



The Long Road Home: The Death and Birth of America

Nick West

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A story of old friends caught up in the conflagration of the American Civil War.

James Johnston James had the dream again last night. He was back on the road with the Great Southern Circus. Randi was riding bareback on the running white horse, her legs flexing smoothly as she balanced gracefully with her arms wide spread atop the speeding animal.

The heavy beat of the circus band matched the pounding of the horses hooves. Together they seemed to drum against his chest as he watched her speed around the ring. Her beauty took his breath away, same as always. A sense of dread crept into his dream. Something was wrong.

Waking with a cry, and drenched with sweat, he suddenly sat straight up in the little tent. It took him several seconds to transition from dream to reality. The jarring boom of cannon shook the earth and the flash of hundreds lit the sky around him.

The circus was over. Randi was home on Sand Mountain. His old friends Miles and Duffee were fighting for the Union. He was wearing the gray uniform of a lieutenant in the Confederate Army and sleeping here on the cold hard ground near a little Pennsylvania town called Gettysburg.

While trying to remember if he finished his prayers, he rose painfully to his feet, pulled on his boots and limped down to the creek where he sat down on a large rock and splashed cold water into his face. As he rubbed his eyes and rinsed out his mouth with the cold spring water, Sergeant Smith walked up leading their horses.

James thought back to the dream and his old friends from Wisconsin. "I wonder what outfit that is up yonder?"

Smitty beat his hat against his leg and spat. "Damned if I know. From what I can see it's a bunch of blue bellies thick as ants at a church picnic. I'm a feared General Lee has done shit and stepped back in it this time Lieutenant. If we ever get our asses back to Virginia hit will be a miracle!"

James sighed and pulled on his hat. "Well Smitty, I recon we are soon gonna find out." Together they swung onto their horses and rode slowly toward the sound of the cannon.

Randi Madderra

Times were hard on the little Alabama farm. The Union blockade had all but stopped the availability of dry goods from England. She and her family had so many patches sewn into their clothes that her Momma joked that they all looked like Joseph's coat of many colors from the Bible. Food was scarce and it seemed they were always hungry.

Their few family heirlooms had been packed into the old circus trunk and hoisted with great difficulty into the fork of a huge oak where it was disguised with branches and leaves to keep it safe from Yankee raiders. She hadn't heard from James in over a year. Each trip to town was filled with apprehension that she would

find his name there, posted on the window of the general store, where all the war casualties were listed as they became known. She had become so afraid to look that her sister had volunteered to make the weekly trip.

Today Randi sat rocking on the front porch of the old house, mending clothes and occasionally glancing down the road toward town for the first glimpse of her returning sister. Catching a sob in her throat, Randi thought "She ought to be back by now."

Taking two deep breaths to hold back the tears, she stepped down from the porch onto the hard packed clay and began to walk slowly toward town. She would meet her sister on the road. She couldn't wait any longer. She had to know.

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