

## Burial Detail

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

A photographer's wagon sets ta the edge a this field. His horse nuzzles the dry ground while the photographer -- a white man -- roots in the back, pullin out stuff like a man sittin up camp. I stand in fronta my full litter and watch -- anythin for a break. Behind me, Dawson says sumpin loud enough for me ta hear, but too low for me ta catch the words. I don't miss the meanin. He thinks I don't work hard enough.

Maybe not. I ain't supposed ta be here. Battlegrounds is dangerous for a man like me, even battlegrounds ten months old. But I need the money and the U.S. government is payin more than I'd make anywhere else. Luce is pregnant, and times is so different now. Different than they was a month ago. If we kin get out a Virginia, we kin live a real life. A real life -- that's worth touchin the souls a the dead.

The white man, he gets out a the wagon, draggin a long three legged black stand. He ain't that tall, kinda skinny, with a big black beard and stringy hair. His coat's too warm for the day, even though the air's got a bite. He'll be bakin before the afternoon's out. April in Virginia's a bad mix a hot and cold; mornins like ta freeze your hands and afternoons sometimes make you sweat. I ain't got many clothes but I wear my oldest pants, a heavy shirt I kin pull off if I gotta, and a stockin cap that folds over my brow. Last night, I searched our place for gloves, but we ain't got none, or at least none Luce'll let me dirty so I got ta do this work with my bare hands. So far I ain't touched nothin but cloth. Cloth was bad enough.

As I think on that, I wipe my palms on the thick cotton a my pants. Corpses ten months dead ain't quite skeletons yet. They got bits a skin hangin off the bones, and some lumpish stuff in the skull. The clothes is still on em, hangin rag-like now, with the stench a death still clingin. Mosta these white boys been layin in the Virginia sun since last June. A few been claimed by family -- mostly Rebs who lived nearby -- but the rest, their families been told they was lost or died "valiently" or was buried by comrades.

Guess I count as a comrade, near ta a year after the fact.

The white man, he got the box part on top a the stand and he's carryin a crate a plates like they weighed as much as him. He eases em down, grabs one, and the glass catches the sun. He grins at me like he spects me ta grin back. I look away. I dunno what interests a white man in a group a folk tillin this field a death.

There's five a us on this patch -- five live ones, that is -- and maybe a two hundred dead. And those's the ones we kin count. It don't take inta consideration the ones the animals got, leavin bones scattered all over every which way. Or the ones that blowed up when they's hit by cannon, or those that was burned when the Rebs tried ta light the breastworks, tryin ta start a fire that consumed all like they done in the Wilderness. Ain't too many burned here. One a the boys who's diggin, he worked burial in the Wilderness, and he say the smell a smoke's still fresh in the air.

I couldn't work there no more than I kin work here. I'm new ta this crew, so they give me the worst job. I shoulda been diggin. The land talks but it don't say as much as bodies.

I picks up the litter, and drags it ta the hole Dawson's dug. A leg bone rolls off, gets buried under some dried grass. I stare for a minute. I don't wanna touch it again, but I guess I will after I deliver the litter ta Dawson.

He's leanin on his shovel, starin at the molderin pile a blue cloth that I piled on the bottom a the litter. It's harder ta look at the skulls, with their empty eyes and sad little grins. The skulls, they show you youse

pickin up bits a men. The cloth could be nothin more than garbage left by the retreatin army.

Dawson reaches down ta help me with the litter when I get close ta the hole. This one's deep, the dirt darker below than it is up top. He's been diggin a while, but he don't got blisters like I'd get if I spent the mornin makin that hole. His hands got calluses on 'em -- he used ta work the land.

I worked the house until the war done started. I was younger then, wasn't quite ready ta be the butler or the reg'lar manservant, but I was trainin. The Missus, she say I had ta learn ta talk better, and I was doin that when they fought the first battle at Mannassas, north a here.

The Missus, she pack up everythin, put it in storage -- not that it helped when they burned the city -- and she and the little ones went ta live with relatives west a here. Master died at Gettysburg -- the real butler told me that when I saw him las week. I was gonna go north, but Luce stopped me. She was pregnant then too, but lost the baby when it was too late for us ta leave. Not enough food, I guess. Her body couldn't handle a baby and survivin at the same time.

I tended her, doin odd jobs, sayin I was free, even though the Missus made it clear she spected all a us ta be around when she got back. Gave us a roof at least till it was burned from under us.

Now we's really and truly free, have been for near two weeks, ever since Grant and Lee signed some papers in Appomattox, not too far from here. They's Union soldiers everywhere -- ta keep the peace, they say, tho havin soldiers didn't help ole Mister Lincoln none. Luce been cryin bout him for more'n a week, like he was someone she knew personal.

Thins's changed, and under the good's sumpin bad comin. I kin feel it. It's the way them Rebs look at us when we's walkin down the street, not carryin nothin a theirs, not sayin "yessir" and "nosir," at least when we's thinkin a it. Some habits get ground in good. I still bob my head like a good darkie most a the time, and I hates it more with each bob, like it takes a little piece a me, grinds it up, and loses it forever.

The North's still the Promised Land, least ta me and Luce. We's gonna raise our kids where there's no battlefields, no burned out buildins, and no hatred in white folks eyes.

So I's workin here.

And now a white man thinks I'm worth photographin.

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He's a strange critter, that white man. He been crouchin behind the black curtain, pointin the box ever which way tryin ta see what direction's best. We been pretendin he's not there, waitin for the white boss hired us ta come back and make him go way. Least I been. Finally, I says that ta Dawson as we tilt the litter.

He laughs. "Ain't no one but us till sundown. No white boy's gonna get his hands in this, Yank or not."

The bodies tumble off the edge, revealin sun-yellow bones mixed in with the cloth. The boots and brass buttons, medals and watches is mostly gone. Guess someone could come and steal from the dead but didn't have the stomach ta bury 'em. Maybe a white man woulda done this job if there'd been real pickins ta get from it.

A small cloud a dust rises from below and a faint stink a rot. One a the skulls tumbles ta the edge, lands upside down. Looks disrespectful ta me , but I ain't crawlin in there ta right no white boy's head. I done enough a that with ones that was alive.

"I guess I better dig a new hole," Dawson says.

I look around us. They's bodies everywhere. "It'll take most the day ta fill this one."

I don't wanna do bodies by myself. Sooner or later I gotta touch one, really touch one, and then it'll go bad for all a us.

Dawson looks at me long. His eyes are pale green, got from some white man who thought his slave women was good enough for more than scrubbin or pickin. Finally, I's the one who looks away. He ain't touchin no more bodies. He moved up ta diggin when I got hired. He ain't comin back ta this job.

So's I pick up my litter and move ta the next patch a ground. They's a trench jus ahead a me. That's the Reb line. They dug in, didn't let Grant get inta Richmond, not then anyway.

Name a this battle here was Cold Harbor. They ain't no harbor nowhere near round, just little streams, swamps, and high ridges. Lots a windy roads. Ain't no accurate maps, that's why they say Grant lost. Didn't know the land, didn't know how ta fight here.

All I member was the way hope turned sour in my stomach when I found out the Yanks done gone around Richmond, went ta Petersburg and tried ta work their way up. I member thinkin, \_hopin,\_ they was gonna bust through and free us all. Wasn't that long ago they finally got ta Richmond, and then wasn't the way I thought it'd be tall.

They's a lot a bodies here, most a em recnizable. All tangled where they fell, legs under em, arms splayed out, skinless hands clawin toward the sky. I sit the litter next ta the biggest pile and wipe the sweat off my face. The mornin's still cold, but what's facin me's got me hot.

I look for that white man. He's still messin with his camera, yellin sumpin at Kershaw and the rest a the crew. Wants em ta pose. I ain't gonna pose. Not with no litter a bodies and open graves all around. Who wants ta look at that six months from now? Who wants ta think about this ever again?

The canvas stretched across the litter is stained with old blood from its days in the field hospital and goo from the bodies. This time, they ain't none that's just dissolved ta cloth, like my first site. I used that cloth ta hold skulls so the bleached bone didn't touch my fingers. Then I sit it on the litter and let it fall into the hole, just like the rest a the stuff.

I wish I ain't done that.

I bend over the first body. Uniform is patched and ripped, thin on the elbows and knees. Don't know how they wore that stuff in the Virginia heat. Last May-June it was hotter than holy hell, a sticky deadly heat that was killin old folks in Richmond. Don't know how men marched in it. Don't know how they fought, how they used rifles, barrels turnin hot against they hands, fires burnin all around. Don't know how they come even this far.

My throat gets tight and I makes myself swallow. Then I crouch and slide my hands under that heavy coat. The bones shift and the back a the wool is wet with sumpin I don't want ta think about. I lift and put the body on the litter. Fortunately, all the pieces stay together.

I do the same with the next one, but my luck has run out. The right arm, crossed over the chest as if he was tryin ta cover his heart, slides off, and I catch it, fingers slippin through a hole in the sleeve, catchin bone.

It's soft and smooth and --

\_he's hungry, so hungry his stomach's cramping. Dust is thick around him, and all he can hear -- all he's heard for days -- is cannon and musketry rattling like a storm that doesn't quit. Sweat's in his eyes -- at least he thinks that's sweat. Orders are to take the line, go over the breastworks, find the weapons, get another five miles before nightfall.\_

\_Five miles and they can't even take one.\_

\_He doesn't even know where his friends are. Two fell on the march here, in sun so hot it seemed to broil human flesh. The sandy plain was heated to the intensity of a blast furnace. If he survives this, he'll tell his son that he's been to hell and no man should live in such a way that he has to spend eternity there. His son. Wide blue eyes and pudgy fingers. He'll be a boy when the war's over, not a baby. A boy -- \_

"...looked like some kind of fit," the white man's sayin. He's left his camera and is bent over me. He's younger'n me, his hair stickin up like he ain't never seen the butt enda a comb. He smells a sweat and chemicals.

"Weren't no fit." Dawson's got me braced. He's moved me away from the bodies. I kin see his chin from here, stubble already growin, the stubborn set a his jaw. Worked with him only a mornin and I kin already read him.

"You should give him some water, or feed him," the white man says. "I saw things like this during the war. Strong men -- "

"He don't need water," Dawson says.

I set up, wipe my hand in the grass. I kin still feel that bone on my skin, still feel that boy's life like it was my own. He weren't more than twenty, a wife and son back home. New baby he seen only once -- a Christmas leave he was lucky enough ta get. The wife cried when he left.

\_What if it's the last time I see you?\_ she said, clingin, makin his dress shirt wet with her tears.

\_Now, April,\_ he said, \_You just gotta believe we're gonna spend the rest of our lives together.\_

But I kin feel inside the fear eatin at him, the lies he told durin the whole stay so she wouldn't worry unduly, the way he tried ta memorize his baby's face so it'd be the last thin he'd see.

And it was.

I puts my head in my hands, but they smell a rot, and I cain't stomach it. The white man, he's still worryin but Dawson, he's got his arms crossed.

"How come you ain't tole me you got the Sight?" he ask.

"Ain't none yo bidness."

The white man, he frownin like we ain't speakin English.

"It my bidness when you cain't do yo job." Dawson say.

"I cain."

"You faint then ever time you touch sumpin?"

"I done the whole mornin. I just need some cloth or gloves or sumpin. That's all."

He grunts, sighs, looks ta the rest a the crew. They's thousands a dead round here, days, maybe weeks a work, and he ain't got a lot a men. We all need the money. He know that. He prob'ly know why too. He prob'ly got the same dream.

"I have gloves," the white man says.

"He don't need fancy gloves," Dawson says.

"I kin use cloth." I don't want no debt ta no white man.

"My gloves'll work better," he says. "They're not fancy. I used them for carrying. I have another pair."

I need the job more'n I need my pride. But I don't say nothin. The white man, he take that for a yes, and runs ta his wagon.

"Who he?" I ask.

Dawson shrugs. "You got the Sight bad."

"It come down through the family."

He nod. "It ain't forward Sight?"

I shake my head. "Only what was."

His smile's sad. "I knows what was. I was hopin you could see what would be."

"I'm hopin that too."

He get up, his knees crackin. "I ain't givin up the shovel."

"I know," I say. It's work with the bodies or go home. I jus gots ta be more careful.

He go back ta his new hole. I look at the bodies stretched out around me, skulls turned toward the mornin sun. All a em got stories. All a em gots wives and families and little boys with liquid blue eyes who ain't never goin ta hear the story a this place.

Coz these boys fought n died, me and Luce and the baby still inside her, we got a chance. Coz these boys fought n died, I's gettin paid this day stead a doin this work for some Massa who says he own me. Coz these boys fought n died, my child kin grow up in my house with my wife in my family.

Coz these boys fought n died.

The white man, he run back ta me and crouch like I'm sick and he gotta be real careful. He got thick gloves, leather, better than any I ever had. He hand em ta me.

"I've heard about the Sight," he says ta me. "I've never met anyone with it before."

I doubt that, but he prob'ly never know'd.

"You see everything from their perspective, don't you? The whole battle. Everything. Even the moment they die."

I slip on the gloves. They's soft. I kin work with em on.

"You think," he ask, "maybe we could try to photograph what you see?"

Then I pulls the gloves off. I cain't owe this man no favor. "No."

"Why not?"

"You see anythin when I was down? Hear anythin?"

He frowns. They's a small crease in his forehead that's gonna grow deeper the older he gets. "No."

"No one does cept the person with the Sight. It ain't sumpin someone else kin share."

His shoulders slump. I hand him the gloves. His face turns bright red. "Oh, no," he says. "Those weren't a bribe. I just wanted to help, that's all."

"Why?"

"You need the work, don't you?" They's some understandin in his eyes. Not enough. But some. It ain't like them Reb eyes, all hatey and nasty. They's a kindness here.

"That box a your'n, it make you see things clear, don't it?"

They's a little smile on his face, sad, but not as sad as Dawson's. "Not as clear as your Sight, I suspect."

That's true nuff.

"I would like to capture what you see," he says. "Maybe some day, I could hire you and we could experiment -- "

"No," I says.

"Why not?" he ask.

Dawson put the body, the one I touched, on the litter. The boy's skull is small. They's a nick in the front and a hole in the back the size a my fist. His wife ain't never gonna see this body, ain't never gonna know just how he died. She's gonna tell her boy what a hero Daddy was and how glorious he died, fightin for the cause.

She ain't gonna know about the lies he told and the fear eatin his belly and the last days in the dirt and the heat and the stink.

"Coz sometimes," I says, "you kin see too clear."

He stares at me for a long minute. His eyes is the same green as Dawson's. I'm thinkin maybe I'm gonna have ta splain what I mean when he stands up.

"This is thankless work," he says, maybe meanin ta be kind.

I look at the bodies stretched from here ta the grove where the Cold Harbor tavern still stands. Bodies waitin for someone ta tend em, waitin for someone ta care.

"It ain't thankless," I say. "It jus hard."