

Élan

by
Michael Delving

The whole month had been a waste, Wayler thought to himself, a pure and utter waste. He'd been working for four whole weeks on the difficult ad account his boss felt only he could handle, and had nothing at all to show for it. He leaned back in the one comfortable chair in his spartan office the single creature comfort he allowed himself, other than the tape player in the corner, currently emitting Peer Gynt at a subdued level, and wondered why this account was so difficult.

It wasn't just this account, Wayler mused, it was the whole setup. Sure, he was being highly paid (more money than at any time since he'd arrived in Chicago). He had a very nice office - heck, he still couldn't believe he had as plush a place to do nothing but sit and create. His job wasn't in itself all that difficult; advertising was only telling the listener to buy so-and-so's product, and doing it in a compelling and memorable way. His boss was even lenient in almost every degree, letting Wayler set his own hours and schedule. Right now, Wayler had adjusted to a two a.m.-to-noon time regimen, so he could work undisturbed in the cavernous office complex, untroubled by ringing phones, fax machines or even coworkers. He'd have lunch on the third floor roof around dawn before the heat of the day set in, and dreamily watch the sunrise over the Chicago skyline some thirty miles to the east.

His environment, he concluded, was the most leisurely he'd ever experienced, and decidedly more enjoyable than at some of the more onerous places he'd worked in his long life. But something continued to gnaw at his insides, and slipped from his grasp each time he tried to nail down just what it was. Bernstein's conducting drew the symphony to a quiet, slow passage, as Wayler looked out over the darkened streets and the headlight-tailight waltz the commuters enacted as they snaked their way to their urban magnet. They're the ones this commercial is being made for, he noted, they're the ones who will eventually see and read the ad for this product. And they'll be the ones who will ultimately determine if this idea (still unborn) will be any good or not.

He tried again to get a handle on the inner conflict that danced about his consciousness, but ultimately gave up, and concentrated once more on the task at hand. He laughed quickly, and realized that maybe what was really bothering him was the idiocy of the product with which he was dealing with.

Toilet paper - and the thought caused him to sigh deeply, for about the thousandth time. Toilet paper is toilet paper, he mused, and the image quickly appeared in his mind's eye of a lover holding up a flower-scented roll to his sweetheart while the deep bassundo of an announcer intoning "A roll is a roll is a roll" drifted in behind. He shuddered internally and laughed again, knowing that somewhere out there an ad exec would look at that ridiculous idea and actually approve of it.

Toilet paper. What an ignoble concept to be working on - to have spent an entire month of his life on! But it

wasn't as bad as the Gypsum account, Wayler remembered. Old man Gypsum wanted a creative new slant on a mineral, for crying out loud, and Wayler was chosen as the man to do it. And he did it, though not without difficulty.

And (God, he hadn't thought about them in years) the Mitchell sisters and their Banana-Sesame Seed Sandwich Spread, which made him grab for a glass of water on his desk when he recalled the first taste test they had arranged for him. That stuff was horrid! But with a few suggestions (and some rethinking of whether they were trying to launch a new food product or a gasoline additive), the spread and the ad campaign actually won a few awards that year.

Could be worse, he thought, could be worse. He rechecked the wall chart near his desk, the streetlights illuminating selected words in the darkened office. The chart served as a combination planning board-message holder-schedule keeper-nonverbal ombudsman. The phrase "new, exciting" leaped off the wall in its artificially high-lighted context, as did the words "Scott" and "softer than theoretically possible." Of course, some of Wayler's less optimistic concepts caught the light as well, such as "crock", "Make The Best Of Your Mess!" (which had several large red streaks through it), and in bright blue letters, "Friday March 20th!!" His head swung slowly back to his desk, resting on the small pop up calendar which showed that today was, indeed, only a week before that fateful day, Thursday the twelfth to be precise.

And it was late Thursday, actually early Friday, he reminded himself. Less than a week before the final presentation had to be made, and he had zip on paper to show them. And then it hit him, that little voice that had been buzzing around in his head for weeks finally drew form, stepped into the light and thumbed its nose at him. It wasn't the idea of doing an ad for a toilet paper company, he realized with amazement. It was the product's name. Élan. Élan Toilet Paper. How in God's green acres was he supposed to create an ad for such a ridiculously sounding product?!

He'd spent the first week trying to tie the word Élan in with everything under the sun, hoping to get a match that would cry out, "Toilet Paper!" His second week began with a couple of days spent realizing just how stupidly the previous week had been spent, with a couple of other days dwelling on the obligatory "What'll I do now?" fears thrown in for old time's sake. He spent a few days after that trying to talk the company out of using the words "Élan" and "toilet paper" in the same breath, to no avail. By the beginning of the third week, he'd really gotten down to business, and had gone practically nowhere in every direction. He studied other companies' ad campaigns, trying to find a link to his own work. All he saw were images of other ad execs working just as desperately and futilely as himself, and in a few instances he even saw careers come to sudden, grating halts as their owners contemplated windows for the first time as objects other than to let a cool breeze through.

Only on a limited number of occasions did he come up with anything close to an intelligent idea for the ad campaign, none of which looked in the least way intelligent upon the next morning's daylight. He did, however, come up with some truly inspired ideas for other products, none of which were applicable to the current needs of his client. He'd gotten along famously with the Polish cleaning woman who came in regularly in the wee hours of the morning (he spoke no Polish, she spoke no English, yet they created an impressive set of hand signals and linguistic short-cuts to comment on everything from the President's overseas troubles to the last Bulls game), he'd perfected his hook shot to the wastebasket

against the far wall, he'd re-adjusted all the maps and posters that covered almost every square inch of non-window wall space in his office - in short, he'd skipped around his task just enough to allow any trace idea to walk in and take him by surprise, which was how he always worked and how he always came up with his best ideas. No dice this time, though.

He'd be damned, he thought, if he would submit anything less than an inspired idea for the product. He prided himself (maybe too much) on being able to come up with an idea no one else would ever come up with, the concept that nobody else in their wildest imagination would think would work. That's what they pay me for, he accepted, and nothing less than the best would do. He briefly considered lowering his usual standards, and rejected it quickly. No, he'd just have to see this one through, and if he only had a week left to come up with something masterful, then he'd just have to get creative pretty darn fast.

He rubbed his eyes and reminded himself that he'd been here for twenty-something hours, since the previous morning, and perhaps it would be a good idea to sleep every few days or so. He knew no more lightbulbs would go off this morning, so he resignedly packed his notes and reports into his bag, slung it over his shoulder, switched off his computer and said good-night to his plants, humming the last strains of "In the Hall of the Mountain King" faintly as he made his way to the stairs.

The short trip home was a mere eight minutes, and Wayler had picked the house he was renting partially because of its easy access to the office. His ability to work on nothing but adrenaline and original formula Coke allowed him to pull extremely long hours, yet when he headed home, the adrenaline wore off quickly and he was almost always asleep within half an hour. Two eyes half open did not equal one eye fully open, and he discovered that weaving down the highway did not endear him to the local constabulary, so a nearby home was a necessity.

This evening, however he felt still fully energized, even after being awake almost twenty-four hours. He let his mind drift to a number of possible ways to relax this early morning, all with one thing in common: none of them had anything whatsoever to do with toilet paper.

When he entered the house, the cat Four Socks crawled up to the doorway and sprawled languidly at his feet, enticing Wayler to scratch her stomach or just be attentive in general. He picked her up, starting her purring immediately, and walked through the small house with her in his arms. He dropped his work papers onto the desk in the second bedroom and turned on the lights in the kitchen. He placed her down on her favorite retreat, the near corner on the top of the refrigerator. From there, Four Socks could view all of the kitchen while keeping an eye on the hall that ran the length of the house, as well as look out both the kitchen window and the window in the back-door when the feeling struck her. Wayler drew himself a glass of his favorite drink, a mixture of orange juice, apple juice, and just a touch of cranberry juice ("for color," he always explained). He wasn't particularly hungry, but he grabbed a pair of chocolate chip cookies to snack on, and the thought that chocolate chip cookies were one of the greatest creations to emerge from the Twentieth Century passed briefly through his mind, and then was dismissed with equal speed.

Wayler strolled slowly through the center hallway followed closely by Four Socks, into the small front room which was easily filled with a minimum of furniture: a couch, an ancient overstuffed chair (obviously the favorite piece in the area, as the wear and tear of continual use was clearly evident), a corner table with an antique glass lamp, and an upright television that was two decades old if it was a day. He placed the glass and cookies on the table where Four Socks was laying in wait, hoping to grab an unaware wrist or arm. He moved over to turn the power on for the VCR that sat on top of the TV. Turning on the set, he remembered that he'd set the VCR (more difficult than programming his computer at the office, he reflected) to record the latest of a special series on the Civil War, broadcast by the local Public Television channel.

The much-ballyhooed production was turning out to be one of the best ever made for TV, and was also one of the most extremely detailed on the military side of the war. This touched that certain nerve in Wayler that was always near the surface these days, what with the War and all overseas. He'd been no stranger to combat in this long life of his, yet he was always saddened at the memory of those close to him that had been lost, in what always seemed in hindsight to be a waste of humanity. Still, the thought of the long ago days when he led men and women in daring, dangerous missions never failed to rekindle feelings of energy and power. Wayler used much of his off-hours these days in studying military history, as well as perusing the few intelligent "war" movies available on video. And the simultaneously revolting and intriguing epoch of brother-against-brother battles in the America's of the middle 1800's was an era that Wayler wanted to learn more about.

He tried rewinding the tape to the zero mark, but the uncooperative machine merely sat there and whined without decreasing the tape counter, so Wayler rigged up a book-and-paperweight contraption to hold the rewind button down while it was in play mode. This would take longer he knew, but would eventually get the job done. Fleeting, barely-recognizable pictures of soldiers running backwards, of flame and smoke retreating back into cannon barrels, of dotted arrows and dashed lines reforming and returning to solid starting positions, all rolled across the screen to the accompaniment of the whirring rewind motor. Unfamiliar faces sat on the screen and conversed in unheard language, with names at the bottom appearing for only an instant before another image popped up. Four Socks, now on the footstool in front of the set, was thoroughly engrossed in this carnival display, even more than she normally would be, since these movements were far more frenetic than the ordinary images she normally observed.'

Wayler's mind drifted through the previous episodes that he'd watched so far. The War had been covered in amazing detail and insight through the first three years of the war, with the focus of the current episode on the buildup of troops and supplies in the spring of '64 that presaged an important attack by the Federals on the Richmond front. Lee had been nothing less than spectacular in his defense of the Confederate capital, but even he could see that the end was drawing near. Few supplies and fewer reinforcements were arriving for his beleaguered army, while the Union forces grew stronger every day. The South was forced to scrape the bottom of the barrel for men each week, conscripting older men and younger boys in an effort to keep their ravaged "country" alive.

The determination that the men and women of the Confederacy showed during those bleak and hopeless days fascinated Wayler, and the sharp, insane action on his TV screen blended with his thoughts to create an hypnotic picture in his mind of hopeless desire, endless conflict and wasted acts of gallantry. Suddenly, the rewind motor jarred to a halt, and the now-familiar theme song of the series began playing on a stark black screen. The music was a simple violin piece, simple yet mournful, as if the player was trying to capture in sound emotions that were themselves untouchable. The tune seemed to exude a rural perspective, Kentucky or Tennessee perhaps, with an emphasis on high notes, sharp chords, clear, unutterably sad tones, yet somehow filled with that same determination that Wayler felt those soldiers of the South must have exhibited in those final days.

The evening's episode began with a Southern historian's perspective on what life in the camps must have

been like those many years ago. The grainy photographs of the earliest cameras painted a scene of mud and timber, wool clothes and omnipresent mustaches, devastated forests and rivers clogged with every conceivable form of watercraft. Food, he said, was not what we'd call food: short rations of hardtack and flour, some abominable black tarry substance the commissar's office had the gall to call "coffee," and occasionally (when the officers looked the other way) an odd drop or two of bootlegged moonshine, home brew that some of the more enterprising troopers whipped up with impressive spirit. The boredom of those late winter days was offset only by the knowledge that the war would soon resume with all the fury and even more fatalities than the previous years had seen.

The scenes then centered on the growing preparations by both the Northern Army of the Potomac and Lee's Army of Virginia. Like two circling gamecocks, the final fight for one or the other's ultimate existence was about to begin, and from this point on, neither would back down until final victory (or defeat) was at hand.

The Union hosts, under the joint command of U.S. Grant and General Meade, began their push south and east to outflank Lee's right and get at Richmond, while Lee masterfully made them pay dearly for every mile they gained. While the major effort was underway in eastern Virginia, both sides had detailed troops just to the west in the pleasant valley of the Shenandoah, breadbasket of the South and stage for many a Confederate drive north into the Union. Here Grant had placed Major General Franz Sigel, a political hack with barely enough common sense to get out of bed each morning and put on his clothes (or so the historians painted him). His orders were to coordinate his attacks with Grant and Meade so as to tie down any troops opposite him in the Valley, making reinforcement of Lee next to impossible. Further, if he was successful (when he was successful, the Union generals expected) he would be in a position to deny to the South the vital crops and other supplies the rich Shenandoah had been delivering since the war began.

The South, however, had other plans. Lee had pushed to have Major General John Breckenridge placed in command of the Army of the Shenandoah, a man who was long on daring and short on defense. Like Lee, he felt that any two Confederate soldiers were more than a match for three Union troops, and proceeded to prove that point to the more numerous Union forces opposite him. Through the spring and early summer, the Army of the Shenandoah was victorious time and again, thought they did have one crucial battle early on that could have broken their spirit and spelled doom for the entire year.

At a place called New Market, Breckenridge faced Sigel's 10,000 men with barely half that number. Sigel was pressing hard, and in a daring counterattack, Breckenridge's troops were about to break the Northern advance when a gap opened up in the overstretched Confederate line. Breckenridge had used up all of his reserves to push his attack, save one unit: a group of cadets from the nearby Virginia Military Institute who'd been asked to join The Cause. They were merely boys, some as young as thirteen and fourteen, none in their twenties other than their aged Commandant, but they answered the call unanimously and without hesitation. They were marched into the breach in the Southern lines, to the hooting and catcalling of other Southern troops who derided them on their young appearance and obvious lack of combat experience.

But an amazing thing happened. Those boys acted like the most level-headed veterans in Lee's best divisions. They not only plugged the gap in the lines, they proceeded to charge the Union forces in full parade formation. Had their commander spent the previous three years in actual combat rather than at the Institute, he would have realized that devastation would await the closely-packed ranks of young troops. And indeed, in less than fifteen minutes, the VMI cadets had lost nearly a third of their six hundred soldiers (including the Commandant himself) to the blazing fire from the Union positions. But still they came on, through cannon and musket shot, up to and through the Union lines, sparking an impossible Federal retreat from that part of the line and spurring the rest of the Confederate army to drive the Union troops pell-mell off the field of battle. The amazed Southern veterans cheered the young cadets, and treated them like honored veterans from that day forward.

The story fascinated Wayler, as the reflected images from the screen danced in his eyeballs and played across his face. They were just kids, fifteen and sixteen years old, and they did all that! Where was he when he was sixteen, he tried vainly to remember? Some deeply imbedded fragment reached up to him from distant ages long forgotten, scenes of a young muscular lad hauling oats and cleaning stables in a rich lord's house, totally ignorant of the ways of combat, of life-and-death struggle with an opponent barely an arm's reach away. Surely he himself at that age could never have survived the trials that those boys - that those *men* - had endured. Yet he felt tremendous admiration for them, a sense of longing to have been part of that great experience, a desire to witness first-hand their world-changing moments and help them in their struggle to overcome tremendous odds.

The sugar-energy boost that the cookies and oj had given him were now beginning to wear off, and the cumulative effects of the long day's work combined with the lack of sleep seemed to hit him almost instantly. Yawning one deep, expressive yawn, he barely had time to switch off the VCR and change into some looser night clothes before he was adrift in the refuge of sleep. His last thoughts were of the VMI cadets, and the sound of musket shots so close he could feel their wind on the side of his face...

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It was one of those dreams that was so real, that when you woke up, for a long instant reality itself seemed like a dream, and you waited patiently for it to end and for the dream-reality to return and set the world aright once more. But waking was still a long way off this night, and Wayler had much to experience before then.

The sounds were more overpowering than he had ever felt in his thousand-year life, more devastating to his ears than any force he could ever have conceived of. Never halting for a moment from the start to the finish, the roar of gunfire, of explosions, of men simultaneously cheering, moaning and screaming seemed to fill every molecule of air for hundreds of miles around.

The next impression to strike him was the impossible contradiction of unbearable light and incredible darkness that was going on all around him. Tongues of fire and lightning-flame seemed to be everywhere at once, yet blackness like an eclipse covered every spot he looked, dark earth thrown skyward blending with the dark ocher of torn flesh. These images were not just there, they were somehow *of* him, part of his insides, flying around and thrown about this battlefield of terror.

And yet, he was calm. He realized right then that he was wholly calm, as if nothing on earth mattered any longer, as if all his worldly cares were as a leaf born away in the wind, and that his life and the very actions that made up his life were no longer his to control.

He looked down at his hands, held stiffly at his side, and realized they grasped an old Civil War musket, and then it all came flooding back to him. His boyhood in the outskirts of Atlanta, the finagling that his parents had to pull to get his appointment to the Institute, the years of war that raged all around the region while he waited impatiently to grow to manhood and be allowed to join the fight for his homeland.

The last few weeks of conflict became real to him, as the war drew closer and closer to VMI, and the over-matched Confederate general came calling that fateful May morning, asking if the cadets would be willing to aid the call of their country. And only a few days later, here he was, marching with his pals towards the greatest fury and devastation he could have ever imagined.

Explosions tore through the young line of gray as they slowly marched, in perfect parade formation, carefully, calmly across the open field. He noticed the sun was shining brightly somewhere overhead, though the incredible smoke and haze from all the firing made it impossible to tell exactly where in the sky the great orb was. Their march was taking them gradually uphill, and somewhere at the peak of this lazy incline was the Union line.

"Helluva way ta git outta class, ain't it?" someone to his left shouted. The eyes in his head slowly turned to his left, and there, marching step by step beside him, was a face Wayler knew instantly. To say that Wayler knew the face was actually incorrect, for "Wayler" was nowhere to be found in this boy's mind or body. In fact, this boy had a complete identity, history and personality that in no way included Wayler or his thoughts. But this face to his left was familiar, and the name 'Ray' matched up with the jovial, rollicking beanpole marching beside him.

"Ya think the Commandant will let us take the rest o' the week off fer this?" Ray asked again, just as happy and cavalier as if they were practicing back at the parade grounds. "Guess I'll have ta git wounded oncet er twicet ta git outta guard duty t'morra."

"Don't talk like that," Thomas said back, as the transformation from dreamer to actual participant became complete. "Don't you know it's bad luck to talk about being shot? Just stay in step and remember to follow The Old Man's orders when he gives them."

The two friends shared a grim smile that betrayed more of their real emotion than their words did, and they redoubled their energy to keep up with some of the taller boys that had begun to outpace them. Thomas peered intently through the smoke and haze to see if he could tell how close they were getting to the Union line, but he knew they had to be close to the guns. The report from the cannons ahead and the resulting explosion in their ranks were split seconds apart, and he felt as if the flames from the muskets ahead were singing his face.

Many of the cadets had fallen out of rank, but Thomas didn't dare turn around and look back the way they had come. He knew inside that their progress was marked by dozens, hundreds of fallen friends, now lying moaning in the warm spring grass, or worse yet, still and silent forever.

The whine of a musket ball screamed past his ear, and a muffled sound came up from a row or two right behind him, as if someone had caught a ball or a stick in his gloved hand, but Thomas knew the truth. There was some clanking of gear as cadets hurried to close ranks, and the dreadful march continued.

Color-bearer Wilson was still in the lead, walking just to the left and rear of the Old Man's ancient brown mare. He seemed so casual up there, Thomas noted, reigns held loosely in his right hand, his left resting firmly on the pommel of his sword. The wind caught the edges of his mustache and twirled them in the breeze, the same mustache that quivered with rage when he'd caught Thomas and Ray pulling another one of their numerous pranks. The same mouth that was set so determinedly now had just days before been fierce and wild, yelling at Thomas that he'd never amount to a damn as a soldier if he kept up with the childish attitude he so often displayed.

"I'll do it, Sir. I'll make ya proud" Thomas said under his breath, and the Old Man seemed to hear, as his left hand reached out and waved in Wayler's direction. He turned then, slowly, leaned back over his still-moving horse, and silently slipped from the saddle, hitting the ground in a clump of pressed gray wool and red-tinged yellow sash.

The cadets as one took a breath then, and wavered for the briefest of instants. Thomas felt a rope snap inside him, changed so quickly he never even knew what had happened, and screamed the Rebel yell at the top of his lungs. The child-men on either side of him picked it up, and as one they surged forward into the smoke and flying death, running on legs that would not stop.

The firing seemed to increase in intensity just then, and a couple of the closest cadets to Thomas keeled over or stopped stock still before they dropped. All along the line men were falling, but the surge would not be halted. Higher and higher up the gentle slope they ran, yelling and cheering as loud as they ever had. From the distance Thomas seemed to hear the cheer being picked up by other units, but the smoke and kicked-up debris prevented him from seeing more than a dozen yards in any direction. For him the war was right here, the handspans of earth and air directly in front of him, and whatever fate lie in wait through the smoke and fire.

And then, impossibly, they were at the crest of the small hill, and their destination lay only a few steps in front of them: a pile of logs, abatis and earth the Federals had hastily thrown up. The Union troops, looking far older than Thomas had expected, appeared shocked and surprised at their sudden appearance, as if they weren't expecting anything to make it up that hill of death, let alone charge up to their very front. Or maybe, Thomas' mind thought in some other reality where the firing, screaming and killing did not exist, maybe they couldn't understand what mere boys were doing up here, on top of the hill where men alone could stand.

Thomas noticed then a row of guns, smoothbore Napoleons from the look of them, smack dab in front of them, right where their charge was leading. Three gun carriages, wheel to wheel, with gun crews standing amazed for an instant, then bending down hurriedly to their grim task of reloading the guns for one last shot before the rebels could reach them.

There was only one thing to do, as crazy as it would seem to him forever after. "Charge the guns, boys, charge the guns!" Thomas cried, and Ray spurred on ahead, making use of his slightly longer legs, whooping and hollering for all he was worth. Thomas pushed himself as hard as he could to catch up, and they reached the guns just as the crews finished their loading. Thomas saw in the middle of the three crews a man with a smoking chord casually leaning over the gun to light the fuse, and Thomas, in a last-ditch effort to save himself and his comrades, threw his musket forward at the man, knowing the chances of hitting him were slim and none.

In surreal slow motion, the musket skipped and rolled across the cannon's barrel, striking the gunner's match just as he was touching it to the fuse and knocking it from his hand. The gunner seemed to waken to his disturbing situation then, and seeing nothing but screaming Rebs to his front, fell staggering backwards away from the guns, before he turned around completely and began a gravity-aided trot down the other side of the hill.

Thomas stopped then, without a weapon, and looked around him. All along the redoubt, savage fighting raged between screaming gray-clad David's and monstrous Union-blue Goliath's. But the Union troops seemed to be slowly backing up, and then a few were seen running down the slope in the direction of the escaping gun crews. Ray was fencing with a trooper twice his girth just behind the gun whose firing Thomas had recently aborted, and Thomas looked around on the torn earth for some device to aid his friend. He saw a short rifle of unusual design (obviously some new Yankee contraption) with a bayonet still attached, and he grabbed it and leaped over the gun with it.

Ray was now swinging his heavy musket like a club to keep the older soldier away from him, and when Thomas joined beside him jabbing with the smaller gun, the bluecoat (Thomas could see now that he wore Master Sergeant's stripes) paused to reevaluate the situation. He was one of the last Federals near the top of the hill, and the fact that most of his compatriots were careening wildly back down the hill or were being overmatched by the young Rebs must have made up his mind for him. With two quick jabs at the youths, the sergeant turned and galloped down the hill, much to Ray's delight.

"Yeeehaw! Lookit them Yankees run! They's runnin' faster than our horse Blackie, that's for sure!" He raised his musket in the air and danced a little jig, spinning around in the dust and dirt, looking for all the world like one of the older cadets Thomas had spied on when they were raiding the medicinal whiskey stores. But Ray was only doing what half the cadets were doing, as many of them cheered and raised their caps on their muskets and lifted them skyward.

Even Thomas was buoyed somewhat by this display of emotion, and his eyes smiled slightly as he surveyed the retreating Federals scampering down the ridge to the safety of a grove of trees some ways off. He noticed then the sergeant loping off with them suddenly stop, wheel about with his musket raised to his shoulder, and point straight at Ray's bouncing form. "No!" cried Thomas, and he jumped into Ray's back just as the sound from the firing musket cracked into his ears.

Landing near the wheels of the nearest gun carriage, Thomas felt splinters of wood rain down on the two

of them. Ray looked up from the bottom of the heap, having fallen on a dead Yankee, and came up with blood on his hands. His face was ashen as he looked down at his reddened fingers, and then that smile of his crept back on his face, and he wiped the blood off quickly on his trousers. "Guess that'll teach me nevah ta turn mah back on ya, Thomas," he quipped.

Thomas, less calm about almost being shot, turned to watch the sergeant finally run off down the hill with the rest of the straggling Union troops. He leaned back against the wheel of the gun, finally allowing his body to realize they had just run uphill for the better part of half a mile, through a blinding storm of flying iron and lead. Curiosity then took hold, and he turned 'round to look for that last shot that landed so near. In the corner of the wheel, not six inches from his shoulder, was a neat, round hole, facing in the direction of the running bluecoats. Thomas felt its rough edges, grateful for the miss, wondering if he could stay that lucky for a few more years.

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Four Socks' purring gradually woke Wayler out of deep slumber. The early morning rays of light warmed the pillow in lines that corresponded to the slats in the half-opened blinds. Wayler stretched his arms fully out over his head, and opened one eye just enough to watch Four Socks cleaning her front right paw, then using the wet paw to clean the top of her head.

Wayler felt peaceful, content. He'd slept deeper than he had in a long time, longer than anytime in the last month, and then the Élan account popped back in his head. He realized he'd gone almost twelve hours without thinking about the account, no tossing and turning in the night, no nightmares about being chased all about the house by eight-foot-tall toilet paper rolls with gaping jaws. He laughed to himself, and then tried hard to remember just what he did dream about during the night. He had a feeling it was a significant dream, a very powerful dream, and the power of it lingered in the air like the reverberations of very close thunder as it echoed off into the distance. But for the life of him he could not remember the dream at all, not even parts of it.

He lay there for quite some time, calming his mind down to a point where he hoped the dream (or even fragments of it) would seep back into his consciousness, but nothing returned. Wayler felt that something extraordinary had taken place, yet no real images came forward. With a sigh, he resigned himself to getting on with the rest of the morning, as it looked like mid-day already from the height of the sun. He leaned his right arm back against the headboard to help swing himself out of bed, and his thumb caught a small ridge on the wood that felt out of place. Still sleepy, Wayler turned around to check out the mark on the wood, wondering in his still-clouded mind just what kind of damage Four Socks and her anxious claws had done now.

His eyes slowly focused on a small hole, about the size of a large marble, a neat, round hole that looked like it had been drilled into the headboard, not something Four Socks could have done during the night -

And then the dream came flooding into his unprepared mind, rolling over his consciousness in waves of sound and color, heat and impulse. He watched the cadets marching, felt the heat, saw the Old Man fall, pulsed with the furious uphill charge, tightened uncontrollably as the gunner leaned down to fire, released automatically with the flinging of his musket, contracted every muscle to push Ray clear of that shot, that shot -

That shot that was now somehow, inexplicably, resting not six inches from his shoulder, in the headboard of his bed, a hundred and fifty years after that battle had been fought.

He fought down a sudden impulse to be very, very sick, and noticed Four Socks stare up at him, then proceed on with her licking as if watching her master going mildly insane was a common occurrence to her.

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All that day, Wayler resided in a dazed confusion, or a confused daze, he couldn't decide which. He didn't react much to the gentle teasings the others gave him about coming into work before noon ("Way Past Noon Wayler" they called him good naturedly, sometimes "Way Late Wayler," too), nor did he acknowledge their questioning if he was feeling well. In fact, he probably didn't say ten words all day. He did do a good impression of a statue, staring out over the fast-moving river of cars, wondering just how many of them had ever had a dream so real that physical traces had followed them back to their bedrooms.

His boss was slightly irritated at the too-casual response to the inquiry about progress on the Élan account. Wayler had shrugged and merely replied, "It'll get done if I'm not shot before then," and the boss, taking that to mean that Wayler was in a bad way, figured to leave him alone for the rest of the afternoon, and bring the subject up the next day when both had had a good night's sleep.

At that moment, however, sleep was the last thing in the world Wayler wanted to do. He actually felt fear for one of the few times in his life: fear of falling asleep, fear of returning to that dread cacophony of fire and blood. He doubted that the dream would return. He rarely had repetitive dreams, and had decided long ago that his sub-

conscious was probably able to make a point to him the first time and most likely had better things to do than to repeat itself to him at night.

Yet, part of Wayler's mind desired quite deeply to return to the battlefield in his dreams, and that shocked Wayler. It was no illusion there in his house, he knew. He'd worked on the hole with an old kitchen knife for a few minutes before the dented minnieball had plopped out onto the bed, and the insane reality of that round piece of metal threatened every law of science Wayler thought he knew. He fished into his pocket and retrieved the lump of lead, turning it over in his hand in the warm sunlight, marvelling at the distance and years the dangerous little object had travelled to get to him.

Needless to say, Wayler got absolutely nothing done on the Élan account that day. He didn't even start to think about the work left to be done, the storyboards and briefings that still had not been begun, the presentation that would have to be made next week.

Wayler left for home as the sun began to set on the far side of the office complex, driving home in a crimson-shadowed cloud of concern and consternation.

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He sat with Four Socks in his lap for almost three hours before he could gather the will power needed to get up and turn on the VCR, whereupon he was caught up once more with the story, caught as tight as a fish on a hook. Only Wayler was not trying to get away. Wayler wanted to be trapped, wanted to be flung back into that other world of the spring of 1864.

The Battle of New Market was a Confederate success, but the superior Union numbers made their weight felt soon after that. Breckenridge was replaced (due to illness) by good old Jubal Early, a friend of the common soldier, a favorite of the trooper in the ranks. With Early's slick tactics (and his 13,000 man corps), the Confederate forces pushed incompetent Sigel all the way north into Maryland. While fierce battles were raging between Grant and Lee with little to show for it in the East, Early was threatening the very outskirts of Washington itself.

The VMI cadets were there every step of the way, many having found their way into the decimated ranks of other units to bring them up to full strength. The battles before the outskirts of Washington could be decisive. If an entrance to the city itself could be affected, the historians theorized, the Capital could be held for a huge ransom. Relief troops would have to be drawn from Grant's forces, relieving the pressure on Lee and prolonging the war for another year or more.

He let the tape run out and sat there before the black and white whirlwind that was the bare unrecorded image. His mind was already at work, wondering where that night's dreams would take him, wondering if he would wake up in one piece the next day.

Four Socks stared as her master absentmindedly put milk in her food bowl, poured a mound of cat food on the floor next to her water bowl and dropped a few pieces of cheese on the top. She figured he'd meant to do that, and she proceeded to eat the cat food off the floor as if she'd been doing it forever.

Wayler walked ever so slowly to the bedroom, crawled under the sheets, turned out the lights, and waited for overpowering drowsiness to close his wide-open eyes.

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It was Confederate cannons that spewed forth flame and smoke this time, as Thomas and Ray waited in columns of battle behind the redoubts. The guns were preparing a Union position for the attacks that their units would make soon after. Thomas involuntarily winced at each shot, reliving each explosion he and the others had suffered in their attack on the ridge at New Market. Here they held the high ground and the Union troops were in trouble in the valley below, but the fact he was shielded from the blasts this time didn't lessen their awful impact one bit.

"Jimminy, they's a-pourin' it on 'em fer sure," Ray exclaimed. "Ah'd a-hate to be down amongst them Yanks this mornin', that's fer dang sure."

"You'll be down there before the morning's over, Reb," the Color Sergeant yelled back at him, his erect posture and full shoulders moving not a hair as he called out his promise. "Soon's the guns are finished, we'll be kindly asking them blubellies to please and thank you, move back to the other side o' Washington, an' that's fer sure!"

Thomas laughed inwardly, and made sure the Color Sergeant didn't hear him. The Sarge, as the other 4th Virginia Volunteers called him, had a tremendous dislike for his two latest charges, and had taken it upon himself to personally whip these two "chillun'" into fighting shape. He came down hard on Ray and Thomas for the slightest mistake, the tiniest error, though Thomas knew his concern was to keep them alive through the coming weeks - or at least, give them their best chance to stay alive.

The cannons began to slow their torrent of fire, and a whitebearded officer rode by and shouted orders to

all the lieutenants and sergeants to get their men ready to move forward. The Sarge, gap toothed and grinning from ear to ear, yelled, "Alright, boys, it's time to play pin the tale on the Yankee!" and with a whoop and a holler, the 4th Virginia marched off.

The drum duo led the way (hardly as old as me, Thomas thought), with the Stars and Bars and the regimental colors flying right behind. The double line of soldiers trotted off, almost running it seemed, though the men beside him were only larger and longer of limb. Ray had less trouble keeping up, and was smiling again as if he'd just stolen a mess of food from the cook's tent. His smile was habit forming. In no time, Thomas was smiling too.

It seemed the time to smile. The federal positions below were hopelessly laid out, placed on the forward side of their hill and exposed to raking artillery fire from above and flanking fire from the Rebel-held woods on both sides. Whoever placed those troops on the wrong side of the hill, Thomas thought to himself, must be either a danged fool or have something up his sleeve. Thomas hoped it wasn't the latter.

The Federals on the far slope were barely hanging on to their position. They would have been much better off on the top of the hill, like at New Market, or even better, on the further side of the hill, where the cannon and musket fire wouldn't be able to reach them. As Thomas mulled that idea over in his mind, the Sarge ordered them to halt, front rank kneel, and volley fire at the Union line. Thomas and Ray, kneeling in the dry earth, raised their pieces to their shoulders. Thomas still carried the Sharps carbine he'd found by the Union guns, and was the envy of every man in the unit. Some of the older men claimed as how he couldn't hit a rail at twenty feet with that gun, and tried to bully it for themselves, but the Sarge had stuck up for him, saying "If'n you blowhards want a Sharps, yi'd better bring down a cavalryman yerself and get one."

The Sarge cried "Fire" and as one, they let loose a rain of death on the staggered Union lines. They quickly reloaded their pieces, Thomas wondering if anyone on either side of him had noticed he wasn't really aiming his gun at the other side, but merely firing in the general direction. Ray was mumbling "Got 'un this time, fer sure, got 'un, Ah knows it" while he was ramming down the paper and ball.

Their weapons loaded, the Sarge ordered them up and moving forward again. The warmth of the mid-May sun could really be felt now, as the few clouds that were in the sky raced northward, a presage Thomas hoped of what the blue line in front of them would soon be doing.

Then, without warning, the Union line began to break and run. A clump here, then four or five, then whole platoons began to turn and dash over the top of the hill. No orderly withdrawal this, but the beginnings of a rout. The Sarge sensed it too, and began to race forward, cries of "There the cowards go!" and "After them blubellies!" on his lips. The 4th Virginia needed no encouragement, every one of the veterans knowing that a good solid push now could keep the Union troops running until nightfall.

The line was really charging now, yelling and hollering all along its length. The men kept their guns leveled, a shot going off every now and then, but most holding back to fire once they were ordered to stop and could get off a stationary shot. They were past the position the Union troops had originally held, marked by angry rents in the earth from the fire of the Confederate field pieces, and by the lines of Union men that had fallen right where they stood.

The hill seemed steeper here than it appeared from across the shallow valley, but the line slowed down only minimally. Only a few Union troopers could be seen still on this side of the crest, most having made it to the safety of the far side. Thomas wondered what sight awaited them when they cleared the top. Would there be a mass of Federal blue retreating away from them? Would they be ordered to stop and fire down into the backs of the retreating enemy? Or would

the Federals make a stand and try to retake the top of the hill? Thomas knew from his talks with the Old Man that Union troops would do almost anything they were ordered to do, including charging hopeless positions. Anything, Thomas knew, was possible.

Some of the older Rebels were becoming winded as they neared the ridgeline, the heat of the sun not helping them any. The advance began to slow as the crest neared, and the Sarge continued on a ways to catch a glimpse of the other side. Thomas struggled as best he could to keep pace with the bigger man, Ray a step or two closer.

"Holy mother of..." his voice trailed off, a comment only the soldiers closest to Sarge could hear. But when he screamed out "Reform ranks! Reform ranks!" at ear-piercing loudness, every trooper in the line responded. They formed line then at the top of the ridge, as Thomas and the rest of the 4th Virginia finally had a chance to look over the hill at their next opponent.

Opponents, actually. Someone on the Union side had been feeling a might sneaky this morning. For awaiting them on the other side of the ridge, out of sight of the entire Confederate army until they reached this point, were hundreds of Union cavalry, battalion after battalion, maybe a whole division of them. The 4th's advance had left them unsupported on both flanks and just past the range of their covering guns behind them.

Ray's smile was nowhere to be found just then. Thomas too had lost the confidence and bravado that had carried them all up to the ridge. Without orders the line of veterans calmly began to reload their pieces (those who

had fired), while the rest fixed bayonets and tried to catch their breath before the inevitable charge.

The bluecoats were obliging as well as sneaky, and the cavalry officers' orders to attack rolled up the hill to the 4th Virginia's position. Thomas quickly took stock of their situation, as the horsemen began to move slowly towards them. The uphill charge had winded them somewhat, but they now controlled the heights that would slow the cavalry just as the 4th had been slowed. There were quite a lot of horsemen opposite them, but they were unsupported on their flanks just as the 4th Virginia was, so neither would be able to overlap and outflank the other. The cavalry had the advantage of speed and mobility however, and in the hands of a gifted officer they could maneuver sufficiently to catch the 4th on one of its sides, putting them in a bad situation indeed.

The Sarge had already figured that out, and had ordered the regiment's snipers to commence firing, and they aimed for the lead officers with plumes in their hats or with different colored tunics. A number of them went down quickly, attesting to the accuracy of the 4th's best shots. The rest of the Union host began to pick up speed, and soon were rolling up the hill, still some ways off. The Sarge then ordered the lines to kneel and fire once more, and this time Thomas knew he had to aim for other soldiers. This time his very life depended on it.

The Sharps rifle that Thomas had was the best rifle of either side, and its accuracy and high rate of fire made it a treasured possession of the men who possessed one. Thomas had used it in a few battles already and had the odd feeling that it was aiming itself. He merely had to point it in the general direction and the gun was sighted right on target. On other occasions, he fired quickly without aiming at all, almost from the hip, and the rifle pointed to the enemy as well as if Thomas had been sighting down the barrel himself. He patted the stock just then, and whispered, "Old girl, we need you now."

There was a knot of six or seven horsemen leaping a fallen tree trunk together, and Thomas took aim at the leftmost one. Sarge's voice screamed "Fire!" and he let go - and the man disappeared from the horse's back. Reloading without taking his eyes off the troop, he could see they were yelling amongst themselves that one of their number was gone, and they leaned back into the charge with their sabres pointed that much lower.

A minute later the Sarge yelled "fire!" again, and Thomas shot for the next man in from the left. This time, he saw both of the rider's hands fly up in the air, hat tossed off in the wind, and tumble from the saddle. The others took that in stride, and returned to their careening charge, leaning into the withering fire as if it were nothing more than a strong wind. Thomas was reloaded and waiting for the Sarge's next order before the others were finished, so he sighted down on the third man. He hadn't felt remorse or any real feeling at all on having shot the first two troopers, but some inner feeling took hold of him this time, and he aimed low and fired at the galloping horse's broad chest, before any of the other Rebs could get off a shot. The horse stumbled and rolled forward, throwing the rider into a cloud of dust. "But he'll live," Thomas said to himself, "he'll live."

There were only three of the soldiers still left from the group of seven, though the riderless horses were still running together. Thomas reloaded as the rest of the line fired, and dozens of riders disappeared, falling from their mounts or slumping over in the saddle. The cavalry, four battalions of them, were much closer, and the 4th would barely have time to get off one more shot before they'd be on top of the line. Thomas took out the next rider as he had the last, shooting at the horse and sending the Yankee sprawling in the dirt.

Thomas just finished reloading with the rest of the line, but the Sarge held their fire back until the cavalry were almost at the top of the slope. Their faces were plainly visible, some contorted from recent wounds, all the rest locked in a screaming frenzy. The pounding of thousands of hooves reminded him of the big tornado three springs ago, the one that tore up the Wilmington Courthouse and toppled the great oak tree in the town square. The sound from the troopers' screams, the horses' snorting, the pounding hooves and the explosions and gunfire combined to send him into an almost otherworldly state.

The last few yards of the cavalry charge seemed to take ten minutes. Every step the horses took, each movement of their riders, the motions of the Virginia volunteers on either side of him, however insignificant, all were embellished with deep importance, as each muscle contraction could very well be the last conscious act of that person or animal. There were a lot less of the riders left in the saddle now, barely half of those that had started the charge, yet on they came. They were visibly slower now, the combination of distance and height decreasing their overall speed to barely that of a fast trot. But those last few moments convinced Thomas that they would not stop the charge, that the wall of horse flesh and Union riders would crash into them, God save them then.

At ten yards distance the Sarge finally yelled "Fire," much quieter and calmer than Thomas had expected, and the line erupted in flame and smoke. The screams and cries of both rider and mount were now clearly heard above the other noises of battle, the crashes of man and animal to the ground sounding like thunder. The kneeling front rank now quickly stood, grasping their rifles and muskets with grim determination, waiting for the flying wave of death that was just about to hit them.

Out of the haze from the last volley they came, devils in Federal blue, demons waving their swords wildly above their heads, beasts with flared nostrils, all of them caked in blood and dust. The horizon was thick with them, and the 4th began to involuntarily edge backward at the thought of the impending collision. The two men left from

the group Thomas had been firing at were directly ahead now, one aiming just to his left, the other - the one on the farthest right of the group - heading straight for him.

Thomas had no idea what to do. He couldn't run, even if he had wanted to, for the line of the 4th was packed tight together front and back, the nearness of the comrades normally a reassurance. He wanted some room to edge out of the way of the mad wave to his front, but he could feel the arms and weapons of Ray on his left and someone else on his right. The officer (he wore some type of gold badge on his collar, he noticed in timeless contemplation) directly in front of him lowered the point of his blade right for Thomas' head, screaming an anguished cry.

At the last moment, with nowhere else to go, Thomas dove under the horse and rolled to his right, dragging the butt of his rifle across the ground and catching the belly of the animal above him with the blade of the bayonet. The horse reared high into the air, turned in an unlikely pirouette, and crashed down beside Thomas, the rider nowhere to be seen. There were other horses going down now, falling like monstrous raindrops to the accompanying clang of metal on metal. Thomas crouched on one knee, spotted the second rank slowing to avoid its halted first line, took aim and dropped a trooper who had his pistol aimed somewhere to the left. There was no time to reload now, so he rose up with his bayonet pointing down the hill. He yelled then, a yell designed to intimidate the Yankees and bolster himself, but all it did was make him feel more alone, as no one nearby picked it up or added their voice.

The Union cavalry had pushed back the line in spots, but the last volley had wreaked so much havoc that they had almost come to a halt. The first two ranks were being engaged and left no room for the other ranks of cavalry to join in. The horses, their energy and will spent in the uphill charge, were now almost uncontrollable. Standing cavalry were at a disadvantage, Thomas knew from his studies, and if they didn't break through on their first charge they would be in bad shape. The greatest danger to him right now was the sharp hooves of the huge Northern mounts, followed closely by the six-shot pistols most of the troopers carried. The bayoneted muskets easily out-distanced the shorter cavalry sabres, and here and there the Confederates banded together to bring down a rider or strike at a trapped animal's exposed legs.

The Sarge was standing almost with his back to Thomas, so when he screamed with pain, Thomas spun about in surprise. There were two bluecoats close to him, one who was just pulling his sword out from the Sarge's shoulder and raising it above his head for a downward cut. Thomas thrust his rifle in the path of the falling blade, pushing it off to Sarge's left side. Sarge was slumping to the ground slowly, but with his one good arm he raised his rifle and fired point blank at the other horseman, the force of the blast throwing the rider right off his horse.

Thomas was taller now than his wounded officer and so presented an easier target for the other Yankee's sword. The blade came slashing across, almost knocking the rifle from his hands, and the sword came back across and did the same in reverse. Thomas tried his best to defend himself, but the taller target and continuous movement of the horse made it difficult to predict where the next blow would fall. "Attack him, boy!" he heard from the ground next to him. "Don't wait for him to get you, go after him!"

Thomas hollered up at the rider, lunged for the rider's leg and caught the man in the top of his boot. The horse reared and bellowed as the spike pierced its side, and Thomas had all he could do to even keep the rifle in his hand.

The wounded animal bucked wildly now, and the officer grimaced in pain yet continued to rain blows down upon Thomas' upraised weapon. Just then, Thomas slipped on the blood-soaked ground, giving his opponent the opening he was looking for. The blade darted in, looking for Thomas' neck. But the slip pulled him out of harm's way just enough that all the blade sliced was the back of Thomas' backpack. He looked up at the officer, silhouetted in the shimmering haze, and felt the last moments of his life tick by as the sword raised up one final time.

The sword stayed there for an oddly long time, then fell out of the man's hand and dropped point first into the reddened earth. The officer had his eyes closed, his mouth opened, looking for all the world like he was breathing in the enticing aroma of a warm summer day. He bent forward at the waist, and his horse galloped back down the hill. The last image Thomas had of the man was the slowly spreading dark stain on the man's back.

The sounds of battle were fainter now. Few of the Rebel line were standing unwounded now, but even fewer of the cavalymen opposed them. Hundreds of riderless mounts were heading back down the hill, as well as a couple of mounts with men still on them. The opponents still engaged at the top of the hill were much slower in their movements now, men barely able to raise their swords swinging down lazily on troopers who could hardly lift their muskets to block the blow. The cavalymen who had not been able to make it into the fray were milling about, only half way up the hill. The officers down there were trying to regroup the men for another push, when great jets of dirt and debris came spouting up all around them, and the regrouping quickly turned into a retreat. Looking about, Thomas saw that the artillery batteries behind the 4th had positioned a few guns on a slightly higher knoll on the ridge, giving them just enough elevation to lob shells into the tightly packed ranks of Union cavalry.

The effect of the artillery fire, coming on the heels of the thwarted charge, encouraged the cavalry in the rear to flee quickly. Horses and riders were being tossed into the air like unwanted toys, and few units would stay

in a situation like that for long. As each rank wheeled about and rode back down the hill, the men in front of them would do the same. Soon only the first few ranks of soldiers were engaged, and the Confederates that were free of adversaries fired back down at the retreating Federals or joined in overpowering the outnumbered remainder.

Thomas looked to the Sarge now, whose wound was less serious than at first it had seemed. The Sarge smiled up at him as Thomas tied a bandanna around the wound, saying "Ya done good there boy, ya done real good."

Ray came over then, whooping and hollering, relief more than joy fueling his emotions, and the two boys helped the Sarge back to his feet. The sun was beginning to sink into the trees on their left, and from the look of the Union cavalry turning away from them, there'd be no more fighting this day.

"We's more'n a match for them Bluecoats, ain't we Sarge?" Ray asked as the 4th took their wounded rearward. "We kin whup 'em any ole day, raht?"

"Ah'm sure as how we whupped 'em today, boy. Thas' all that matters raht now."

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Four Socks toyed with the blinds next to the bed, trying to decide if it was more fun to climb them or just bite the ends off of the slats. The noise as they slammed against the window and the adjacent wall was enough to wake Wayler but he dozed on, trying to remain under the dream-horizon. But Four Socks and her noisy playing finally won out, and a muffled sound escaping from the pillow covered head signaled to Four Socks that her master had returned back to her world.

She dropped down into her stalking pose, back legs tucked under, all her muscles tight, and began creeping closer to the covered form under the covers. It moved every now and then, as if mildly irritated by an insect or an itch. When she got to within a few inches of the moving pillow, Four Socks froze for an instant, then leaped the remaining distance in a bound. The unexpected weight forced the pillow down on Wayler's face, and he brushed both Four Socks and the pillow away from his gasping mouth. He came to his senses and realized that Four Socks, now purring on her back with all paws and claws extended, had gotten an early jump on playtime.

The dream was still all about him despite Four Socks' playful insistence to joust. The faces and locations seemed to replace or overpower his actual reality: the smells lingered in his nostrils, the roars and crashes thundered in his ears. He wanted the dream to continue so he could find out what happened to Sarge and momentarily thought about blaming Four Socks, still spoiling for a fight, as the culprit for his early awakening. He leaned over and put his face right next to hers, as she grabbed at him with her front feet. They played around like that for a few seconds before Wayler realized he needed to search the room for any evidence of last night's (Yesterday's? Last century's?) battle.

He got up quickly, the sudden movement interpreted by Four Socks as an escalation to more spirited combat. He glanced hurriedly around the room for something that would tie in with the deadly fighting. The chest by the closet still had the previous day's clothes draped overtop of it. The cabinet next to the door to the living room was still as he remembered it, as was the dresser opposite the bed. Something caught his eye in the mirror above the dresser, and he walked slowly nearer, at once drawn and afraid to find the answers.

The mirror was the same, but the picture inside had changed. Wayler looked to be the same person as before, same ruffled hair, same face and eyes, same clothes he wore to bed - but not the same. His left hand slowly moved up to the collar of the tattered old gray t-shirt that served as a nightgown, the impression of the bearded hiker on the front worn down to a mere shadow. The thumb of his hand touched the thicker material of the collar, then ran around the circle of the neck opening, until it met the deep tear that ran from the top of his shoulder to halfway down his back. It wasn't a tear though; his shirt had been sliced cleanly, as if by a very sharp knife - or a sword...

Four Socks had her claws dug into Wayler's right calf and was attempting to bite the much-too-large circumference that was his leg. She knew that this combination would usually bring a howl from her master and a scolding, but she was disappointed this day when no reaction at all ensued. She tried biting harder. Still nothing. She looked way up at her master staring into the Big Glass Thing, his hand slowly tracing a gap in the material he put on every night. She realized instantly that she was bored with this, and ran off hurriedly to see if there were any new spiders in the bathtub.

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"I know it's crazy, Elizabeth," Wayler spoke calmly into the phone, "but it's happened seven times this week. The first couple of dreams had a novel appeal, but now I'm getting pretty worried. What happens if I die in one of these dreams? Or if I get severely wounded? Am I going to wake up that way? Or will I not even wake up at all?"

"I don't know, Marion. They're your dreams." The voice on the other end was trying to remain calm and unconcerned, yet a strong feeling of worry came through. It was a melodious voice, and the effect it had on Wayler

was quite noticeable. His eyes were closed, his head tilted way back in the high-back chair, the hand not holding the phone rested unmoving in his lap. He looked for all the world to be asleep, or maybe just hypnotized. "You say you've had these dreams for seven nights in a row, and they all end the same way?"

"No, they end slightly different each time. All the people I'm friends with stay more or less the same, but the battles and their outcomes are all different. Sometimes we win, and sometimes the Bluebellies win."

"The Bluebellies? Who are they?"

"The Yankees, Liz. Don't you remember?"

"Oh yes, that's right. I'm sorry honey, I'm just not up on my Civil War slang terms. What happened last night?"

"Well, the unit I'm with is right outside of Washington, and we're preparing to make an assault on the fortifications tomorrow morning at dawn."

"See dear, these have all got to be dreams. The South never got that far in the war, from what I recall."

"That's just the problem, Liz - they did get to the Capitol." He reached across a desk cluttered with books, maps, old parchment filled with handwriting, to grab a thick volume entitled "The Encyclopedia of Military History," opened to a section under the heading "The War in the East, 1864-1865."

The voice on the other end sounded confused. "But the South never took Washington D.C. I'd have remembered that, surely."

"No, they never took it, but they came pretty close. In July of '64, Jubal Early marched to within six miles of the downtown area, but was stopped by the fortifications on the city's outskirts. The forts were so lightly manned that if he had rushed them the first day, he'd have probably gotten right in. As it was, Lincoln himself came down to the forts to bolster the Union troops. Grant rushed troops back to the Capital, and a couple of days later, Early withdrew without having made any serious attempt to take the town. Came damn near close to doing it, though."

"And you think you're with those troops now, Marion?"

"I *am* with them, Liz. Don't you get it? Every night when I go back to sleep, I get ...transported somehow, back to this other time period. And it's real, just as real as you and I talking here on the phone." More so, he thought to himself, but he couldn't explain that to her. It was hard enough trying to explain to her that he wasn't going crazy, that every thing he'd experienced for the past week was really happening, that inexplicably, every morning there was some new form of evidence waiting for him there in his room. A bullet hole, a cut piece of clothing, dirt in the shape of a horse's hoof, a discarded button - all tied in directly with his dreams, and none of which could have been planted there by someone else. He had long ago discarded the possibility that he was being duped (how could they get into his dreams?), and no other explanation presented himself. 'When you've eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, is the truth.' Holmes would have had a lovely time explaining this one, Wayler thought.

He realized that he had drifted off from the conversation and that Elizabeth was now asking about the current project Wayler was supposed to be working on. "When do the Élan people expect you to be finished with the proposal?"

"Oh, I've got 'till the twentieth."

"The twentieth? Oh Marion, that's tomorrow!"

My God, Wayler realized, it is tomorrow! Where had the week gone? He thought he had at least two or three days left, but now his deadline was almost up. Elizabeth was repeating a question to him. "I said, what have you got to show them?"

"Well, I've got some interesting ideas, some concepts that might... there are some real unusual possibilities... they're gonna be knocked over when I tell them - ""

"What have you got on *paper*, Marion?"

"On paper? Not much. Nothing, in fact." The realization that he'd burned his month and more of preparation time with nothing to show for it instantly weighed heavy on him, and Wayler sank deeper into the chair.

There was a long silence on the other end of the conversation.

"Well. What are you going to do?"

"I think... I think... I'm going... to go to sleep."

"Wayler, come off it!" She was starting to get peeved at his devil-may-care attitude to his job, but something in his voice - determination, insight, it was hard to say just what - caught her attention. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Liz, it's been staring me right in the face for a week." His eyes were open now, and his head was only an inch or two up from the headboard. "I usually come up with something totally original, outstanding, right? And I've been completely frustrated lately, haven't I?" He was beginning to feel a slight wave of energy building up in him. "This is one of the most unbelievable events that's ever happened to me."

"Only 'one of'?" she dryly replied. "Gee, I'd hate to be around you when something really unusual happens."

"You know what I mean. Look, this has got to be the reason why I'm having these dreams. Something to do with my need for a concept for this Élan t.p. account. Somewhere in all of those wild, dangerous dreams, there's a concept waiting for me."

"Do you know where this 'concept' is, Marion?"

"That's the problem," he said as his head sank back and the crest of the energy passed. "I haven't the foggiest idea where."

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Surrounded by wads of crumpled paper, Wayler sat back in his old battered chair. He rubbed his eyes, then looked down at Four Socks, curled up in a ball at his feet. She had long ago been worn out from playing with the dozens of paper wads her master had tossed resignedly to the floor, and she now slept peacefully. Wayler had begun to write at the top of this last sheet, "Options: Resign / Quit / Maneuver to Get Fired," then tore this one off just as he had all the rest. Realizing he should be happy Four Socks had finally settled down, he merely released this last sheet in mid air, and watched it float like a large white leaf to the floor, covering the cat like an overstarched blanket.

Four Socks stretched languidly, then opened her eyes to see her master traipse off to the bedroom. The light went out soon after, but she was already up and trotting to the room, sleepy but alert enough to follow.

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The night was warm and full of sound. Crickets from the fields they slept in, bullfrogs from the low marshes over on the Confederate right flank, the sound of rushing water from a creek somewhere up ahead in the inky blackness, all combined to fill the evening air with activity. The Rebel encampment was unusually still and quiet in comparison, especially considering the tremendous successes they had just been through. There should have been much cheering and singing, but the Rebels knew they were very far north, and tomorrow would tell all.

Old Jubal had been a man of his word. He had delivered his corps right to the very outskirts of the Union capitol, and tomorrow's attacks should find them inside the town itself. Some of the less experienced troops (Thomas did not see the irony that a mere sixteen-year-old with but a half-season's worth of fighting could consider himself more a 'veteran' than a man twice his years) wanted an immediate attack on the weak and supposedly thinly-held fortifications that separated them from the city. But Jubal had too much respect for the Union troops, and also a great deal of concern for his own men. He had seen too many good men wasted in attacks on prepared positions, and these fortifications had been years in the making. True, they were thin in depth, but what really would determine their strength were the men manning the gunpits. Were they the experienced soldiers that Grant must have surely dispatched by now? Or were they merely the Federal Militia, old men and youths culled from the city's unfit-for-combat crowd? He had to know which troops were there.

Early had issued orders asking for volunteers from the 4th Virginia, one of his best units, and surprisingly, two of its youngest members came forward. The officer in charge of recruiting for this dangerous assignment laughed out loud at first, but when the Sarge steely looked him straight in the eye and vouched for the two youths' courage and ability, the officer swallowed hard and apologized.

Then it was that Thomas and Ray found themselves creeping silently past their sentries, stripped of all their equipment save their rifles and their ammunition pouch. They found the gurgling creek in front of them and realized that as soon as they crossed, they would become the first confederate troops to enter Washington D.C. in the entire war.

"Hey Thomas, is you as skeered as Ah am?" Ray whispered through chattering teeth, the water much colder than expected on this dark July night.

"Yeah I'm 'skeered,' Ray, but I don't wanna die. So keep quiet!"

"Okay, ole' buddy."

Thomas continued wading the shallow stream, his Sharps held high above his shoulders. He was still mystified by his immediate reaction to the officer's call for volunteers (which was stepping forward), and he was still trying to sort out just why he had done it. He thought the Sarge would throw a fit for his volunteering ("Nevah vol'n-teeer for anythin'!" he had once told them early on), but Thomas was surprised at the defense the Sarge had put up when the officer had laughed at him stepping forward. Thomas only then realized that Ray had volunteered immediately too. He felt safer somehow knowing Ray was right there with him, yet felt twice as much responsibility to get both of them back to their lines alive tonight.

The other side of the creek was mostly tall weeds, some cattails and reeds, which allowed them to crouch forward almost invisibly. There were no troops immediately this side of the creek (Thomas hoped); they would all be up on the ridge where the fortifications were, huddled around camp fires or dozing in their firing lines.

The embankment was only a few yards away from the stream, a steep wall of eroded earth and tree stumps. If it were daylight instead of moonless night, they would be shot down before they took three steps. As it

were, the two gray-clad forms moved silently and unnoticed, across the open ground, into a deep ravine that stretched back into the Union lines.

Thomas and Ray used the cover of the ravine to catch their breath for a moment. They could hear Union pickets talking, a couple way off to the left, a few others singing what sounded like an old hymn, off to the right downstream. Neither conversations seemed at all to be centered around them, so after they congratulated themselves for staying alive during the past halfhour, they continued on.

The Union line, built at the very edge of this embankment, was full of these ravines. The officer who briefed them had spotted this one during his afternoon scouting. It supposedly ran almost a quarter-mile into the lines, and appeared to be lightly defended along its latter half. It would be possible, the officer suggested, for a couple of stealthy men to sneak into the ravine, crawl in as far as they could, and listen to the men talking around the campfires. From the men's conversations there could be some valuable information picked up, specifically, whether the men had just come up from Grant's army, whether they were nearby Union troops recently moved in to fill the lines, or whether they were merely Militia and artillery units used to make the forts look defended until the real troops arrived.

Thomas was smart enough to be know just how valuable this information would be the following day. He was young enough and quick enough to be able to get in and get out without being spotted. He was brave enough to have volunteered, and just foolish enough not to change his mind before it was too late.

He and Ray were now just a few yards away from the end of the ravine. The low-hanging branches and deep foliage in the uncleared end of the cut provided excellent concealment, better than he had hoped for. The only problem was, the foliage also concealed the Union troops from his observation, so he couldn't tell what type of uniform and unit badges the men had on who wandered by every few minutes or so. Although the depth of the crevice was now but a shallow gully, he knew he and Ray would have to crawl forward, almost to the very end of the gully, to get a better look at the men in the encampment.

"Ray, I'm goin' forward a bit. I want you to stay here, and if you here a commotion, I want you to git."

"No suh! Ah ain't a-stayin' here so's you kin git all the glory and hoopla yerself. Ah'm a-comin' wit ya, an that's fer sure." Ray said his piece quietly and with a solemn tone that belied his true reason: he wouldn't let his friend go into that danger alone.

"Thanks, Ray," Thomas answered back, and they both took one long deep breath, then turned to face the Union line.

The bushes thinned a bit in front of them, enough for them to be able to scrunch down and crawl through them on their bellies. It was a good idea to leave everything unnecessary behind, he thought now, because any stray article of gear would be bound to catch on all the undergrowth here. They continued their silent advance for about ten or fifteen yards, when the gully finally ran out, and they stared face-to-face with a Union officer.

Thankfully, the Union officer was sleepy and resting his head on a tentpole some fifteen feet away. His eyes were half-closed and seemed dulled from a late meal or a post-dinner drink. Or maybe he was as tired of all the fighting as we were, Thomas mused. Maybe he had a home and family to return to, and was off in some personal memory, thinking of them. Ray's elbow nudged Thomas back to alertness, and he saw Ray pointing at a group of Union officers walking towards the tent from the left. Their conversation could be barely heard through the trees and stacked equipment between them.

"... of you to come, Sir. The men ... to see you. They always are, you know." The first voice was an older man, his voice crackled with age and perhaps a fondness for tobacco. He sounded slow to talk, but the slowness seemed to emanate from careful choosing of words rather than from feebleness. "It's helped ... realize their importance here."

"Yes, General, I'm sure ... them. I'm proud of them all, and ... will do their best to protect us." The second man had a much deeper voice, and had an odd accent to boot, one that Thomas couldn't place right off. His father had entertained gentlemen from the Coast, as well as business travellers from the New England states before the War, but this man sounded nothing like them. The only person he sounded vaguely like was a cadet named Jimmy Mitchell who came all the way from Kentucky to join the Institute. Jimmy was one of the first to fall at New Market, Thomas remembered sadly. But what would a Kentuckian be doing here in the Federal camp? A traitor maybe, or a spy? Thomas could see at least a dozen men around the two conversers, and the closeness of their accompaniment (combined with the darkness of the evening) made it impossible to see much of the two central figures.

The group drew closer, and as they did, the officer opposite the two men stood to attention at the entrance to his tent. The group of men then filtered around the opening, shielding the two talkers as they entered and sat down facing each other. The two must be important officers, Thomas figured, to have such an impressive escort at this time of night. There was a respectful silence from them as they stood about the tent, some as close to Thomas and Ray as five feet. But their concealed position and dark hid them as well as if they were a hundred feet away. The two inside the tent picked up their conversation.

"You know, General," the deeper-voiced one began, "we would have been in mighty bad straights if the

Confederates had attacked today as soon as they had arrived here. Our militia are brave lads, but they wouldn't have stood much chance against those Johnny Rebs."

"Yes sir, but you have to remember, Jubal Early is careful when sending his men into battle. He wouldn't waste them on a suicidal frontal attack on our forts. Not unless he knew for sure that we only had militia in them. But by four this morning, we should have another fifteen thousand Regulars manning the walls, and then let old Jubal try to take us!" The older man seemed almost grandfatherly, and it was strange to hear his kind, ratchety voice talk about combat and battle.

A number of the escorting officers excused themselves from the two seated figures, explaining that their duties required them to check on their troops before retiring. They were sent away with hearty handshakes and salutes, and many of the remaining officers found seats or dropped tiredly to the ground, obviously drained from their preparations to defend the capitol. Thomas now had a good look at the man sitting on the left of the tent. He appeared to have been the older man, a great gray beard adorning a fine, weathered old face. He had a kind smile, and Thomas thought how terrible it was that he might be shot by one of us. His words seemed even more gentle, now that Thomas had a face to put with the words. He knew how men could follow the likes of Lee and Stonewall, for, if he had been dressed in Union blue this day, he would gladly lay his life down for this kindly old man.

But the real surprise came as three of the younger officers moved back off to a campfire further to the left, allowing a glimpse of the other man in the tent. Little bumps began to grow on Thomas' neck, then shoulders, then down his arms and across his back. It took a while for his mind to grasp just who was sitting barely twenty feet away from him. The coal-black civilian clothes were nothing special, though they seemed out of place with all the deep blue uniforms around. The lanky body could have fit right in with some of the Virginia mountain men, as would the half-beard he wore from his cheeks on down. The face, the clothes and body, all were common enough - but the tall stove-pipe hat sent shivers up Thomas' spine and right back down again. He heard the deep solemn voice speak quietly, earnestly, and little hairs he didn't even know he had began to stand up and dance on the back of his neck.

Ray was a bit slower on the comprehension, but when he heard the older general address the man in black as "Mr. President," Thomas noticed he turned pale and very scared for a long while. He turned to nudge Thomas, but realized his friend was already aware that they were listening to Abraham Lincoln.

"Yes, we came pretty close to losing our great city," Lincoln went on. "And I hope the danger for the most part is passed. But the Confederate soldier is a wily, cunning creature, as you are no doubt aware. He fights for a cause he truly believes in, however misguided we may feel it is. He fights for the preservation of his land, his way of life, his country and his honor. No more motivated a rmy has ever tread this land before, nor is it likely to again."

This was Lincoln, Thomas fully realized, the leader of our enemy, the scourge of the South, the instigator of this terrible war. But he seemed far less the demon that Davis and the other Confederate politicians had made him out to be. Here he was, complementing the Southern fighting man for his spirit and courage. This surely caused Thomas to stop and think a while. Their conversation had suggested that the Union reinforcements were due to arrive within a few hours only, not enough time for the Confederates to launch a coordinated attack on these heights. It seemed that their time of opportunity had indeed passed, and that where Thomas lay now was as close as the South would ever get to the city of Washington.

It was a simple decision. The army would simply have to turn about and march back down The Valley, holding up in whatever defensive positions presented themselves. The North would be content to see them march away, and would keep a respectful distance away from them, he figured. And so it would go, right up until the Yankees got all the way down to Richmond. This was their last chance, and it was not meant to be. Just like that, Thomas accepted the inevitable, and began to plan the retreat that would mean the end of the war.

As he turned quietly to Ray to signal that they need stay no longer, he was astonished to see him carefully pulling his musket up beside his outstretched arms. They were far enough back in the brush that the gun barrel, leaned up against his shoulder, just stayed within the cover of the thickets and bramble. He stared intently at Ray's eyes, trying to read his intentions there, when Ray glanced over and whispered, "Ah'm gonna bag me a Prez'dent."

Thomas was suddenly confronted with the realization that they were alone deep into the Union lines, with no realistic chance of retreat once Ray fired. If they were lucky enough to make it back running through the ravine and somehow escaped through the alerted Union pickets, they would stand little or no chance of surviving their own patrols and sentries, who would understandably shoot first and ask questions later when confronted with running figures and gunfire from the Federal lines.

But it wasn't the very real possibility that they would be killed or captured that drew his senses tight. It was the coldblooded murder of this civilian, this non-military man who sat before them, calm and poised like the minister at Wilkes' Baptist Church, who spoke gently, almost caringly for the soldiers who were up in arms against his own country. Somehow, he couldn't let Ray kill this man. Somehow, he felt compelled to let this enemy of The Cause live through this day, to await some other fate down the road. Maybe it was in repayment for the fate that had spared him, or maybe it was because he knew the South had no real hope of winning this war, only prolong-

ing it, and when the end did inevitably arrive, it would be better to have this man running the victorious side than someone less thoughtful, less understanding.

Thomas gently placed his hand on the barrel of Ray's gun, and pulled it rather than pushed it to the ground. "No, Ray, we can't do this here. Not like this. Not him."

"But Tom, we got's..." Ray started, then the look in his friend's eyes took hold and conveyed some deep truth to Ray in a mere second. "Yeah, Tom, Ah guess as how yer raht." He lowered his gun to the dirt, and with one long look back, began to slide back into the gully they crawled up from.

"No wait, Ray. I have an idea." Back further in the undergrowth where their whispers had less chance of being heard, Thomas proposed a plan to Ray that almost had him laughing out loud at the conclusion of it.

"If'n ya think ya kin do it, Tom, Ah says do it. Ah'll wait raht heah fo' ya, whethah ya makes it back er not."

"Good, Ray. We'll need to wait a bit longer 'till things quiet down some more, then I'll give it a try. Who knows, they may write a song 'bout us some day." The two laid down in the lowest crevice they could find, and waited until the talking and movement had all but died down.

It was perhaps two hours later, well after midnight, when the Union encampment slowed down to the lowest noise level of the evening. Nearly all the Union officers were asleep, and only a few sentries walked about the campfires some thirty yards or so away. The older general was snoring away on a cot in the tent in front of them, under two heavy blankets that defied the heat of the evening. Lincoln lay back on his cot in his pants and white dress shirt, unbuttoned at the wrists, obviously accustomed to sleeping outdoors from his early backwoods days. He did not snore, but neither did he move.

After both Thomas and Ray were satisfied they had all drifted off, Thomas made his move. He slipped quickly out of the underbrush and stood straight up, and did not move for a full minute. No discernable alarm was raised by the specter of a gray uniformed soldier appearing in the Union lines, but only a sharp-eyed alert soldier would have been able to discern that he even stood there, let alone that his uniform was not the Union blue. Still, Thomas' first action was to calmly

stride over and pick up an officer's long overcoat and hat, putting them on over his own to give him some semblance of a disguise. Any trooper would probably pass right by without another look tonight - or so Thomas hoped.

He carefully walked around to the side of the sleeping soldiers, many risking the biting mosquitoes for the chance to sleep out in the moderately cool breeze of early morning. There were a lot of soldiers sleeping here, thought Thomas, as he gingerly tiptoed between the prone bodies. There were a few on both sides of Lincoln's tent, but none at the rear, so he decided to make his entrance there.

The flaps had been tied together by two braided cords, which he cautiously untied. A snort and a cough came from the inside of the tent, apparently from the general, but after a few seconds the soft snoring returned. Thomas bent down on one knee and poked his head slowly inside.

From the closed end of the darkened tent he could see across the clearing to the wooded gully where until moments ago, he and Ray had lain totally invisible. It looked like a solid wall of trees and bushes from here. No wonder none of the soldiers had paused to look their way. The smell of a candle lingered in this end, put out only a few hours before. In front of him, the snoring form of the old general lay on the left, which meant that Lincoln was the dark long body to the right.

Thomas knew he had to hurry, yet he must not fumble now. He had only one chance to do this, and any error would undoubtedly prove fatal. He slowly crept forward on the compacted soil of the tent floor, feeling with his hands for any obstacles in his way. He bumped into the camp table that must have been placed there for the light-source, and held his breathe hoping his clumsiness would not knock over anything resting on it. After a few seconds his breathing returned, and he continued with his task.

A few more tense moments of searching (they seemed like an eternity) and he touched a cool, slick, tubular surface, placed next to the bed on the ground, open side up. It must be the man's stovepipe hat, Thomas realized, and knew that Lincoln's head was mere inches away. It was now or never.

Carefully, ever so slowly, Thomas reached his right hand past the Union overcoat, into his coat, searching for something. He glided as slowly as he imagined an insect would, in its patient crawl across their front porch, taking forever to put his hand on the object hidden in the folds of his jacket. He found it then, placed there before he left the thicket, and slowly, carefully extracted it into the musky tent air. He held the object up to his eyes in the darkness of the tent, wondering one last time if he could actually go through with this. It seemed like such an excellent idea back in the relative safety of the gully, and now it seemed unduly dangerous and foolhardy. Yet here he was, and he was inches away from his target.

He was all steel and resolve then. I must do it, he said to himself, with conviction that grew from some deep vast well inside him. I will do this act, and it will help Our Cause in the end. He searched with his eyes for the circular shape that was his target, then he did it.

He dropped the object, his Rebel cap, gray cloth and black lacquer visor, into the Great Man's stovepipe

hat. "Happy birthday, ole' man," he unknowingly said out loud. "Figure this one out t'morrow, if'n you can."

Thomas crawled back out of the tent, fastened the straps calmly as if he was tying his shoe back at Institute, and strolled casually back to the break in the bushes from whence he first emerged. He dropped back into them without a sound, and the two gray-clad forms stole back south to their friends and their country.

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Next morning, after the late-sleeping officers awoke, a great commotion arose when one of the Union colonels discovered his greatcoat and hat were missing. The sentries were accused of pilfering, and much was made of the incident. The officers made a great deal out of this supposed petty thievery, accusing and arguing back and forth, and spent considerably more time on the subject than would have been thought warranted.

Lincoln, however, had been awake since much earlier that morning, ever since the back tent flaps had been opened by a very quiet intruder. He had always been a light sleeper, as his woodsman's hearing usually alerted him to sounds others often overlooked.

Unarmed, Lincoln waited for the assassin's blow that was sure to fall. He thought about yelling for the guard, but knew if the Great One had decided this was his time to go, he would not fight it but would accept his fate calmly and with dignity. Instead of the gunshot he expected to hear, only a soft thunk came from somewhere down near the lower corner of his bed. The intruder soon left, walking back to the wall of thickets near the edge of the camp, and darting into the underbrush. He had figured correctly that it was a rebel come stealing into his tent, and a braver man Lincoln had never met.

When he picked up his stovepipe hat and found the rebel cap deposited within, he was puzzled for a moment. Then he laughed out loud, and gained a great deal of insight from that act. Here was a man who risked his life to give his sworn enemy a token of his respect. Instead of killing him, he left an object that showed he had been there, and wanted peace, though he had had it within his power to commit violence instead. 'Counting coup' the Indians called it, when one brave snuck into the tent of another and left an axe or a knife next to a sleeping brave's head.

"You may lose this war," Lincoln said to no one in particular, "but you men surely have élan."

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Wayler woke up at that moment in bed, suffused in the enjoyment of that one perfect moment, that awakening of realization, and within him, his own awakening occurred. He noticed it was four-thirty on his bedside clock. "Five hours until the meeting. Plenty of time," he sighed. He got up, grabbed his storyboard blanks and went to work right there in the middle of the bed.

The lights in the conference room were dimmed to provide additional emphasis on the single bright spotlight that illuminated the easel at one end of the room. A single word, "ÉLAN," was written there in bold handwriting. Wayler stood calmly behind the easel, and if the lights had been up just a fraction more, the executives gathered in the room would probably have noticed his eyes were half-closed, as if lost in a dream. He waited until the men and women in the room were in that slightly annoyed state that approximated the same feeling that television watchers get when their favorite show has been interrupted by one more fool commercial.

Without a word, he slowly turned over the first page, which depicted a dark evening, an exterior shot of a field with a flowing creek. Two soldiers, dressed in drab gray attire, are making their way cautiously through the creek, towards a fortified heights some distance away. Close ups reveal the two to be Confederate soldiers, young ones at that. They crawl determinedly up to the Union positions, through dirt and bramble, thorn and thicket. The executives exhibited both confusion and curiosity, and all waited patiently for the next series of drawings.

Wayler soundlessly turned the next page over, to reveal the two soldiers, on their bellies, inspecting the campsight of a dozen or so Union officers. In their midst, sitting in an old A-frame tent, are an ancient Federal general with a flowing white beard, and the unmistakable form of Abraham Lincoln. One of the execs muttered low, "Not another President's Day sale," but a more rapt lady on his left gave him a very sharp elbow to the ribs, which he interpreted to mean she wanted no comments from him just then.

The storyboard followed the action as the Union men went to sleep, then followed a solitary gray-clad figure as he emerged from the undergrowth and stole silently to the back of the single tent. The air in the room was one of surprising tension for such a simple concept, and many of them appeared to motion involuntarily with a movement of their fingers or a nod of their heads for Wayler to reveal the next page.

Whether Wayler saw them through his barely focused eyes or not, he languidly turned over the next page. Eagerly, two dozen pairs of eyes scanned the page for the continuing story. The silent gray figure was undoing straps at the back of the tent (the exec that had previously muttered under his breath held back on criticizing the historical probability of whether the tents in those days had straps or not). He ever-so-slowly crawled inside, to

deposit an object into the signature stovepipe hat that rested on the floor. That done, the figure calmly retreated back out of the tent, and disappeared into the darkness of the thickets.

A number of the executives moved forward in their chairs as Wayler ever-so-slowly reached for the last page. His eyes, if one were close enough to see them, were definitely not focused on the figures in the room, but neither were they partially closed due to fatigue or some artificially-altered state. It was as if his eyes saw some other scene, were aware of some other reality entirely, rather than the one that existed before him. He effortlessly moved the last page into place, and his hand drifted leisurely down to his side. He spoke no words in the presentation, allowing the pictures and drawings in front of him speak their own volumes.

The scene was now of a daylight Union encampment, with the same tent in the foreground. The soldiers were all in an uproar over something that the Confederates had apparently done during the night, but the focus of the scene slowly drew away from their antics and instead locked onto a solitary figure sitting on a cot in the back of the tent. He holds in one hand his stovepipe hat, and in the other, a roll of Élan toilet paper. The half-bearded man looks off over the thickets that block his view of the Confederate line, and says in a mellow, deep voice:

“Those men may be Rebels, but they sure have Élan!”

A final image of the roll is superimposed over the scene, with the words “Élan Toilet Paper” displayed simply underneath.

After a few moments during which nobody spoke, someone turned up the lights. Then a torrent of words broke forth, on every subject from the historical right-and-wrong of the Civil War to just who should perform the role of Lincoln in the commercial. Wayler’s boss just sat there, smart enough to allow the clients’ energetic response to do all the selling necessary.

He finally stood up and raised his hands for silence, which finally brought the room to order despite a man and a woman off to one side who still threw the words “Costner!” and “DeNiro!” back and forth at each other like fastballs. He looked down on the out of-breath group and spoke three words: “You like it?”

The entire room tried to respond at the same time, but an older man at the far end of the table finally stood up, and as he did so, the room quieted down in a hurry. He was an older man with a long flowing white beard, and when he spoke, his gravelly voice gave the impression that he’d had one too many cigars in his time. But his words were soft and direct, and the executives listened to him like he was their father or grandfather. “We like it - / like it. I have to say, it’s the most original idea for our product - heck, for any product - that I’ve seen in years. Your man, Wayler is it? He’s done a splendid job.”

Wayler’s boss smiled a satisfied smile. “Well, that’s what we pay him for, you know.” He turned to speak over his shoulder in the direction of the easel. “Now don’t go asking for a raise just yet, Marion. Even if you do deserve-” and stopped in mid-sentence. There was no one behind the easel. In fact, as his boss looked around the room, he couldn’t find Wayler anywhere in sight. But executives were already on their feet shaking his hand for the splendid proposal and asking his opinion on whether they could get Costner to do the commercial and what he would cost. He quickly forgot about Wayler’s instant disappearing act, and kindly thanked each and every one who congratulated him on the excellent work.

If his boss could have looked out to the road in front of their building, he would have seen Wayler smiling to himself, driving south in the direction of his home, looking forward to seeing Four Socks and thinking expectantly about his bed and the good night’s sleep he would find there.