

# The Dead Are Not Without Power

Award Winning Short Story at 1994 Chesapeake Writers Conference

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The heat devils danced a ballet on the asphalt in front of my car as I drove west down State Road #26. It was May in South Central Georgia and as hot at ten o'clock in the morning, as it would be at high noon. The past two hours had been a boring, sleepy ride. There was no scenery. Fields on each side of the road, once fertile with corn and cotton, were now covered in sedge grass and slash pine. What scattered homes I passed, were in need of paint, with rusted screen wire covering sagging front porches.



A strong hot breeze of poverty and despair blew across the yards and slammed against the door of my car. No real life had thrived in this country since the Civil War. To keep awake, I turned the air conditioner vents full force into my face. There had been a big party last night to celebrate the end of a three day sales seminar over in Dublin. The celebration always included a big buffet along with a generous supply of single malt scotch and generous non-practicing virgins. I have a tendency to over participate in everything offered free.

To help concentrate, I coasted every dial on my radio for stay awake music. All the radio produced were broken hearted country singers. They whined, in the same key, sad dirges of cheating lovers. It made me wonder if there were any faithful folks left in the country culture. The other alternative was one of some semi-literate fundamentalist preacher, shouting in a breathless voice, short passages of scripture and long passages to send money for prayer clothes. If the Almighty had time to listen to these performances he would probably have grimaced in contempt and compassion. Half numb with boredom, I caught a glimpse on my right of a green highway sign. The sign pointing left at the junction read, "Andersonville." A flash of recognition awakened my memory. Could it be? Is it the notorious prison town of the Civil War period? I eased my foot off the accelerator, slowing the car for a quick turn around. It was a robotic reaction. I had no real intention of turning back. The sign read, "Eight miles to Andersonville." A little doubt gnawed at my mind. Maybe this was not the notorious prison site. There was no one around to ask. Had I known what the experience of the next two hours would be, I never would have turned down this road.

It was a short ride down the eight miles to the edge of town. During the drive, I had time to review past visits to Civil War battlefields and cemeteries. Some kind of fascination drew me to them. Soon, on my left, I could see the small village across the railroad tracks. On my right an arched sign acted as a gateway to what was identified as 'Prison Park.' A quick feeling of satisfaction passed over me. This was the place after all. My detour from Highway #26 wasn't a waste of time. I turned into the park.





The area the prison had occupied was not much to see. It was still an open field of about twenty acres with a scattering of new trees. There were short concrete markers where the log stockade had stood. Eighteen feet inside these markers were shorter stakes to indicate the 'deadline' past which no prisoner dared to pass. Earthworks remained at the west guard location of the old 'Star Fort.' I recalled reading accounts of the cannon at this gate being loaded with grapeshot, primed and pointed at the prisoners whenever this gate was opened. From my past study, I knew this prison had been a hell hole beyond human comprehension.

About ten years ago, when I first learned about this place, I had a strange motivation to locate and study all available accounts and actual diaries written by former prisoners. Burned into my memory was a description of this place. It had been erected in the middle of a pine woods by slaves who had been leased from local landowners. The stockade of green pine logs had enclosed an area 450 feet east and west, by 1540 feet north and south. The log wall stood fifteen feet out of the ground and five feet in ground. Recorded accounts state this prison held at one time, twenty-two thousand men. From February 1864 to May 1865 thirteen thousand of them died from malnutrition and disease. Some weeks there were over two hundred bodies to be buried. Diarrhea and dysentery killed over half of them. Smallpox, whooping cough and measles killed most of the rest. Even though the average age was only nineteen, the lack of food and clean water left them unable to resist the smallest infection.

Most of the prisoners had been held in Virginia. The prisons in Richmond were emptied at the rate of 400 prisoners per day. Shipped by train south in freight cars, they brought with them all the diseases that were endemic in prison warehouses. In most cases they had been in tobacco warehouses almost a year and were already semi-invalids from lack of food. What was left of the uniforms they wore were rotted rags. There was no soap to wash. Officers were routed to camp Oglethorpe in Macon and the enlisted men were shipped to Camp Sumpter in Andersonville. A few officers were imprisoned at Sumpter due to poor administration and organization. There was no way to tell rank by uniform since anything wearable was stolen off the dead before they were cold. It was necessary to steal in order to survive the unheated warehouse cold.



There were no spare regular troops in the southern ranks to guard these union prisoners. Sherman's Army was pushing southeast and all trained troops were needed to stop him. The Georgia Reserves pressed into service as guards, were made up of boys, some as young as fourteen, as well as old men with little or no training or discipline. The young farm boys were eager to shoot a bluecoat so as to brag about it to the girls back home. Some of them had lost brothers and fathers in northern Virginia campaigns and hated the prisoners they thought responsible.

The inexperienced camp commanders did not lay the prison grounds out into streets. Instead, it was a jumble of odd placed



shelters of canvas and rags erected at random to keep the scorching sun off in summer and break the cold wind of winter. The prisoners named these domiciles 'shebangs.' This same terminology carried over in the ranks through World War I. As soon as a death occurred in one of the shelters, the body was stripped of shoes and clothing as well as any stray valuables. They were then placed naked on the ground outside the tents. The strongest among the prisoners quickly grabbed the belongings of the dead. Every morning the 'dead squad' would pick up the night's casualties. They tied a man's big toes together with string and placed a paper on his chest stating name, rank and regiment number. The dead house at the gate was made to hold twenty bodies and would overflow. The naked stiff bodies would be stacked outside on the ground. The corpses would soon stink but no one would notice. There was no lumber to make coffins so the dead were picked up twice a week and buried naked, side by side, in a common trench in the high ground graveyard next to the camp. A wood stake was put at the head of each body with the name and regiment number on it.

There were no real latrines. The few that were dug soon filled up and would run over whenever it rained. The prisoners called these latrines "sinks." The sick were so weak they could not struggle far from their bed to shit. Diarrhea ran through the camp inmates and the ground was covered with feces up to the very edges of the outdoor cooking pots. The stink of the camp was so bad the people of Andersonville, living only six hundred yards away, would have to leave home on windward days in summer.

Many of the memories of past study crowded my mind as I walked around the perimeter of the old prison. I recalled, almost verbatim, a few lines from a boy's diary written in this prison,

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*"The Johnneys are giving us spoilt beef and maggoty mush alive with worms. The beef and rice is sour enough to kill the devil or any other tough cuss. We are shut up in a hawg pen. How can we love a govt that leaves us here?"*  
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Its strange how a mind retains such odd material.

All was quiet and still as I walked around the actual prison grounds. A feeling seemed to inform my feet that this ground was hallowed. So many human spirits had soared away from such a small space to follow the golden pathway of 'Light' into eternity. If you have ever walked all alone at dusk on Antietam Battlefield you will know the same feeling. Standing on this ground in nineteen seventy four, I was smothered by the sense I had been here over one hundred years ago.

I walked back to my car and drove the short distance to the National Cemetery next to the camp site. The grounds were well kept and landscaped with blooming shrubs. States with sons buried here had erected large marble and granite statues. Some of these monuments were in the form of full bodied soldiers in full uniform. Standing there, dozing on the muskets, they represented Massachusetts, New York, Maine and others. The even lines of white tombstones set row on row were inscribed with the names of young men who died far from home and family. Most died with their last spoken word being, 'Mama.'

There was a gravel parking area in the center of the statues. Beside it was a huge blooming magnolia tree. May warmth brought out the large pure white blossoms. Magnolia perfume floated over the whole area. A marble bench sat in the shade of the tree. I sat down to gather the rush of thoughts that had invaded my mind in the prison yard. I looked up at the Maine statue close to me. He faced north and home. The place was like a peaceful magic garden. I was alone, not even road noises disturb the quiet. All my senses were alive to the perfume and bird songs. A warm flood of recognition and appreciation flowed over me. I felt my body relax on the shaded bench as I sat and counted each slow out breath from my nostrils and began to meditate.



Suddenly from nowhere a voice began to speak.

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*"Hello, Johnny, know'd you'd come back. Spoke to you earlier this mornin' and you dropped your musket and skedaddled! The parolees on burial detail thought you'd deserted. Good thing the other Johnny Reb guard stood fast. The parolees would of run too. They wuz a bunch of us here this morning. They all gone over to the 'Light' by Providence Spring. Jus' me and Lieutenant Silbert of the New York 45th Volunteers are still here waiting for you to come back. We know you are the only one who can let us in to hear our story so we can go to the 'Light.' Lieutenant wuz shot thru the head day 'fore yesterday by a young Johnny. He wuz coming back from 'the sink,' inside the 'deadline' too. He wants you to tell his wife an' son up in Oswego, New York what happened 'fore he goes into the Light. Please tell Mama and Poppa what happened to me too. They're in Oswego. I wuz caught in Virginia Wilderness battle last May and put in prison in Richmond. Lieutenant Silbert was caught by Rebs on same day. We both from the 45th. Didn't see each other in prison but damned if we wasn't on the same train coming here and damned if they didn't lay us together outside the dead house. We know'd each other here but didn't know any of the other poor cusses with us. They all went back anyhow. Soon as we talk to you, me and him leavin' too. Light tunnel still waiting at the spring over in the yard. Tell Poppa the whole story. I had to sit on the hard floor for a year in Richmond 'fore they moved us from that hell hole to this hawg pen. Lieutenant and I were put in Sergeant Flannagan's mess. He had a good shebang for hissself but the rest of us had tough scratchin'. Kept extra rations for hissself.*

*Sergeant's tent mate died the day before we got there of the bloody flux. He was a drummer boy, younger than me. He lived in the Sergeant's tent three months 'fore he died. Since I was stronger, Sergeant Flannagan detailed me and Lieutenant Silbert to take the boy's naked body to the dead house. Everything he had was stripped off him. Most of our Troopers were wersen to us than the Johnneys. Sergeant offered to let me take the drummer's place in his tent. I regretted the day I jumped at his offer. He was a big redheaded man and slept in his dirty long johns in the tent. All the rest of us slept in our clothes. Mostly rags anyhow. He even had a candle at night. His bunk was off the ground and wide enough for two men. That first night I chose to sleep sitting against a supply box even though he tried to persuade me to sleep with him. I could hear him grunt and groan after the candle was out. I know he was playing with his whacker. I hadn't done that since I left home. Thought about it a couple of times but didn't get to it. Now, this is the part I want you to tell Poppa. Next morning he put bread and two apples on the box for breakfast. He ate his apple by cutting it up with his boot knife. The knife was left*



*in the box beside a jug. I ate standing on the opposite side of the box table. He was still in his long johns and walks around behind me. The tail of my old uniform pants was wore out. I didn't have any long johns left. Sergeant Flannagan moved in behind me and pinned my arms to my side. I could feel his big hard whacker going into my tail. I fell over the table knocking the jug off. He was holding me, using me like a woman, when my hand found the knife handle. I screamed and freed my right arm enough to swing it round with the knife in my hand. I buried the blade in the side of his neck. He fell backward with a yell and turned me loose. Blood wuz squirtin' from his neck and his eyes looked at me all white like. No one came in the tent during our ruckus. They must of been use to hearing them sounds from the drummer boy. I went outside and told the boys what happened. I didn't have a friend there. Lieutenant had been shot at the 'sink' the same night. They rushed past me into the 'shebang' and raided the Sergeant's stores. Even stole the bloody long johns off his dead body. They wuz satisfied. They turned on me and called me 'Killer.' Two of them grabbed me and Joe Blanchard took the boot knife and stuck it into my heart. I floated free of my body, and watched them look into my pockets and strip me naked. I wuz picked up that morning as a disease dead and laid at the dead house with a bunch of others. I wuz put in that trench over there with the Lieutenant next to me. I knew when you wuz guarding the burial detail and run off when I spoke to you that you could hear me. Now, that's why me and him has been waiting since this morning for you to come back. Mama and Poppa have to know I ain't a killer. You tell them I run a knife through him. Good enough for him. Had to straighten him out. You just tell them that and I can go with the rest.'*

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My attention had been focused on every word spoken. The voice was clear and close. I was aware I was sitting on the bench and had understood every word spoken.

Suddenly behind me a bugle blew Taps. It startled me so my heart stopped beating. I was frozen inside and unable to breathe. The shock of the bugle startled me more than the voice I had just heard. I was too paralyzed to turn my head to see where the sound was coming from. My mind and psyche were in a state of confusion and turmoil. It was as if something dramatic was happening to me but I was functioning as if it had not occurred. A state of confusion and denial lingers with me, but I continue in a routine manner, clinging to sanity. The complete funeral Taps was being played behind me. Turning at the end of the last mournful note I saw a modern soldier in full dress uniform. He stepped from behind the magnolia tree. Evidently he had been quietly watching me on the bench. Seeing my look of shock he said, "Scared you, didn't I?" I could only nod. He continued "I am with the special burial detail from Fort Benning." Just as he spoke I heard three volleys of rifle fire. "Look here," he said walking around to the opposite side of the tree. I followed and looked down into an open sloping field surrounded by a brick wall. There was a hearse beside an open grave. A handful of mourners stood around a flag draped casket. The military detail stood around at port arms. The bugler explained "We are honoring a black airman. His body was sent back from Vietnam."



The playing of Taps had pulled me away from the "voice." I walked to the first row of white tombstones behind the Maine statue. The name on the first marker read, John Silbert, New York, no rank or regiment number. Next to Silbert on the right was the name, Billy Sexton, Pvt. 45th New York Volunteers. "OK Billy," I said, "I got your message, go back with the others."

A quick glance at my watch noted it is exactly noon. Nervous hunger is rolling in my gut. My business schedule flashed on my memory screen. There was going to be a divisional sales meeting in New York City on June 15th. Wondered if I rented a car how far it would be to Oswego.

It was a short walk from the magnolia tree to my parked car. The windows are down but the inside is like an oven. I became conscious of the heat again. Starting my car I wait a moment for the air conditioning to take over. Without a backward glance I drove out of the cemetery and down the eight miles to Highway #26 that I had left only two hours ago.

The End

