

Counterfactual by Gardner Dozois

Since he left his position as editor of Asimov's magazine, Gardner Dozois has been busily editing a variety of anthologies, including Galileo's Children, Nebula Awards Showcase 2006, and One Million A.D.

To our good fortune, he has also been writing more fiction. His last story, "When the Great Days Came," appeared in our December 2005 issue. His new one is a very different sort of tale, an inquiry into What Might Have Been that is sure to interest longtime fans of science fiction who are likely to find an old friend or two herein...

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"If we reach the Blue Ridge Mountains, we can hold out for twenty years."

--General Robert E. Lee

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Cliff's fountain pen rolled across the pull-out writing shelf again, and he sighed and reached out to grab it before it tumbled to the floor. The small ink bottle kept marching down the shelf too, juddering with each vibration of the car.

Writing on a train wasn't easy, especially on a line where the rail-bed had been insufficiently maintained for decades. Even forming legible words was a challenge, with the jarring of the undercarriage or a sudden jerk all too likely to turn a letter into an indecipherable *splat* or to produce a startled, rising line across the page, as if the ink were trying to escape the mundane limitations of the paper.

Scenery was a distraction too. Cliff had always loved landscapes, and he had to wage a constant battle against the urge to sit there and just look out the window, where, at the moment, pale armies of fir trees slowly slid by, while the sky guttered toward a winter dusk in washes of plum and ash and sullen red. But he'd be sharing this room tonight with three other reporters, which meant lights-out early and a night wasted listening to them fart and snore, so if he was going to get any writing done on the new Counterfactual he was working on for *McClure's*, it'd better be now, while his roommates were down in the bar with the rest of the boys.

Cliff opened his notebook, smoothed it, and bent over the page:

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General Robert E. Lee put his hands on the small of his back and stretched, trying to ease some of the tension out of his aching spine. He had never been so tired, feeling every one of his fifty-eight years sitting on his shoulders like bars of lead.

For days, days that had stretched into an unending nightmare of pain and fatigue, he had struggled to stay awake, to stay erect in the saddle, as they executed a fighting retreat from the trenches and earthworks of Petersburg westward along the Appomattox River toward Lynchburg, Grant's Army of the James, which outnumbered his own forces four to one, snapping at their heels every step of the way. Thousands of his men had died along the way, and Lee almost envied the fallen--at least they could *stop*. But Lee couldn't stop. He knew that all eyes were on him, that it was up to him to put on a show of being indefatigable and imperturbable, tall in the saddle, regal, calm, and wholly in command. His example and the pride it inspired, and the love and respect the men felt for him, was all that was keeping his ragged and starving army going. No matter how exhausted he was, no matter how bleak and defeated were his inner thoughts, no matter how hopeless he knew his position to be, no matter how much his chest ached (as it had been aching increasingly for days), he couldn't let it show.

They had stopped for the night in the woods near Appomattox Court House, too tired even to pitch tents. There had been almost nothing to eat, even for the staff officers. Now his staff huddled close to him

in the darkness, as if they depended on him for light and warmth as much as or more than the low-burning bivouac fire: ragged, worn-out men in tattered uniforms, sprawled on blankets spread on the grass or sitting on saddles thrown over tree-stumps, without even chairs or camp-stools anymore. Lee could see their eyes, gleaming wetly in the firelight, as well as feel them. Every eye was on him still.

The barking of rifles had started up again from General Gordon's rear-guard on the road behind them when the courier arrived. He was thin as a skeleton, like Death himself come to call. He saluted and handed Lee a sealed communique. "Sir, from General Grant."

Lee held the note warily, as if it was a snake. He knew what it was: another message from General Grant, politely suggesting that he surrender his army.

The question was, what was *he* going to say in return?

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The car jolted, shuddered, and jerked again while momentum equalized itself along the length of the train, and Cliff lifted his pen from the paper, waiting for the ride to steady again. What *was* he going to say in return? That was the problem.

He had an arresting central image, one that had come to him whole: Robert E. Lee surrendering the Army of Northern Virginia to General Ulysses S. Grant, the soldiers lined up somberly along a country road, heads down, some of the Confederates openly in tears, Lee handing his sword to Grant while a light rain fell, both men looking solemn and grim.... How to justify it, though? Counterfactuals had become increasingly popular in recent years--perhaps because the public had been denied the opportunity to play soldier during the Great War--until they were now almost respectable as pulp stories went, and you could make decent money selling them. But in writing Counterfactuals, you had to provide some kind of tipping-point, some event that would have changed everything that came after--and it had to be at least superficially plausible, or the fans, armchair historians all, would tear you to pieces. Having the Confederates win the War was a common enough trope in the genre, and a number of stories had been written about how Lee had won at Gettysburg or had pushed on out of Virginia to attack and burn Washington when he had the chance, forcing capitulation on a terrified Union, but Cliff was after something more subtle--a tale in which the Confederates still *lost* the War, but lost it in a different way, with different consequences as a result. It was hard to see what would have motivated Lee to surrender, though. True, he was nearly at the end of his rope, his men exhausted and starving, being closely harried by Union forces--but in the real world, none of that had brought him to the point of seriously contemplating surrender. In fact, it was at that very point when he'd said that he was determined "to fight to the last," and told his officers and men that "We must all determine to die at our posts." Didn't sound much like somebody who was ready to throw in the towel.

Then, just when things looked blackest, he had narrowly avoided a closing Union trap by breaking past Phil Sheridan at Appomattox Court House, and kept on going until he reached the Blue Ridge Mountains, there to break his army up into smaller units that melted into the wilderness, setting the stage for decades of bitterly fought guerilla war, a war of terror and ambush that was still smoldering to this day. It was hard to see what would have made Lee surrender, when he didn't contemplate it even in the hour of his most extreme need. Especially as he knew that he could expect few compromises in the matter of surrender and little or no mercy from the implacable President Johnson....

He was spinning his wheels. Time for a drink.

Outside, the sun had finally disappeared below the horizon, leaving behind only a spreading red bruise. The darkening sky was slate-gray now, and hard little flakes of snow were squeezing themselves out of it, like dandruff sprinkled across felt. This had been a terrible winter, especially following the devastating

dust-storms that had ravaged the Plains states all summer long. He hoped that the weather didn't work itself into a real blizzard, one that might hold them up on the way back. Like everyone else, he wanted to get the ceremony over with and get back home before Christmas--even though all he really had to look forward to was a turkey sandwich at a Horn & Hardart's and an evening of drinking in a journalist's hangout with many of these same people with whom he was already sharing a train in the first place.

Cliff stored his notebook in his carpetbag, and pushed out into the corridor, which was rocking violently from side to side, like a ship in a high sea, as the track-bed roughened. He made his way unsteadily along the corridor, bracing himself against the wall. Freezing needles of winter cold stabbed at him between the cars, and then stale air and the smell of human sweat swallowed him as he crossed into one of the coach cars, which was crowded with passengers, pinch-faced civilians in threadbare clothes, including whole families trying to sleep sitting up in the uncomfortable wooden seats. Babies were crying, women were crooning to them, couples were fighting, someone was playing a Mexican song on a beat-up old guitar, and four Texans--Texans were being seen around more frequently these days, now that relations had been normalized with the Republic of Texas--were playing poker on one of the seats, with onlookers standing in the aisles and whooping with every turn of the cards. They all wore the stereotypical but seemingly obligatory Stetsons.

There were three more coach cars to push his way through, and Cliff was glad to get beyond them into the alcoves between the cars, even though the cold air nipped at him each time. He never had liked noise and crowds, which was one reason why he'd always preferred small towns to the big cities. With things the way they were, though, the big cities like Chicago and Minneapolis were where the work was, and so he had no choice but to live there, as long as the *Minneapolis Star* paid his bills.

Even out here, between the cars, he could smell the tobacco stink coming from the next compartment, and when he opened the door and stepped into the bar car, tobacco smoke hung in such a thick yellow cloud that he could barely see. Most of the newsmen on the train were in here, standing around the bar or sitting grouped on stools around the little tables. Like Cliff, most of them had shunned the dining car and brought bags of sandwiches from Chicago, to save their meager expense-account money for the bar.

Cliff was hailed with the usual derisive, mildly insulting greetings, and two of the boys squeezed apart to make room for him at the bar. He was well-enough liked by the other newsmen, although his hobby of writing Counterfactuals and Westerns, even the occasional Air War or Weird Fantasy, marked him out as a bit strange. Half of these guys probably had an unfinished draft of the Great American Novel stashed away in a drawer somewhere, their attempt at unseating Hemingway or Fitzgerald, but in public you were supposed to give lip-service to the idea that to a *real* newsman, the only kind of writing that mattered was journalism.

"Hey, Cliff," John said. "Finish another masterpiece?"

"Aw, he was probably just jerking off," Staubach said.

Cliff smiled tolerantly and bought a round. He was already several drinks behind. The *wunderkind* from the *Chicago Tribune*--he was supposed to be nineteen, but to Cliff it didn't look like he could be more than thirteen--was trying to get an argument about The Gathering Clouds of War in Europe going with Bill, a big amiable Michigan Swede who rarely paid any attention to anything outside of the box-scores on the sports page, unless it was a racing form. "The United States will never get involved in a foreign war," the kid was saying, in his surprisingly deep voice. "Bryant kept us out of the Great War, and Hoover will keep us out of this one, too." He was short and pudgy, pasty-faced, with a sullen, cynical, seen-it-all air unusual in one so young. For a while, a few of the boys had held the fact that he was a New York Jew against him, but he was basically good-natured behind his gruff exterior, and smart as a whip, with just the kind of savage black humor that reporters liked, and so most of them had warmed to

him.

He was trying to get a rise out of Bill, who had been incautious enough to express mild Interventionist sentiments a few times in the past, but Bill wasn't rising to the bait. "Guess England and Germany will just have to take care of de Gaulle without our help," Bill said amiably. "They're up to it, I guess."

"We've got enough problems of our own without worrying about de Gaulle," John threw in.

"Fuck de Gaulle and the horse he fucking rode in on," Staubach said. "Who's got the cards?"

"Language, gentlemen!" old Matthews said sternly. They all jeered at him, but they acquiesced, Staubach rephrasing his question to "Okay, who's got the *frigging* cards?" Although he was as natty as ever, impeccably dressed, looking every inch the distinguished senior correspondent, Matthews had been drinking even harder lately than reporters usually drank, and was already a bit glassy-eyed. The kid was supposed to be his assistant, but everybody knew that he'd been writing his column for him, and doing a better job of it than Matthews ever had.

John had the cards, but they had to wait through another couple of rounds for one of the little tables to open up, as the more prosperous passengers, or those who were more finicky about their food, drifted off to the dining car up front. "Crowded in here," Cliff commented. "Where are all the politicians, though? You'd think they'd be nine deep around the bar."

"Aw, they got a bar of their own, coupla cars up," Staubach said.

"Got the first three cars, all to themselves," Bill threw in, with a grin. "And a sergeant with a carbine on the platform outside, to make sure Lindbergh and the rest of them don't get bothered by the *hoi poloi*."

"Sure, little do they care that the poor bastard has to freeze his nuts off all the way to Montgomery," John said, which drew another admonishment of "Language!" from Matthews, although, as he was already more than half-fried, it was clear that his heart wasn't in it anymore. The bartender--who, on a train like this, traveling through the Occupied Territories, was likely to be a soldier in civilian clothes, with a carbine of his own tucked under the bar--grinned at them over Matthews's head.

At last a table opened up, and they settled in for their usual nickel-and-dime game of draw. Matthews kept fumbling with his cards, having trouble holding them in a proper fan, forgetting whose bet it was, and changing his mind about how many cards he wanted, and soon was the big loser--as big as it got in this penny ante game, anyway. Every time the kid lost a hand, he would curse with an inventive fluency that was almost Shakespearian, and that kept the rest of them chuckling. Since he never deigned to use the common "four-letter words," even Matthews couldn't really complain, although he grumbled about it. Bill played with his usual quiet competency and was soon ahead, although Cliff managed to hold his own and split a number of pots with him.

After about an hour and a half of this, the smoke and the noise, and the fact that Matthews was no longer able to keep from dropping his cards every time he picked them up, and was getting pissy about it, made Cliff deal himself out.

"Going back to the room," he said, "see if I can get a couple of pages done before the rest of you guys show up."

"Can't keep *Wild West Weekly* waiting," Bill said.

"Aw, he's just going to jerk off again," Staubach mumbled, peering at his cards.

Cliff waved at them and walked away, moving a little more unsteadily than was entirely justified by the

lurching of the car. Truth was, left to his own devices, Cliff wasn't that heavy a drinker--but if you were going to be accepted by the boys, you had to drink with them, and reporters prided themselves on their ability to put it away, another way in which the kid--who seemed to have a hollow trunk, as well as two hollow legs--fit right in in spite of his youth. Cliff could feel that he was at the edge of his ability to toss it back without becoming knee-walking drunk, though, which would lose him respect with the boys, so it was time to call it a night.

There was snow crusted on the footplates between the cars now, although it didn't seem to be snowing anymore outside. Cliff decided that he'd better clear his head if he was going to get any writing done, and walked back through the now-darkened coach cars and the sleeping cars to the observation platform on the back of the rear car.

It was bitterly cold outside and Cliff's breath puffed in tattered plumes, but the snow had stopped and the black clouds overhead had momentarily parted, revealing the fat pale moon. They were still moving through thick forest, the snow-shrouded ghosts of the trees gleaming like bones in the darkness, but now the ground on one side of the track fell steeply away, opening the world up to space and distance and the dimly perceived black bulks of nearby hills. There was a fast little mountain stream down there, winding along at the bottom of the slope, and in the moonlight he could see the cold white rills it made as it broke around streambed rocks.

The train slowed while going up the next long incline, and a dark figure broke from the trees, darted forward, and sprang onto the observation platform, grabbing the railing. As Cliff flinched back in shock, the figure threw a leg over the railing and pulled itself up. It paused, sitting on the top rail, one leg over, and looked at Cliff. It was a man, thin, clean-shaven, with a large nose and close-cropped hair bristling across a bullet-head, clutching a bundle in one hand. As Cliff gaped, the man smiled jauntily, said, "Evenin', sport!", and put one finger to his lips in a shushing gesture. Then he swung his other leg over the railing, hopped down to the platform, and sauntered by Cliff, giving him a broad wink as he passed.

Up close, even by moonlight, you could tell that his clothes were patched and much-mended, but they seemed reasonably clean, and although he exuded a brief whiff of sweat and unwashed armpits and sour breath as he passed, it wasn't too strong or too rank. He couldn't have been on the bum for too long, Cliff thought, or at least he must have been finding work frequently enough to enable him to keep himself moderately clean. The tramp disappeared into the car without a backward glance, presumably to lose himself among the coach-class passengers or find a water closet or a storage cubical to hide in for the night. There were thousands of such ragged men on the road these days, drifting from place to place, looking for work or a handout, especially down here in the Occupied Territories; the economy was bad enough in the States, but down here, whole regions had never really recovered from the War in the first place, the subsequent decades of guerrilla war and large-scale terrorism--with entire armies of unreconstructed rebels still on the loose and lurking in the hills, many of them by now comprised of the children and grandchildren of the original soldiers--tending to discourage economic growth ... especially with raiders knocking down new factories or businesses as fast as they sprang up, to discourage "collaboration" with the occupying forces.

Cliff knew that he really should report the tramp to the conductor, but it was difficult to work up enough indignation to bother, and in the end he decided not to even try. It was hard to blame the guy for wanting to be inside the train, where it was warm, rather than out there in the freezing night.

Up ahead, around a long curve, you could see the engine itself now, puffing out bursts of fire-shot black smoke like some great, stertorously gasping iron beast. The smoke plume wrapped itself back around the observation platform, making Cliff cough and filling his mouth with the ashen taste of cinders, and that, plus the fact that he was beginning to shiver, told him that it was time to go back inside. If his head wasn't

clear by now, it wasn't going to be.

When Cliff got back to their compartment, though, it became obvious that it didn't matter; he wasn't going to get any more writing done tonight. The conductor had already rearranged the compartment into its sleeping configuration, folding away the benches and lowering two bunks from each opposing wall, one stacked above the other. Somewhat surprisingly, his roommates were already back from the bar. Matthews, in fact, was already soddenly asleep on one of the lower bunks, gurgling and snoring, still fully clothed, although Bill was fussing with him, trying to get him undressed, with little success. Cliff gathered that the old man had passed out in the bar, or come near to it, and his compatriots had hauled him back to the roomette. Even out here, you could smell the booze coming off of him.

With the bunks folded down, there was hardly space enough for Bill and the kid to stand in the tiny compartment, and Cliff had to hover in the doorway, half out in the corridor, waiting for someone to make room for him. The kid at last got impatient with Bill's efforts to undress Matthews and bumped him aside, saying harshly, "Oh, leave the poor old *pfumpt* alone." With a curious tenderness that belayed the gruffness of his tone, he took off the old man's shoes and stowed them under his bunk, and loosened his tie. "He'll just have to sleep in his clothes for once like the rest of us, instead of those stupid woolen pajamas."

As if to demonstrate, Bill climbed into the other bottom bunk--fully dressed except for his shoes; it was a good idea to keep your wallet in your pocket, too, since sneak-thieves were known to riffle through bags left on the floor in a compartment while the occupants slept--and put his hat over his eyes. Cliff slid inside, now that some floor space had opened up, and closed the door on the corridor.

They had come down out of the hills by now, and stopped at a tiny station for no readily apparent reason. There was a small town out there, two or three streets of two-story storefronts laid out parallel to the tracks, some dilapidated old wooden houses with big overgrown yards set farther back. The storefronts carried faded signs that said things like "Hudson's Hickory House" or "Brown Furniture Company," but none of them looked like they'd been open for a while, and several had boarded-up windows. Nothing was moving out there except a dog pissing on a lamppole.

"What a dump!" the kid said, turning to look at Cliff. Up close like this, he had a habit of partially covering his mouth with his hand when he spoke; he was embarrassed about his teeth, which he never brushed; they were green. "No wonder all the colored folks moved up North."

"Getting lynched and shot and burned out by Lee's Boys probably had something to do with it too," Bill said dryly, lifting his hat for a second. "Turn off the light. I want to get some sleep."

The kid vaulted up into the bunk above Matthews. Cliff took his shoes off, stuffed his carpetbag into his bunk to use as a pillow, shut off the light, and climbed into the other upper in the dark, nearly falling when the car lurched as the train started moving again.

Cliff lay awake in the darkness for a while, feeling oddly apprehensive and jittery for no particular reason he could identify, listening to the snoring and moaning of his roommates. He tried picturing himself back on his grandfather's hill farm near the confluence of the Wisconsin and the Mississippi, playing fetch with his old buff-colored coon dog, and eventually the steady swaying movement of the car rocked him to sleep.

Even so, he'd wake up for a moment every time the motion of the train changed, slowing down or speeding up with a jerk and a lurch, opening his eyes to see, through the uncurtained top of the window, trees rushing by, the roofs of houses, bright lights on tall poles, more trees, and then his eyes would close, and he'd sleep again, the wailing of the train's whistle and the rhythmical clatter of its wheels weaving

themselves through his dreams.

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By morning, they had outrun the winter. Here, there was no snow on the ground; browning, multicolored leaves clung stubbornly to the hardwood trees. Farther south, on the Gulf Coast or at least in Florida, it was probably still summer, palm trees swaying in balmy breezes, but they weren't going that far. This was the last leg of their journey, with only a couple of hours left until they reached Montgomery.

The room steward brought them a pot of coffee. Sensitized by the kid's remarks of the previous evening, Cliff noticed that the steward was a Mediterranean immigrant of some sort--Italian, Greek; recent enough to retain a heavy accent--where before the War, the job almost certainly would have been done by a colored fellow. It wasn't true that there were no colored people left in the Occupied Territories, of course--there were still families holding out here and there. But decades of large-scale terrorism had chased millions of them to the big cities of the North, where they had encountered other problems to replace the ones they'd left behind, and most of the medium-level jobs went to more recent (and reasonably white) immigrants like the room steward. Now the Open Door that had let people like the steward into the country was slamming closed as immigration policies were tightened, leaving millions of European refugees with nowhere to go. As someone whose father had immigrated from Prague only a generation before, Cliff sympathized with all of them, and with the exiled colored folk as well, unwelcome in either the South or North.

Bill slipped his shoes on and ducked out to fetch a bunch of doughnuts from the dining car. They ate while taking turns going to the WC at the end of the sleeper for sponge baths and to change into fresh clothes, although old Matthews was so glazed and hung-over that the kid had to guide him there and back, holding him by one arm. Bill teased him about this unmercifully, although he wasn't quite mean enough to ask the kid if he'd had to help Matthews bathe. He certainly had to help him dress, though, while Bill jeered, and Matthews, lost in his own world, stared at nothing anybody else could see. He clearly didn't have long to go before he reached the end of his rope, Cliff realized. Odds were that the kid would have his job before then anyway.

Outside, rundown white clapboard houses with incongruously large porches were slipping by, as well as burnt-out factories, cut banks of red clay, goats grazing in hilly yards, an occasional glimpse of a sluggish brown river. For the last half hour, they crawled by a huge Army base, home of one of the occupying divisions, although little was visible beyond the high walls and barbed wire except the red roofs of the barracks, a water tower, a big industrial crane of some sort. There were guard towers every few yards, with machine-gun emplacements at the top, giving the whole complex the look of a prison. Scrub woods, weed-overgrown lots, and heaps of rusting scrap metal for the next few minutes, and then the outlying freight yards for the Montgomery station began to roll past.

Montgomery was a big city for this part of the world. It had been in Yankee hands since the end of the War, and although it had suffered several major raids in subsequent years from unreconstructed Confederate forces, and had been shelled by terrorists more than once, it was still in pretty good shape. There were a few bombed-out buildings visible in the center of town, but most of them were busily being repaired, and the sounds of construction--hammering, workmen shouting, buzz-saws whining--were constantly heard here. Outside the train for the first time in more than a day, Cliff wished he'd brought a heavier coat; it wasn't as cold here as it had been up the track, in the hill country, but it was still brisk, and the pregnant gray clouds that were sliding by overhead promised rain that he hoped would hold off until after the ceremony. The air smelled of dust and ozone.

He caught a glimpse of the Vice President going by, his handsome features looking strained and a bit grim; one of the youngest Vice Presidents in history, Lindbergh hadn't been given a lot to do after his

charm, good looks, and charisma had helped Herbert Hoover win the election, except to be trotted out on ceremonial occasions like this one that were important but not quite important enough to fetch the President out of the White House. He was accompanied by his son, a somber, silent little boy dressed like a miniature adult in suit and tie, and by the usual crowd of handlers and hangers-on, as well as by John Foster Dulles, Huey Long, Charles Curtis, and the rest of the senatorial party, and *their* people. All of the dignitaries were hustled into long black limousines and whisked away, the star reporters and big-name columnists--one of whom once would have been Matthews--scurrying after them, off to arrange interviews with local officials and whichever of the senators they could catch before they disappeared into backroom bars somewhere.

After the ceremony, there'd be the usual photo-op for clutch-and-grin shots of Lindbergh shaking hands with the outgoing Territorial Governor, Lindbergh and the pro-tem State Governor about to take office, Lindbergh and the Mayor, Lindbergh and the Mayor's big-breasted sister, and so on, and then, hopefully before it started pouring, they'd all rush back to the train station to file their stories via telegraph (there were no trunk lines through the Occupied Territories; it was difficult enough to keep the telegraph lines up). They'd all try to come up with some twist or angle on the same dry story, of course (Cliff hoped to get some pithy quotes from Huey Long, who'd been born in the Occupied Territories before moving North, carpetbag in hand, to seek his fortune, and who was a usefully Colorful Character, always good for a line or two of copy), and then they'd all pile back in the train and head back to Chicago, to be off to somewhere else a day or a week later. That was a reporter's life.

In the meantime, most of the newsmen crossed the tracks and headed for a caf across the street from the station. It was just a dingy old storefront, with cracked and patched windows, the calendars on the walls the only decorations, but it was warm inside and smelled invitingly of cooking food. The pancakes and eggs weren't bad, either, although it was probably better not to know what animal the bacon had come from; even the bitter chicory brew that passed for coffee down here on the far side of the Embargo Line was tolerable. Most of the reporters ignored the grits, to the amusement of the local stringers who'd arranged to meet them here before the ceremony. Watching them, Cliff realized that although he had been born in Wisconsin and lived in Minneapolis, had only visited New York City once, and had never been to Boston in his life, he was a Yankee to the locals--they were all just Yankees to the locals, who didn't make any of the fine distinctions between them as to regional origins that they made amongst themselves, and who probably, truth be told, disliked them equally. Cliff wondered if this boded well for the years ahead, when they'd officially be fellow citizens once more, on paper, anyway.

Bill and Staubach and Hoskins from the *New York World* had started a political argument about just that, Bill thinking that officially readmitting Alabama to the Union (something that it had taken decades of economic sanctions and delicate negotiations to accomplish, in the face of Rebel reprisals against "collaborators" and a general population who were by no means wholeheartedly for the idea), as Virginia and the Carolinas and Arkansas had already been before it, as Mississippi and Louisiana and Georgia had *not*, was a good thing, putting more of the shattered jigsaw that had once been the Union back together--while Staubach and Hoskins thought that Reunification was a bad idea, that it would further drag the economy of the U.S. down, that the nation was in fact better off *without* the disaffected former States, especially with federal troops quartered on them to make sure they stayed down.

Cliff lost interest in the too-familiar argument and started thinking about his Counterfactual again. How would the world of his story have differed from the real world? He toyed with the conceit that in that Counterfactual world there might *also* be a Cliff, struggling to write a Counterfactual story about *his* world, and yet another Cliff in the *next* world, and so on--a vision of a ring of Alternate Earths, in each of which history had taken a slightly different course. There was a story idea there. Maybe somebody manning a way station of some sort in some isolated location, maybe out in the rural Wisconsin hill-country where he'd grown up, a station that allowed travel between the Alternate Earths. It was too

weird an idea for Thurber at *McClure's*, probably for most of the Counterfactual market, but it could maybe be done as scientifiction. He'd written a few scientifiction pieces at the beginning of his career for *Marvel Tales* and *Wonder Stories Quarterly*, although they didn't pay as well as Counterfactuals. For all his prim pseudo-Victorian stuffiness, Lovecraft at *Weird Tales* liked wildly imaginative stuff; maybe he'd go for it....

"Wake up, Shakespeare," Staubach said, punching his arm. "Time to get going."

The reporters gathered up their equipment--Cliff had earlier hauled his battered old Speed Graphic out of his bag; the *Star's* budget didn't stretch to sending a photographer as well--and shambled out through the streets of Montgomery. You could already hear a brass band playing in the distance.

There was a raised wooden stage set up in front of the State Capitol building, from whose white marble steps Jefferson Davis had announced the formation of the Confederacy (which was rubbing it in a bit too blatantly, Cliff thought, but nobody had asked him), with a podium and a microphone up front, and rows of cold-looking dignitaries sitting on camp-chairs lined up behind, including Lindbergh's little boy, who, sitting hunched up on himself, looked like he'd rather be inside drinking a cup of hot chocolate than sitting out here in the cold. No chairs for the color guard who surrounded the stage on two sides, weapons at port arms, or for the audience, who were packed in in front of the stage in a disorderly mass. Not a bad turnout for a chilly December day, Cliff thought as he and his compatriots wormed their way to the front, especially for a ceremony solemnizing a decision that by no means had the support of the entire citizenry. The real ratification ceremony would take place in Congress later, of course; this symbolic local ceremony was an excuse to show the flag--literally: a big one center-stage that snapped in the wind. And to give the local yokels a chance to bathe in the reflected glory of Lindbergh and the other bigwigs.

The sky was still threatening, although a lacuna had opened up in the slate-gray clouds, splashing watery sunshine around. A brisk wind had come up, scattering trash and discarded sheets of newspaper like frightened birds. Bill cursed and seized his hat to keep it from flying away. The faces of the men in the brass band were stiff and red with cold, the cheeks of the trumpet player bulging grotesquely out, as though he'd bitten off something too big for him to swallow.

The band stopped playing. The Territorial Governor made a long, rambling, fawning introduction of Lindbergh, who then stepped forward to the podium and began speaking himself. His face was also red with cold, and he kept sniffing, as if his nose was running. He was holding his hat in one hand to keep it from blowing away, and the rising wind made his tie flap up into his face from time to time, requiring him to smooth it back down.

Cliff raised his camera and dutifully took a photo of him, and then stopped listening. Christ, he'd heard a lot of speeches in his life! Very few of them worth listening to. He'd crib quotations from the transcripts the Press Secretary would hand out later. Instead of listening, he fell into a reverie about his Counterfactual. He thought he'd seen a psychological justification for Lee surrendering rather than fighting on. Suppose, unlike what had happened in the real world, Lincoln *hadn't* been assassinated at the Second Inaugural ceremony by John Wilkes Booth, the well-known actor and radical Confederate sympathizer, who'd been lurking in the inaugural crowd with a pistol? Suppose that Lincoln had instead gone on to actually serve out his second term? In the real world, there was known to have been an exchange of notes between Lee and Grant in April 1865, discussing the possibility of surrender; Lee had refused to come to terms, and instead had vanished with his army into the Blue Ridge Mountains to wage a hide-and-seek campaign of large-scale guerrilla war that had lasted far longer than even he could have possibly imagined it would. Others had taken their cue from Lee, Joseph Johnson with his Army of Tennessee, the dreadful Nathan Bedford Forrest, the even more terrible John Mosby and William Clarke Quantrill, who had already been waging guerrilla warfare in Missouri and "Bleeding Kansas." Jefferson

Davis and the Confederate Cabinet had escaped into Texas, from where they'd continued to pursue the war for decades, until the Texans--always hard-pressed by Mexico on their southern border and out of patience with the arrogant high-handedness of the "Richmond Refugees"--had gradually lost interest in being a hold-out Confederate state and had reinvented themselves as a Republic instead.

But suppose Lincoln had still been President? It was well-documented that Lee and Lincoln had had great respect for each other as individuals, in an age where personal honor had been a real factor in human affairs. Suppose Lincoln had worked through Grant to mediate Lee's surrender, guaranteeing favorable terms for surrender and backing it with the force of his own personal word, terms that would enable Lee to surrender with some semblance of honor and dignity for himself and his hard-pressed men, terms that the vengeful Johnson never would have approved in *this* world? Would that have allowed Lee to justify the surrender of his army? And if Lee *had* surrendered, mightn't that have provided the cue for how others should act, just as Lee's defiant refusal to surrender had in the real world? If so, that one moment would have caused everything else to change....

It was in that moment that Cliff saw the tramp, the one from the train, standing a few yards away in the crowd, and from that instant on, he knew everything that was going to happen, detail for detail, like watching a play you've previously seen rehearsed.

The tramp, staring up at Lindbergh intently, his sallow, unshaven face as blank as wax, the cords in his neck standing out with tension. He swallows once, twice, his prominent Adam's apple bobbing, and then his hand inches toward his coat.

Everything has gone into slow motion. Cliff wills himself to lunge forward, and feels his muscles begin to respond, but it's like swimming through syrup, and he knows that he'll be too late.

The tramp comes up with a gun, an old model Colt Navy .36. Practically a museum piece by now, but it's clean and seems in good working order. The weak sunlight splashes from the barrel as the tramp raises the gun, slowly, infinitely slowly, it seeming to ratchet up in discrete jerky intervals, like film being manually advanced frame by frame.

Cliff is swimming forward through the encrusted, resistant air, bulling through it as you'd breast your way through oncoming waves, and even as the breath for a warning shout is gathering itself in his lungs, he finds himself thinking, *It's not my fault! There's a dozen ways he could have gotten here!* Yes, but there was only one way he *did* get here, in this world, in this lifetime, and if he'd only reported him to the conductor last night, everything would be different.... Everything has stopped now, time freezing solid, and he sees it all in discrete snapshots.

A woman standing on the steps of the State Capitol building, holding up a baby so that it can have a better view. The baby is holding a rattle in one hand.

The trumpet player, cheeks no longer distended, lighting a cigarette and laughing at something the tuba player is saying.

Birds flying, caught on the wing, crossing the sky from left to right, something that would have been read as an omen in Ancient Rome.

John Foster Dulles saying something behind a raised hand, probably a scornful remark about Lindbergh's speech, to Charles Curtis.

Lindbergh's son scratching his nose, looking bored.

Lindbergh himself, pushing his tie out of the way again, a *moue* of annoyance crossing his face.

The tramp's face contorting into an intense, tooth-baring grimace of extreme, almost mortal, effort...

The gun fired.

At once, as if a sheet of glass had been shattered, time was back to normal, everything going *fast* again. Cliff staggered and almost fell, as other people in the close-packed crowd began to surge forward or back. The tramp's revolver barked twice more; the sharp reports hit the wall of tall buildings on the far side of the street and echoed back. Someone screamed, someone else shouted something incoherent. Then those nearest the tramp in the crowd swarmed over him, pulling his arm down. He disappeared under a knot of struggling men.

At the podium, Lindbergh staggered as if in concert with Cliff. His mouth half-open in shock, he grabbed the podium to keep himself upright, swayed, and then lost his grip and fell heavily to the stage. Some of the dignitaries had thrown themselves down at the sound of the first shot, Huey Long among them, but Charles Curtis had jumped up and grabbed Lindbergh's little boy as he threw himself forward with a scream, and was now wrestling with the child to keep him away from the body. Dulles had also stayed on his feet, and was now bending over the fallen Vice President, fumbling at him ineffectually with fluttering hands, his mouth working, although it was impossible to make out what he was saying over the rising roar of the crowd.

More screams, more shouts. Cliff could hear Bill, at his elbow, saying "Oh no! Oh no!" over and over again. Old Matthews looked as if someone had shot him as well, his face slack and ashen. The tramp was on his feet again, still struggling against a half-dozen men who were trying to wrestle him back down. His face was scratched and battered now, splattered with blood.

"The South will rise again!" the tramp shouted, before they could pull him down, "The South will rise again!" And Cliff realized with horror that indeed it *would*, that it would keep on rising again, and again, as it had ever since the ostensible end of the War, dragging the country down like a drowning man dragging his rescuer down with him ... that the War would never be over, that his children and their children would still be fighting it when he had long since gone to dust, dealing with the dreadful consequences of it, even unto the fifth generation and beyond, world without end.

Was there another Cliff writing about this right now, he wondered numbly, in some other Counterfactual world where, unlike here, it was only a remote abstract possibility that had never happened, good for an hour's academic entertainment and nothing more?

Behind him, the kid had already regained his wits and was running for the train station to file the story, leaving Matthews and the rest of them gaping in the dust and the cold rising wind.