward, bringing me back to the moment. I managed to raise myself to my knees, never taking my eyes off of Blakely. A slow shake built up from my core and transformed my body into a mound of panic.

I held on to reality from a far-off place, looking down, seeing my trembling hands tenderly covering Blakely’s severed neck with my cloak. I rocked back and forth, crying and clutching my folded legs, whispering Blakely’s name over and over—an incantation meant to return him to me.

“Get up, Bet! You can’t stay here. We’re exposed!” All of a sudden, as if in a dream, Charlie was there, prodding me to get up and move on.

I looked up at him and cried, "Blakely!" Black gun powder ringed Charlie's lips, giving him a deathly appearance. He glared at me with consternation. His eyes filled with frustrated tears, streaking down his face, leaving wet paths through the dirt of battle.

"I know. I saw, but you have to move. Now!" He roared. I snapped back to the moment.

He still had Hanson in his grip, dragging him along. I couldn't believe my eyes. How did he make it this far, dragging that ass along? How the hell did he discharge his weapon? The cannon to our front roared to life again, followed by a crackling volley of musket fire. Hanson twisted free of Charlie's grasp in one rounding, ducking movement. Charlie spun around and caught a slug of grapeshot in his upper left arm. He fell to the ground, bleeding. Hanson was gone in an instant, running toward the rear. My heart stopped and I felt paralyzed. I crawled over to him.

The bone in his upper arm was shattered and took the appearance of a ghastly, dark red and mushy mixture of soft tissue with slivers of white bone. He was barely conscious.

"Charlie...what do I do?" I asked, bending close to him. His face went ashen, then white, and his eyes struggled to focus on my face, on the trees above, and on the boys running past us in groups of twos and threes. Eventually, his grey eyes grew dull and rolled back into his head. He grabbed me with his uninjured arm. His grip was weak. He couldn't speak, but I knew I had to apply a tourniquet. I untangled the twine I had saved from my old trousers. My hands shook as I worked to save him.

"Get...out...of..." he choked.

"I have to get you out of here first. You can't stay here!" I objected. He tried to shake his head in protest, but I ignored him. I rose to my feet and grabbed him by the shoulders. He cried out in pain and I winced. Bracing every ounce of strength I had left within me, I pulled him from the field of fire into the tenuous safety of a nearby group of trees as quickly as I could. He passed out and I fell to the ground next to him. My heart beat into my throat and I let out one long, broken sob. "Live..." I whispered next to his face, my dirty tear drops fell to his cheeks. His eyes fluttered open and he grabbed onto me again.

"Leave me," he commanded. And with that, he passed out again.

I pushed myself up with a determined grunt and stumbled away from him. Senseless emotion wouldn't serve either of us at this

moment. I looked around, aware at last that I must leave him here, alone. I muttered heated words to God, demanding Charlie's safety. I glanced back at him and, through maddened tears, saw how completely vulnerable he looked, passed out and oblivious, shielded only by blackjack. His dark hair was wet and dirty and gumming to his forehead and temple. Reddish-brown dirt and black gunpowder covered his face. I knew his arm was ruined. At best it would be useless, if he lived. One way or the other, the war was over for Charlie. I mumbled curses under my breath, damning the world and the pitiless men in it. I grew afloat with anger, hard and ready to extract vengeance.

The battle moved some yards ahead of where he fell. The most I could do for him now was to fight to keep the Federal lines surging forward. I turned and ran as fast as I could. I felt finished and tired at the moment of Charlie's wounding, but now anger fostered a different animal in me, one that moved despite my exhaustion—one that rushed to kill or be killed.

I caught up with the regiment. It had stalled at the edge of a wood, where the Rebels were making a determined stand surrounding and behind a red-brick structure. Small sections of the brick building lay smashed and crumbling from artillery fire. Artillery which now tore through the trees surrounding us. They were overshooting—for now—soon our lines would be in their sights.

The crackle of muskets added frightening tenor to the deep boom of the cannons. The enemy kept up a steady fire by squad, still moving forward. Men fell all along our lines as the enemy artillery adjusted aim and deadly round missiles tore through our formations. All along the line, the officers yelled to the men to plug the gaps vacated by the dead and wounded. Our artillery could not support us from the woods behind and it was clear that our position was quickly becoming tenuous.

We retreated in an orderly manner, refusing to flee the Rebel resurgence. Every few yards, we dressed our lines and returned fire, but the Rebels pushed forward, determined to regain the ground we had chased them from. The *zip, thud, zip, thud* of the enemies' bullets inundated our formation, knocking men down all along our line. The Butternuts were firing by rank now, keeping up a steady and discouraging onslaught. I do not remember ever fighting so hard to keep a piece of ground behind me clear of the enemy. I am sure that in this fight I managed my three rounds a minute and then some.

Down the shattered line, the officers yelled out, "Fall back, boys! Fall back!"

I screamed at the boys, "Turn and fire! Turn and fire, goddamn you!" I bawled until I lost my voice and could only choke out single-syllable remonstrations. To give way meant to give Charlie over to the enemy, to be shipped south to a God-awful, starvation prison camp where his wound would fester and he would die for sure. Blakely would end in an unmarked trench, after being stripped clean. I was determined to protect them, and yet I knew I could not fight the whole Confederate army on my own. Eventually, I had to accept the inevitable. We would certainly lose the ground we gained.

I decided to run back to the rear and move Charlie while I still had a chance. God willing, I would have enough time to drag him to safety. Lieutenant Hoke saw me break and run and aimed to hit me broadside with his sword.

"Get back here, Corporal!" He yelled after me.

"I have to move Charlie, Lieutenant! We're losing ground. I have to get him out of the line of the retreat!" The Lieutenant turned back toward the line and I figured that his inaction meant that he had granted me permission. I suppose he knew better than anyone that I was right.

That was the last time I saw the Lieutenant. The retreat ended for him shortly after I left. The boys said he was wounded at least twice before he took one square and merciful through the heart.

I ran hell-fire toward the trees where I had left Charlie, glancing in the direction of Blakely's body. What I saw stopped me dead in my tracks. A rebel bullet whizzed past, inches from my head, slamming into a tree near where I stood, but even such a close call barely registered in my mind. The scene unfolding before me riveted my attention: Hanson bent low, rifling through Blakely's pockets, murmuring insults.

"Where do you keep it, nigger? I want it. You got no need for it now." And then the bastard chuckled. He actually chuckled – a low, wicked sound foreign even on this field of madness. It seemed to me as if the Devil himself had come up from the netherworld.

I could only guess that Hanson somehow knew about Blakely's stash of money. He was saving every dollar he earned, secretly sewn into the lining of his coat. He intended to purchase his mother's freedom with it when the war was over. Perhaps he shared this information with his mother last night and unwittingly with the cowardly thief as well.

My insides burned watching this low-down dog. I strode toward him, leveling my rifle for a clear shot.

“Stand up, Hanson!” I shouted with as much authoritative depth as I could muster. Hanson shot up looking scared witless and intending to run until he recognized me.

“What you want, sissy?” He sneered.

“Get away from Blakely! So help me God, I will kill you! I may kill you anyway. Get!”

“Not until I find that money.” He bent low again. “You can go to hell.”

“Goddamn you! I am not going to tell you again!” But it was no use hollering. I was no more a threat to Hanson than if he knew I was a girl. Blood drained from my face, heating my hands and my arms. My muscles tightened and shuddered as I walked toward him, then suddenly they calmed.

I levelled my rifle. My heart beat slowed. I fired a round into his left knee. He buckled, cursing and damning me to hell. I charged then like I never had before. I can only recollect the sound of my feet hitting the ground and my heart pounding in my ears. Intense anger shook and propelled me. It was him or me, and I felt damn sure it wasn't going to be me.

Hanson rolled onto his back, grabbed his rifle and aimed. He shot and missed. Figures, it was probably the first time he shot it on a battlefield. He started to reload. I was upon him in a matter of seconds. I thrust my bayonet deep into his gut. He exhaled in a long moan.

“You stupid shit,” he hissed, “you just killed me.”

“Not soon enough!” I spat. “I should have killed you a long time ago. Charlie was hurt under your hand.”

“Serves him right...you don't even know nuthin', do you? He's secesh!”

“You shut your mouth!” I screamed at Hanson. I pulled my bayonet out and he began to bleed profusely. I turned to walk away.

“You're a girl.”

I turned back, stunned.

“That's right. I know everyone's secrets. Heard Blakely tellin' it all to his mama last night. Your Charlie boy didn't tell you his secret. He came north with Blakely. They is brothers! Got the same pap.” Hanson tried to laugh but instead spit up blood. “He's a goddamned secesh!” The words bled from his mouth.

At that, I turned and raised my rifle butt over his head.

“Secesh don’t fight for the Union and neither have you.” I brought the butt of my rifle down upon him, smashing his skull. His blood spurted up onto my arms, splattered my rifle.

I felt his warm blood dripping from my rifle onto my trembling hands. I threw down my weapon as if it were about to strike me, and wiped my hands on the back of my blue jacket without looking at them. I did not want to see his poisoned taint on my skin. I stripped out of my blood-stained jacket and threw it to the ground by his body, and then picked a clean rifle off a dead soldier. I would carry none of Hanson with me. I had done him and that was it.

As I turned to walk away, I heard a sad whimpering at my side. The stray mutt that Hanson had adopted as his own early on, stood cowering and whimpering before me. I had forgotten about this little brute. Where’d he been all this time? His big, black eyes looked from me to his dead master and back again, his brows shifting dolefully.

I looked at Hanson’s mutilated body and at the whining dog. The mongrel was as alone as I was now. Awareness rolled over me like a fever. What had I done? My stomach felt hollow, carved out. I heaved. Tears rolled down my cheeks and I wiped at them frantically. I refused to cry for Hanson.

I could hear the retreat drawing closer and rushed toward the place I had left Charlie. His body was gone. I became disoriented, thinking I had somehow forgotten where I left him. He could not have left on his own. “No...no...no...” I repeated, leaving the trees and looking about for the right copse. I realized with uncontrollable anguish that I was in the right spot; Charlie was gone. Despite myself, I began calling out his name, running from place to place. I entered the copse one last time to look for clues. He must have been carried out because there were no marks as if he had dragged himself.

I stopped, too stunned to move on. I screamed, loud and long, at nothing and at everything, protesting the bleeding world. I couldn’t stand to lose Charlie. I couldn’t stand not knowing where he was or who took him and to God knew where. The ache overpowered my senses. I fell to my knees, noticing a spot where he had bled. I ran my fingers through it and cried. Blakely was dead, Charlie was gone and likely dead or dying, and I was alone. Nothing could be worse than to be alone. I wished in that moment to follow my friends to the grave.

What had Hanson said? They were brothers? If that was true, had

Blakely told Charlie my secret? Why didn't Blakely tell me? I scoffed at myself, believing a fool like Hanson.

I saw the boys run past at full retreat. All semblance of order had disappeared. The Rebel yell rang through the woods. The momentum of our retreat pushed me along, and I lost sight of the spots where I last saw Charlie and Blakely. It seemed as if the war, now, was mine alone.