

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Widow of the South

Robert Hicks

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About the Book

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

Tennessee, 1864.

On a late autumn day, near a little town called Franklin, 10,000 men will soon lie dead or dying in a battle that will change lives for ever; none more so than Carrie McGavock's who finds her home taken over by the Confederate army and turned into a field hospital. Taking charge, she finds the courage to face up to the horrors around her and, in doing so, finds a cause.

Out on the battlefield, a tired young Southern soldier drops his guns and charges forward into Yankee territory, holding only the flag of his company's colours. He survives and is brought to the hospital. Carrie recognizes something in him - a willingness to die - and decides that day, in her house, she will not let him.

In the pain-filled days and weeks that follow, both find a form of mutual healing that neither thinks possible.

In this extraordinary début novel based on a true story, Robert Hicks has written an epic novel of love and heroism set against the madness of the American Civil War.

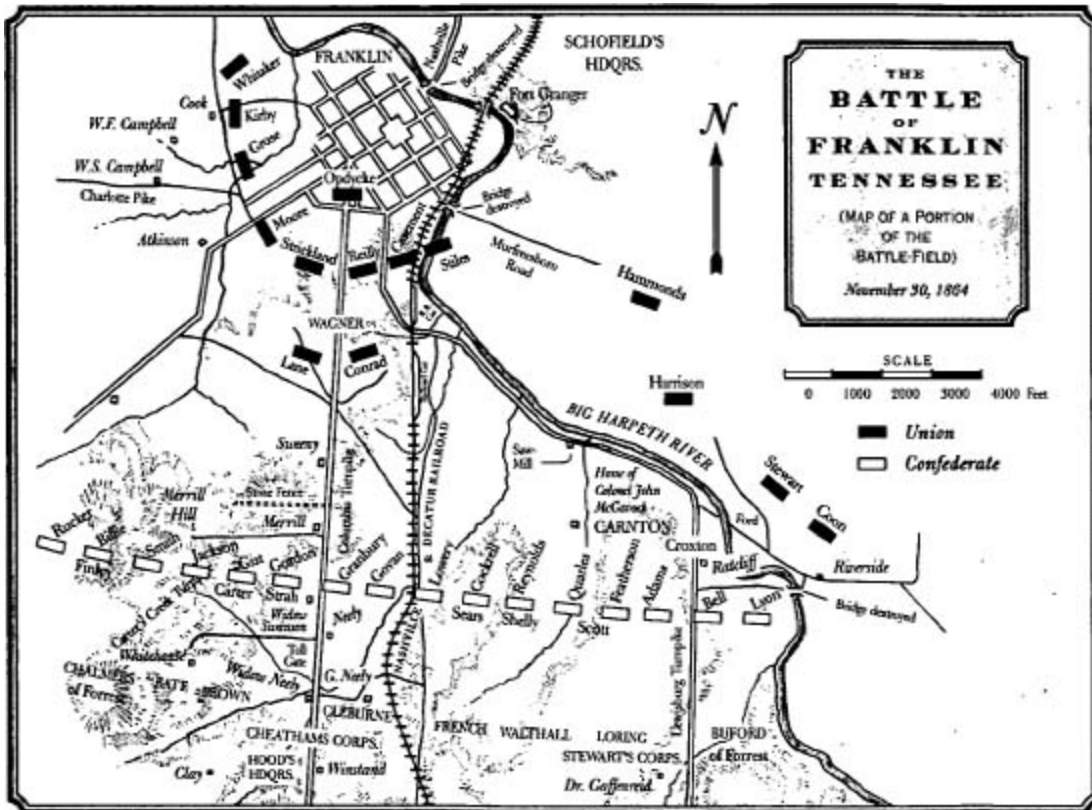
THE
W I D O W
OF THE
S O U T H

ROBERT HICKS



BLACK SWAN

for
Tom Martin, Jr.
Semper Fidelis



HISTORICAL NOTE

FROM 1861 TO 1865 a deeply divided and still emerging America was at war with itself. Fighting on one side were the Unionists, representing the Northern states in America who, under President Abraham Lincoln, fought for the restoration of the Union (the United States of America). While the Abolitionist Movement was growing, particularly in the northeastern states of New England, it would be very late in the war before the abolition of slavery was considered by the rank and file of the Northern armies as a cause worth fighting for.

On the other side were the Confederates, representing most of the Southern states in America, who fought for the right to cede from the Union; to exist as a completely separate sovereignty known as the Confederate States of America. The Confederates fought to preserve a particular Southern way of life, largely agricultural, which included their constitutionally protected right to own slaves.

In the novel there are references to Union soldiers or Unionists, who were known as the Yankees. Confederate soldiers were called Rebels by the Unionists, for rebelling against the Union.

By late 1864, at the time of the Battle of Franklin, the Confederates, who had started off the winners in the opening years of the war, were finding the tide turning and the Union's superior material resources and manpower numbers were making significant headway. The Battle of Franklin would effectively become their "last hurrah", as Confederate troops tried to re-energize the war in "the west" and push the Union armies out of the South.

The staggering losses at Franklin served as the death knell of the Confederates' campaign for sovereignty, and led to the end of the war several months later.



B O O K I



1

NOVEMBER 30, 1864: DAWN

THAT DAY IN 1864 was unseasonably mild for late November. There had been a frost already, and the land lay fallow. The cotton, which lay white on the fields in early fall like the crashed remains of an exhausted wave, had been gathered and ginned and baled and shipped off for when it could be transported in safety, which was practically never. Most of it sat stacked near the gins, in warehouses, and in barns around town. But the fields looked healthy, and the houses weren't burned to the ground, and the barns weren't stripped of their joists and planking, and the nearby rail line, the Nashville & Decatur Railroad, still had all the pieces of its track.

Early that morning, long and twisting columns of butternut gray moved slowly up the three pikes that cut their way toward Franklin, Tennessee. They were miles away but closing fast. Bright metal flashed from within each column, like the glistening of a snake's scales. The locals later remembered that the thump of boots and bare feet upon the macadam rattled the windows of their houses. These were the Southern Confederates, come to smash the Northern Union soldiers. They had been ridden hard. They wore raggedy homespun and crumpled felt slouch hats, and they were so skinny that no one—not even

the Unionists—blamed them for looting the dead of their food. It did not escape the Southerners' notice that the land they were moving into had been spared the ravages of war, unlike Atlanta and the little towns of northern Alabama where they had lately been. There they had seen ghost towns and torched fields, houses that retained only the barest skeletal relation to their former selves. There they had seen what looked like the ruins of an ancient civilization.

Here they saw houses circled by groves of giant cedars and magnolias so beautiful they thought they would never see a thing so pretty again, and white board churches that inspired silent oaths of faith and devotion from even the lapsed and godless, promises of good works in exchange for survival. The meanest, most dissolute and liquored-up men looked on the land and wanted nothing more than the quiet, pious life they could lead in one of the houses along the side of the road, tending crops and riding to the little wooden churches with their plump wives and their cherub-faced children. Few such men ever lived such lives later on, if they survived, but it could be said that the imminence of death had inspired in even the hardest cases a momentary appreciation of anonymity and quiet.

The Confederate columns kept on, converging as the roads angled in. They seemed unstoppable, inexorable, churning on and on as if to chase down and devour the town itself. There would soon be no escape, but this was not something anyone in Franklin could know at dawn on November 30.

In the town another mass—this one of blue—swarmed and jittered upon the outskirts, scraping at the dirt with their shovels and picks and bayonets, felling trees and Osage orange hedges, building bulwarks and ramparts. These were the Union soldiers, who had snuck by the Confederates the night before when they rightfully should

have been beaten down and destroyed. Good-bye, Andersonville, they had whispered to each other as they walked quietly up the pike past the Confederates at Spring Hill, invoking the name of the most feared Confederate prison. How could 21,000 men walk up a road within a few hundred yards of another 25,000 men and not be noticed? Better not to wonder, thought the men laboring at the ditches, their shirts torn off and their muscles glazed in dirt and sweat. Might jinx it.

And so the Northerners, bone-tired, threw up even more defenses across the southern end of town, a crooked smile of trenches that ran across the bend in the river, from one side of town to the other, in the off chance that the rebels would put up a fight. The possibility was absurd, and after getting together a decent defensive position, many of them wandered about the town in search of food and drink. Many of the officers, that is. They found the natives friendly and hospitable. Or perhaps they were just worn down by the occupation and endless requisitions of the small Yankee garrison that had lived among them for two years while fortifying the town. In any case, the newcomers helped themselves to their stores and their whiskey. Don't mind if I do, they said, filling their canteens and propping their boots up on the railing of porches, watching their men dig and saw and hammer.

A little town, Franklin had its share of rambling two-story frame manses surrounding its square, and plenty of ancient oaks and maple trees with branches hiding little boys staring goggle-eyed and dumbstruck at the blue-coats, thousands more than they'd ever seen. Amid the sound of pickaxes and shouts drifting up toward the square, ladies sat on their porches moving backgammon pieces and wondered if they'd actually see a real battle now, the sort of thing they had read about in the *Chattanooga Rebel*, which published the clever little irreverent letters of one of the local boys off fighting somewhere to the south.

A hawk circling high above the land, floating on the thermals thrown into such disorder by the heat of the day, would have seen the stream of butternut gray gliding ever closer to the mob of blue, the glint of metal and the flash of bright flags, the gashes of newly turned dirt, the orderly streets and the regular gray roofs of Franklin. Whatever coincidence or divine intent had conspired to bring it about, Franklin was surrounded.

In the Confederate camp, a squad stirred awake. They stoked fires grown cold overnight and watched them crack and spark before they remembered that the things they had to eat weren't worth cooking. Hickory nuts and sugarcane. One by one they abandoned their fires. They dried their rifles with their shirts and hoped they would fire when the time came. They were in no hurry for that time to come, but the sun kept rising. A few voices carried over the shuffling and groaning.

"What you gonna do with them oats? Give 'em here."

"Damn, boy, you look green. What's that smell?"

"Please, y'all, that blanket was from my mama."

"The hell you say. My oats. Mine."

"I don't know about this cut I gotcheer on my arm. It's got a smell to it."

"The blanket was from his mama! Well, somebody better give it over right quick, or Mama gonna whup his ass."

"There bugs in 'em oats, so what you care? Cough it up. You gonna die anyway."

"You got to see the doc about that, Harlon."

"He all infested, you ain't gone want it. Got the fleas or something, got that itch. Just give the boy his blanket."

"And you'll be a-dying right before me, I guarantee it. No oats for any of you. Get back."

"I ain't gone see the doc. Just as soon keep my arm."

"That's all right, I'll just get it back when you through with it. Don't go getting blood on it, now."

“All right, just a few, then. Gimme some crumbs.”

“Better your arm than otherwise.”

“When we’re *what* with it? Speak up.”

“Steal your own damn oats. Steal from Pendergrass.”

“What’s worse than losing an arm?”

“When you’re through, when you’re dead.”

The bright jingle of stirrups and bridles silenced them. Officers. No sense calling attention to themselves. Silence could keep you alive sometimes, keep you from being volunteered for something stupid.

* * *

Hundreds of horsemen rode out of the Confederate camp as the sun rose behind the clouds. They were led by a tall man, hunched over in his saddle and unnaturally thin. The tall rider led them along the Columbia Pike, which ran hard by the army’s night camp, and headed north toward Franklin. Many more of his horsemen rode toward the town on other roads. The cavalry was on the move.

In the dust of the macadam road the tall rider could make out the boot prints of 21,000 Union soldiers who had somehow passed that way undetected in the night, a turn of events so impossible it made him flinch every time his new mare stumbled over a caisson track. When fellow riders strayed too close, he pushed them off with one of his big, bony hands and warned them to watch the road and stay the hell away from him. He had no time for their god-awful horsemanship. He had no time, either, for the god-awful hills of middle Tennessee, with their hollows, draws, ridges, and points, all no doubt hiding Yankees down from the North lying in ambush.

When did that happen? When did the Yankees start lying in wait for him? *He* was the impossible fighter, not the stumbling Yankees, who were ever fat and lethargic in his unsettling night dreams. *He* worked miracles against long odds, *he* made General William T. Sherman afraid, *he* made fools of the enemy. Had he not been called a monster and a

devil by the abolitionist newspapers? Yes, he had, and damn them for their ignorance. He was no monster, he thought. He just wanted victory worse than most men.

And yet it was undeniable that they had all been fooled in their sleep, even Major General Nathan Bedford Forrest. Whose fault was that? It was a question that couldn't really be answered, not right then, but the tall man was damned if he'd have the blame laid at his feet. Not ever. He was not in charge, not this time. He, Forrest, had never been beaten when he was in charge, which is a whole lot more than he could say for that cripple Hood. Let the commanding officer pull himself away from the fog of his precious laudanum and take the blame. Let Hood take it, and damn him to hell.

In four years he had never seen Southern land so unmolested. Tennessee had once been his home. Now look at it: Unionists and deserters and traitors everywhere. He wondered what deals had been struck to spare those fields. He'd been a businessman once, and he knew about deals. There was a time when he always got the better half of a deal on a slave, but no longer. That life was past him now, and that fact made him resentful.

He rode with the broad brim of his hat pulled over his face, shielding his sunken eyes and the cheekbones that seemed ready to burst through his sallow skin. He had boils and a cough. The years of battle had made him seem smaller, robbing his frame of its solidity and power and leaving behind a bony carcass that could only be roused by battle. Before Hood began his mad march into oblivion, Forrest had hoped to get some time to go back to Mississippi and recuperate. There was no time for that now. He rode on, swaying in his saddle and brooding.

His staff wasn't much to look at. He'd had so many of them come and go he sometimes forgot their names. They were skeletal and bone-tired like Forrest, but they had a certain irrational hope that Forrest could not share. They

were riding with Forrest, by God! Hero of Shiloh and Brice's Cross Roads! They had faith in him, and Forrest felt the burden of their faith. They could not see battlefields like he could; the strengths and weaknesses of the enemy were not as plain to them. He had come to resent that they could not read his mind and anticipate what he would do. This was unfair of him, but he could get wore out just like any man. Why do I got to do all the thinking all the time? They were loyal, at least. He could say that for them.

Up the pike they went, gray and ragged, picking their way over the footprints of the enemy. The road rolled gently and straight, bordered on each side by farmhouses and fields lying rich and fallow. Faces watched warily from farmhouse windows. Women used to run out of their homes in their bedclothes when we rode through, and now we get this. Shit.

He stopped. He looked out at the farmland passing beside him, dormant brown humps rolling off as far as he could see. The remnants of old weeds poked out of the fields here and there and shook in the wind. He looked harder at the fields stretching out before him, and everything was familiar for a moment. He had almost forgotten that he'd been there before, right on that road. He'd fought there and won, way back almost two years before. He'd lost his favorite horse there, too, a big sorrel stallion named Roderick. Loyal and stupid. Wouldn't stay out of the fight, even when Forrest had sent him to the rear with a gunshot wound. Broke loose and went galloping around the battlefield until he took a bullet in his head while leaping over a hedge. Just looking for his master. There was no lesson in that, Forrest thought. It just was what it was.

They rode on. He expected to hear the sounds of cattle and chickens, the shouts of children, the creaking of wagons—but there were none. Except for the eyes peering out from the windows, everyone seemed to have vanished.

They know a fight's comin'. He spurred his horse on a little more. It wasn't far to Franklin, but it seemed an endless slog over the hills. Forrest didn't like how the road had begun to slope gently up toward the town, straight and unbroken by cover or protection. He called a halt, and his men's horses came skittering and snorting to a stop around him. He scanned the sunburned and dirty faces staring expectantly at him and asked if anyone knew this place.

One man raised his hand while spitting out some tobacco and pulled his yellow hair out of his eyes. He'd been in Forrest's troop longer than most.

"My uncle lives around here, I been here before."

"Where is there a place I can see the town from without getting out from cover?"

Forrest trusted this man, who had once shot a Union officer in the face before he could run Forrest through. He liked that kind of loyalty, the kind that saved his skin.

"There's a house off the Lewisburg Pike. Got two stories. McGavocks own it."

McGavock, McGavock. I know that name.

"Where is this house at?"

"I can take us there. There's woods, be easy to sneak up on it."

McGavock. I might have sold him slaves.

"Go on, then."

2

CARNTON

MARIAH KNEW CARRIE would not come greet the men. She closed the door behind her before walking heavily across the passage to the staircase, which she took down to the ground floor. If Confederates were coming, she decided, she must receive them at the front of the big house like proper folks. If she had to cover for her missus yet again, and this time with men who frightened her like the devils in one of her old dreams, she would use all the power of the house and whatever might still be dignified and imposing about it. Not much to go on, but still ...

Sometimes she thought of herself as the mistress of the house. She planned the meals and directed what was left of the house staff. She had intercepted many visitors on the front brick walkway during the last two years, telling each of them that her mistress was not feeling well and could not rise to see them. Town people had quit coming to visit unless it was to transact business with Colonel John or herself, and she had heard there was some speculation about Carrie's health and the propriety of any household that would leave a nigger in charge. Hattie and Winder, Carrie's children, came hollering for Mariah to settle their disputes now, after encountering Carrie's closed and locked door all too often. It had come to this, finally: she

sometimes forgot about Carrie, something that would never have happened when she was running around fetching food and sewing and books and mops and what all. When her mistress ran things. Sometimes now she would jump a little when she heard footsteps on the floor above her.

Mariah walked past the plaques of the "Masks of Tragedy" on the walls of the hallway and, now hurrying, across the worn-out floorcloth that led to the front doors, which she unlocked. She stepped out onto the portico. She held her hands clasped in front of her to keep them from shaking.

At the end of the front walkway a small group of riders had come to a halt, and between the rows of boxwoods and cedars that lined the front walk she could see a tall man unwind himself from the back of his horse and step to the ground. His movements seemed so languid she was surprised by how quickly he moved up the path. She wanted him to stay forever down by the gate. He walked bowlegged and loose, with his head down, and was upon her before she knew it. When he first noticed her, he made a gesture as if to take off his hat, but when he saw her fully, he left it on. Down by the gate one of the other gray men dismounted and held the horse of his leader in one bony hand.

"I need to use your back porch, second floor. I saw it on the way up here. Get your people so I can talk to 'em."

"Pardon me, sir, but Colonel McGavock's out, and Mrs. McGavock's a mite too sick to take visitors. She would be happy to receive you on another day, and she send her regrets."

He eyed her for a moment, as if he was trying to figure her out, and then he nodded. He knocked his boot against the bottom step of the landing, and clods of red mud fell into the path.

"I ain't a visitor. I am General Forrest, and I'ma use your house to reconnoiter awhile. Watch yourself."

With that, he strode up the stairs two at a time and tried to brush past Mariah, but she had already fallen back to the doorway.

“Please, sir, Colonel McGavock say no visitors or disturbances.”

Forrest pulled up and clenched his fists for a moment before rocking back on his heels and nodding again. He seemed to be trying to remember something he had once known, maybe something he had been taught when he was a boy but had long since forgotten. He nodded and took a deep breath.

“Please tell your mistress I am right sorry she’s sick and that I hope she gets well. I will do my damndest to stay quiet, but I’m coming in. Get out of the way.”

Mariah had made her attempt, and now she knew it was time to step aside. She remembered where she’d heard Forrest’s name. Some of the town Negroes had been talking about him the last time she’d gone in to get supplies. Forrest killed all them colored soldiers, throttled them right around the neck. He left not a one standing, and he put their heads on sticks all around the place. Fort Pillow it was. He the devil, no doubt. The Lord goin’ to make him pay, yes. This memory made him seem smaller to her, less human, and therefore more contemptible. She would not give him respect. She stood with her back to the wall as he strode into the house and trod hard across the diagonal squares of the floorcloth toward the stairs. Mariah saw his steps raise little dust balls.

“Is this the way up’n the top floor?”

“Yes.”

“You let me know when *Colonel* McGavock gets back, hear?”

“Yes.”

But Mariah followed him up the stairs. She would not let him out of her sight, not while Carrie was up there.

3

SERGEANT ZACHARIAH CASHWELL, 24TH ARKANSAS, CONFEDERATE STATES OF AMERICA

WE WERE MARCHING up that pike, and everywhere you looked there were things cast off by the Yankees littering the sides of the road, and it was everything our officers could do to keep the young ones from ducking out of formation and snatching up something bright and useful-looking, like crows looking to decorate their nests. The old ones, like me, we knew better than to pick up anything, because you'd have to carry it, and we knew that our burden was heavy enough. But, hell, the Yankees had thrown away more than we'd laid our eyes on in months, maybe years. There were pocket Bibles and little writing desks, poker chips and love letters, euchre decks and nightshirts, canteens and pots of jam, and all kinds of fancy knives. It looked like a colossus had picked up a train full of things, from New York or one of those kinds of places, and dumped it all out to see what was what. And I'm just mentioning the things that you might want to pick up and keep. There was a lot more, besides. There were wagons left burning on the side of the road, crates of rotten and infested meat, horses and mules shot in their traces. I reckon those animals

weren't moving fast enough, and you couldn't blame the Yankees for lightening their loads if they could, but it was a sorry sight. Even so, all that gear gladdened my heart because it seemed so desperate. They were *running*, by God. They were running from us, the 24th Arkansas, and all the rest of the brigades ahead of us and behind us. The columns stretched far as I could see when I wiped the sweat from my eyes and got a good look around. But mostly I just kept my head down and put my feet down, one in front of the other, the way I'd learned to do.

The officers rode up and down the column on their horses, saying all sorts of things to keep our spirits up. I'd learned that if you needed an officer to pick up your spirits, you were in sorry shape. But some of the younger boys listened, and they were heartened by it. The officers talked about the glory of the South and about how our women would be watching and how they would expect us to fight like Southern men—hard and without quitting. I wanted to say, *Until that bullet come for you*, but I didn't. Those officers were getting a whole lot of the men riled up for a fight, and I figured that was good no matter what else I had to say about it. Some of our boys had their homes around there, and you could just tell they were itching to get going. You had to hold them back, tell them to pace themselves, or else they'd start running and whooping and getting all lathered.

One big hoss in the company ahead, a man with a full beard and a neck like a hog's, started yelling for the band to give us a tune. He stomped his feet and rattled the bayonet he had at his side, and then some other of the boys did the same thing, and pretty soon we were all yelling at the band to play "The Bonnie Blue Flag," to give us a tune and be useful for once. The band even got a few notes off before one of the company commanders rode by, snatched up a trumpet, and threatened to beat them with it if he heard another note. That was funny to watch, and it was

about as good a morale lifter as hearing “The Bonnie Blue Flag” straight through, on account of our band wasn’t very accomplished.

The thing I kept thinking about was the nightshirts and the pots of jam, lying there on the roadside. They made me wonder whether we’d been fighting in the same war.

And then the order went out to get on line. They just up and stopped us, and I couldn’t help running into the man ahead of me and getting a whiff of the sweat and stink rising up off his homespun shirt. The men quit jabbering, and then the thousands of us were moving to either side of the road, all bunched up at first but then thinning out as the line got longer and longer, like a ball of twine unwinding. There wasn’t any stomping of the feet then, no bayonet rattling. We picked our way across the hills, some units stopping at the edge of a tree line, most of us out in the open. It took me a few moments to realize we were going to stop and fight right here, rather than chase the Yanks all the way to Nashville. It looked like a mighty long way to the Union lines, which were up on a rise. I could see men way up there in town tossing dirt around. The sunlight flashed off their shovels and picks, and sometimes it seemed like you could actually pick out the sound of their work a few seconds after you’d seen their tools go chunking into the dirt. It was so damn hot for late November. What had General Hood said when we crossed the river into Tennessee? No more fighting on the enemy’s terms. I looked at those battlements up ahead over a mile distant, and I thought, We must be the greatest army in the world if these are our terms.

I’d been fighting for three years by then. I’d been shot once, and my left arm still didn’t feel right. Sometimes I had a hard time lifting my rifle and keeping it steady. I thought about this and began flexing my arm to get it limbered up. We sat down in place and began the long wait.

It always seemed a long wait before the fight, no matter how long it took. Officers rode here and there conferring with one another, and then they'd come back and huddle with their sergeants, and word would come down about what was happening, and then they'd do it all over again and the word would change. This drove some of the men crazy every time. *Shit, let's just go*, they'd yell to no one in particular, and they'd jump up and pace around and kick a tree or something. Sometimes you didn't know what they meant by "go": fighting or running. I'm quite sure that both options crossed the minds of most men. It crossed my mind every time, and I'd been in a lot of fights and hadn't run yet. Well, I hadn't run until everyone else was running. I had that rule.

The thing I'm about to say, you might not understand unless you've been in war. But in those moments before the fight, if you were a smart man, you'd figure out a way to convince yourself that it didn't matter to you if you lived or died. If you're safe in your house, with your children running around underfoot and with fields that need to be worked, it's an impossible way of thinking unless you're sick or touched in the head. Of course it mattered if you lived or died. But if you went into a battle caring what happened to you, you wouldn't be able to fight, even though you knew you were as likely to die as the next man whether you cared or not. There wasn't any logic to who got killed and who didn't, and it was better that your final thoughts not be of cowardice and regret. It was better not to care, and to let yourself be swept up in the rush of the men beside you, to drive forward into the smoke and fire with the knowledge that you had already beaten death. When you let yourself go like that, you could fight on and on.

Everyone had their own way of getting their mind right. We lingered there on the outskirts of Franklin, and I could see each of the men in my company going through their

little rituals. There were two ways of getting ready. Most of the new men, unless they were unusually wise or strong-minded, went about tricking themselves into forgetting the possibility of death. One youngster in an almost clean uniform took a couple pieces of straw, stuck it in his hat, and began to loudly tell every joke he could remember to no one in particular, as if everything would be all right if he could keep laughing right up until the bullet got him. A few people were listening to him, but that wasn't really the point.

Listen here, I got another one. Three old men come courting a young lady, and she says, "What can I expect from a marriage to you?" And the first old man, he says, "I've got a big ol'..."

Other younger ones paced back and forth, hitting themselves in the chest, shaking their heads like bulls, and cursing. These were the ones who were trying to make themselves so angry and riled up that they'd run like they had blinders on and rush wherever someone pointed them without thinking about anything except throttling something or somebody. Some of these boys picked up rocks and threw them as hard as they could at the confused rabbits, squirrels, and coveys of quail flushed out of their hiding places by our noise. I caught one mountain boy with stringy auburn hair and no shoes punching and kicking at an old locust tree behind us, and I yanked him around and sat him down before he hurt himself.

Me and some of the other veterans, we had different ways. We'd all been in battle, and you couldn't go through such a thing more than a couple times without it becoming impossible to forget death. The boy I'd joined up with three years before, my best friend from Fayetteville, he'd gotten a minié ball through the eye at Atlanta. In my dreams I still see his pink round face thrown back on the ground, his mouth open and his crooked teeth bared, his straw-blond

hair matted with blood. After that, I never forgot about death.

The way I prepared myself was to sit down on my pack, pick out a point on the horizon, and stare at it. This is what I did that day at Franklin. I stared and stared at what appeared to be a church steeple on the edge of the town, just at the limits of my vision, and I took stock of my place in the world. My father had died young, and my ma ran off when I was about ten. I didn't have a girl, I had no one to go back to. I was just a man, and even if I'd lived to be a hundred, I'd still be forgotten someday. Men die, that's how it is. I had lost my faith by then; otherwise, I guess I would have prayed for my safety, but I didn't. I took deep breaths, stared at that steeple, and convinced myself I didn't matter in this world. I was an ant, a speck of dust, a forgotten memory. I was insignificant like everyone else, and it was this insignificance that made me strong. If my life was insignificant and my death meaningless, then I was free of this world and I became the sole sovereign of my own world, a world in which one act of courage before death would be mine to keep forever. I could keep that from God.

When they called us up to get on line again, this time for keeps, I was ready. Men dusted themselves off, tightened their belts, and obsessively checked their cartridges and ammunition, just in case. I stood there, staring forward, silent, looking out over the rolling land, hearing the *pop pop* of pickets firing their first shots, and thinking I could almost see around the bend of the earth if I looked hard enough. It was so pretty. The hills were glowing and soft-looking, and I saw a couple of deer scatter out of the woods and leap across the fields as we moved out. I could have seen myself living in that little town in front of me, in a proper house, under a different set of circumstances and in a different lifetime. Before we stepped off, I thought, I wonder why they chose this place for me to die.

And that, finally, was my real strength: I knew I was going to die. I wasn't happy about it, but I felt relieved to know it.

4

CARRIE MCGAVOCK

I HEARD THE muffled voices downstairs in the central passage and then the sound of hard boots on the creaky stairs. I could smell tobacco and sweat, a scent I imagined drifting off him and insinuating itself into the warp and weave of my house, disturbing my peace, throwing everything off kilter. What could possibly be so important? I turned back to Martha's dress and scrubbed until the threading began to fray.

We must endeavor to keep her cool, and her room darkened. Close the blinds, please.

The room felt suddenly hot and stale. There seemed to be no air; whatever air that remained seemed thin and fragile and musty. I stood up from the bed and crossed to the window that looked out over the front walk. The condensation had evaporated in the sun, which now loomed high over an unusually warm day. I could see out to the driveway and observed the men waiting with their horses. I began to drum the windowsill with my fingers, yawning. I yawned uncontrollably when I was nervous, one little yawn after another. It was an odd habit that had possessed me since childhood. It caused my hand to flutter mouthward whenever I felt myself growing agitated. I stared down at the horsemen and tried to project my thoughts toward