

CONFEDERATES IN THE ATTIC

*There never will be anything more interesting
in America than that Civil War never.*

—GERTRUDE STEIN

In 1965, a century after Appomattox, the Civil War began for me at a musty apartment in New Haven, Connecticut. My great-grandfather held a magnifying glass to his spectacles and studied an enormous book spread open on the rug. Peering over his shoulder, I saw pen-and-ink soldiers hurtling up at me with bayonets.

I was six, Poppa Isaac 101. Egg-bald, barely five feet tall, Poppa Isaac lived so frugally that he sliced cigarettes in half before smoking them. An elderly relative later told me that Poppa Isaac bought the book of Civil War sketches soon after emigrating to America in 1882. He often shared it with his children and grandchildren before I came along.

Years later, I realized what was odd about this one vivid memory of my great-grandfather. Isaac Moses Perski fled Czarist Russia as a teenaged draft dodger—in Yiddish, a *shirker*—and arrived in Manhattan without money or English or family. He worked at a Lower East Side sweatshop and lived literally on peanuts, which were cheap, filling and nutritious. Why, I wondered, had this thrifty refugee chosen

as one of his first purchases in America a book written in a language he could barely understand, about a war in a land he barely knew, a book that he kept poring over until his death at 102?

By the time Poppa Isaac died, my father had begun reading aloud to me each night from a ten-volume collection called *The Photographic History of the Civil War*. Published in 1911, the volumes' ripe prose sounded as foreign to me as the captions of my great-grandfather's book must have seemed to him. So, like Poppa Isaac, I lost myself in the pictures: sepia men leading sepia horses across cornfields and creeks; jaunty volunteers, their faces framed by squished caps and fire-hazard beards; barefoot Confederates sprawled in trench mud, eyes open, limbs twisted like licorice. For me, the fantastical creatures of Maurice Sendak held little magic compared to the man-boys of Mathew Brady who stared back across the century separating their lives from mine.

Before long, I began to read aloud with my father, chanting the strange and wondrous rivers—Shenandoah, Rappahannock, Chickahominy—and wrapping my tongue around the risible names of rebel generals: Braxton Bragg, Jubal Early, John Sappington Marmaduke, William "Extra Billy" Smith, Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard. I learned about palindromes from the Southern sea captain Raphael Semmes. And I began to match Brady's still-deaths with the curt stutter of farm roads and rocks that formed the photographer's backdrop: Mule Shoe, Slaughter Pen, Bloody Lane, Devil's Den.

In third grade, I penciled a highly derivative Civil War history of my own—"The war was started when after all the states had seceded," it began—and embarked on an ambitious art project, painting the walls of our attic with a lurid narrative of the conflict. Preferring underdogs, I posted a life-sized Johnny Reb by the bathroom door. A pharaonic frieze of rebel soldiers at Antietam stretched from the stairs to the attic window. Albert Sidney Johnston's death at Shiloh splashed across an entire wall. General Pickett and his men charged bravely into the eaves.

I'd reached the summer of 1863 and run out of wall. But standing in the middle of the attic, I could whirl and whirl and make myself dizzy with my own cyclorama. The attic became my bedroom and the murals inhabited my boyhood dreaming. And each morning I

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woke to a comforting sound: my father bounding up the attic steps, blowing a mock bugle call through his fingers and shouting, "General, the troops await your command!"

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS LATER, the murals were still there and so was my boyhood obsession. I'd just returned to America after nine years abroad and moved to an old house in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. My Australian wife chose the spot; the fields and cows and crooked fences fit Geraldine's image of outback America. For me, the place stirred something else. I stared at a brick church still bullet-scarred from a Civil War skirmish. In the lumpy village graveyard, I found Confederates and Yankees buried side by side, some of them kin to each other. Within an hour of our new home lay several of the battlegrounds I'd painted as a child, and to which I now dragged Geraldine on weekend drives.

At a picnic soon after our arrival, I overheard a neighbor ask Geraldine how she liked Virginia. "Fine," she sighed. "Except that my husband's become a Civil War bore."

I'd always been one, of course, but my obsession had lain dormant for several decades. With adolescence had come other passions, and I'd stuffed my toy musket, plastic rebel soldiers and Lincoln Logs into a closet reserved for boyish things. A Day-Glo poster of Jimi Hendrix supplanted Johnny Reb. Pickett's Charge and Antietam Creek vanished behind dart boards, Star Trek posters and steep drifts of teenage clutter.

But a curious thing had happened while I'd lived abroad. Millions of Americans caught my childhood bug. Ken Burns's TV documentary on the Civil War riveted the nation for weeks. *Glory* and *Gettysburg* played to packed movie houses. The number of books on the Civil War passed 60,000; a bibliography of works on Gettysburg alone ran to 277 pages.

On the face of it, this fad seemed out of character for America. Like most returning expatriates, I found my native country new and strange, and few things felt stranger than America's amnesia about its past. During the previous decade, I'd worked as a foreign correspondent in lands where memories were elephantine: Bosnia, Iraq,

Northern Ireland, Aboriginal Australia. Serbs spoke bitterly of their defeat by Muslim armies at Kosovo as though the battle had occurred yesterday, not in 1389. Protestants in Belfast referred fondly to "King Billy" as if he were a family friend rather than the English monarch who led Orangemen to victory in 1690.

Returning to America, I found the background I lacked wasn't historical, it was pop-cultural. People kept referring to TV shows I'd missed while abroad, or to athletes and music stars I'd never seen perform. In the newspaper, I read a government survey showing that 93 percent of American students couldn't identify "an important event" in Philadelphia in 1776. Most parents also flunked; 73 percent of adults didn't know what event "D-Day" referred to.

Yet Americans remained obsessed with the Civil War. Nor was this passion confined to books and movies. Fights kept erupting over displays of the rebel flag, over the relevancy of states' rights, over a statue of Arthur Ashe slated to go up beside Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson in Richmond. Soon after my return, the Walt Disney Company unveiled plans for a Civil War theme park beside the Manassas battlefield. This provoked howls of protest that Disney would vulgarize history and sully the nation's "hallowed ground." It seemed as though the black-and-white photographs I'd studied as a child had blurred together, forming a Rorschach blot in which Americans now saw all sorts of unresolved strife: over race, sovereignty, the sanctity of historic landscapes, and who should interpret the past.

THEN, EARLY ONE MORNING, the Civil War crashed into my bedroom. A loud popping noise crackled just outside our window. "Is that what I think it is?" Geraldine asked, bolting awake. We'd sometimes heard gunfire while working in the Middle East, but it was the last sound we expected here, in a hamlet of 250 where bleating sheep had been our reveille for the past six months.

I went to the window and saw men in gray uniforms firing muskets on the road in front of our house. Then a woman popped up from behind a stone wall and yelled "Cut!" The firing stopped and the Confederates collapsed in our yard. I brewed a pot of coffee,

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gathered some mugs and went outside. It turned out that our village had been chosen as the set for a TV documentary on Fredericksburg, an 1862 battle fought partly along eighteenth-century streets that resembled ours.

But the men weren't actors, at least not professionals, and they performed in the film shoot for little or no pay. "We do this sort of thing most weekends anyway," said a lean rebel with gunpowder smudges on his face and the felicitous name of Troy Cool.

In the local paper, I'd often read about Civil War reenactors who staged mock battles with smoke bombs and reproduction muskets. It was a popular hobby in our part of Virginia. But when I asked about this, Troy Cool frowned. "We're hardcores," he said.

Between gulps of coffee—which the men insisted on drinking from their own tin cups rather than our ceramic mugs—Cool and his comrades explained the distinction. Hardcores didn't just dress up and shoot blanks. They sought absolute fidelity to the 1860s: its homespun clothing, antique speech patterns, sparse diet and simple utensils. Adhered to properly, this fundamentalism produced a time-travel high, or what hardcores called a "period rush."

"Look at these buttons," one soldier said, fingering his gray wool jacket. "I soaked them overnight in a saucer filled with urine." Chemicals in the urine oxidized the brass, giving it the patina of buttons from the 1860s. "My wife woke up this morning, sniffed the air and said, 'Tim, you've been peeing on your buttons again.'"

In the field, hardcores ate only foods that Civil War soldiers consumed, such as hardtack and salt pork. And they limited their speech to mid-nineteenth-century dialect and topics. "You don't talk about Monday Night football," Tim explained. "You curse Abe Lincoln or say things like, 'I wonder how Becky's getting on back at the farm.'"

One hardcore took this Method acting to a bizarre extreme. His name was Robert Lee Hodge and the soldiers pointed him out as he ambled toward us. Hodge looked as though he'd stepped from a Civil War tintype: tall, rail-thin, with a long pointed beard and a butter-nut uniform so frayed and filthy that it clung to his lank frame like rags to a scarecrow.

As he drew near, Troy Cool called out, "Rob, do the bloat!" Hodge clutched his stomach and crumpled to the ground. His belly swelled

grotesquely, his hands curled, his cheeks puffed out, his mouth contorted in a rictus of pain and astonishment. It was a flawless counterfeit of the bloated corpses photographed at Antietam and Gettysburg that I'd so often stared at as a child.

Hodge leapt to his feet and smiled. "It's an ice-breaker at parties," he said.

For Robert Lee Hodge, it was also a way of life. As the Marlon Brando of battlefield bloating, he was often hired for Civil War movies. He also posed—dead and alive—for painters and photographers who reproduced Civil War subjects and techniques. "I go to the National Archives a lot to look at their Civil War photographs," he said. "You can see much more detail in the original pictures than you can in books."

A crowd of blue-clad soldiers formed down the road. It was time for the battle to resume. Hodge reached in his haversack and handed me a business card. "You should come out with us sometime," he said, his brown eyes boring into mine with evangelical fervor, "and see what a period rush feels like." Then he loped off to join the other rebels crouched behind a stone wall.

I watched the men fight for a while, then went back inside and built a fire. I pulled down Poppa Isaac's book from the shelf. The tome was so creased with age that the title had rubbed off its spine and the pages discharged a puff of yellowed paper-dust each time I opened the massive cover. Searching for pictures of Fredericksburg, I quickly became lost in the Civil War, as I'd been so often since our return to America.

Geraldine came in with a cup of coffee. She'd chatted with a few of the men, too. "It's strange," she said, "but they seemed like ordinary guys." One worked as a Bell Atlantic salesman, another as a forklift operator. Even Robert Lee Hodge had seemed, well, normal. During the week, he waited on tables and sometimes freelanced articles for Civil War magazines. I'd once worked as a waiter, and at twenty-eight, which was Hodge's age, I'd been a freelancer, too, although writing about more recent wars.

Then again, I'd never spent weekends grubbing around the woods in urine-soaked clothes, gnawing on salt pork and bloating in the road. Not that my own behavior was altogether explicable, sitting

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here in a crooked house in the hills of Virginia, poring over sketches of long-dead Confederates. I was born seven years after the last rebel soldier, Pleasant Crump, died at home in Lincoln, Alabama. I was raised in Maryland, a border state in the Civil War that now belonged to the "Mid-Atlantic States," a sort of regionless buffer between North and South. Nor did I have blood ties to the War. My forebears were digging potatoes and studying Torah between Minsk and Pinsk when Pleasant Crump trudged through Virginia with the 10th Alabama.

I took out the card Robert Lee Hodge had given me. It was colored Confederate gray; the phone number ended in 1865. Muskets crackled outside and shrieks of mock pain filled the air. Why did this war still obsess so many Americans 130 years after Appomattox? I returned to Poppa Isaac's book. What did that war have to do with him, or with me?

A FEW WEEKS LATER I gave Rob Hodge a call. He seemed unsurprised to hear from me and renewed his offer to take me out in the field. Hodge's unit, the Southern Guard, was about to hold a drill to keep its skills sharp during the long winter layoff (battle reenactments, like real Civil War combat, clustered between spring and fall). "It'll be forty-eight hours of hardcore marching," he said. "Wanna come?"

Hodge gave me the number for the Guardsman hosting the event, a Virginia farmer named Robert Young. I called for directions and also asked what to bring. "I've got a sleeping bag," I told him. The voice on the other end went silent. "Or some blankets," I added.

"You'll be issued a bedroll and other kit as needed," Young said. "Bring food, but nothing modern. Absolutely no plastic." He suggested I arrive early so he could check out my gear.

I donned an old-fashioned pair of one-piece long johns known as a union suit (which sounded Civil War-ish), a pair of faded button-fly jeans, muddy work boots, and a rough cotton shirt a hippie girlfriend had given me years before. Ignorant of nineteenth-century food packaging, I tossed a hunk of cheese and a few apples into a leather shoulder bag, along with a rusty canteen and camping knife.

Surely the others would share their grub. I imagined the Guardsmen gathered round a crackling bonfire, talking about the homefront while slicing potatoes into a bubbling Irish stew.

Two young Confederates stood guard at the entrance to the drill site, a 400-acre farm in the bucolic horse country of the Virginia Piedmont. One was my host, Robert Young. He welcomed me with a curt nod and a full-body frisk for twentieth-century contraband. The apples had to go; they were shiny Granny Smiths, nothing like the mottled fruit of the 1860s. The knife and canteen and shoulder bag also were deemed too pristine, as was my entire wardrobe. Even the union suit was wrong; long johns in the 1860s were two-piece, not one.

In exchange, Young tossed me scratchy wool trousers, a filthy shirt, hobnailed boots, a jacket tailored for a Confederate midget, and wool socks that smelled as though they hadn't been washed since Second Manassas. Then he reached for my tortoiseshell glasses. "The frames are modern," he explained, handing me a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles with tiny, weak lenses. Finally, he slung a thin blanket over my shoulder. "We'll probably be spooning tonight," he said.

Spooning? His manner didn't invite questions. I was a soldier now; mine was not to question why. So half-blind and hobbled by the ill-fitting brogans—boots weren't always molded to right and left in the Civil War—I trailed the two men to a cramped farm building behind the inviting antebellum mansion I'd seen from the road. We sat shivering inside, waiting for the others. Unsure about the ground rules for conversation, I asked my host, "How did you become a reenactor?"

He grimaced. I'd forgotten that the "R word" was distasteful to hardcores. "We're living historians," he said, "or historical interpreters if you like." The Southern Guard had formed the year before as a schismatic faction, breaking off from a unit that had too many "farbs," he said.

"Farb" was the worst insult in the hardcore vocabulary. It referred to reenactors who approached the past with a lack of verisimilitude. The word's etymology was obscure; Young guessed that "farb" was short for "far-be-it-from-authentic," or possibly a respelling of "barf."

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Violations serious enough to earn the slur included wearing a wrist-watch, smoking cigarettes, smearing oneself with sunblock or insect repellent—or, worst of all, fake blood. ~~Farb was also a fungible word;~~ it could become an adjective (farby), a verb (as in, "don't farb out on me"), an adverb (farbily) and a heretical school of thought (Farbism or Farbiness).

The Southern Guard remained vigilant against even accidental Farbiness; it had formed an "authenticity committee" to research subjects such as underwear buttons and 1860s dye to make sure that Guardsmen attired themselves exactly as soldiers did. "Sometimes after weekends like this, it takes me three or four days to come back to so-called reality," Young said. "That's the ultimate."

As we talked, other Guardsmen trickled in, announcing themselves with a clatter of hobnailed boots on the path outside. Rob Hodge arrived and greeted his comrades with a pained grin. A few days before, he'd been dragged by a horse while playing Nathan Bedford Forrest in a cable show about the rebel cavalryman. The accident had left Rob with three cracked ribs, a broken toe and a hematoma on his tibia. "I wanted to go on a march down in Louisiana," Rob told his mates, "but the doctor said it would mess up my leg so bad that it might even have to be amputated."

"Super hardcore!" the others shouted in unison. If farb was the worst insult a Guardsman could bestow, super hardcore was the highest plaudit, signifying an unusually bold stab at recapturing the Civil War.

Many of the Guardsmen lived outside Virginia and hadn't seen their comrades since the previous year's campaign. As the room filled with twenty or so men, greeting each other with hugs and shouts, it became obvious that there would be little attempt to maintain period dialogue. Instead, the gathering took on a peculiar cast: part frat party, part fashion show, part Weight Watchers' meeting.

"Yo, look at Joel!" someone shouted as a tall, wasp-waisted Guardsman arrived. Joel Bohy twirled at the center of the room and slid off his gray jacket like a catwalk model. Then, reaching into his hip-hugging trousers, he raised his cotton shirt.

"Check out those abs!"

"Mmmm."

"Awesome jacket. What's the cut?"

"Type one, early to mid '62, with piping," Joel said. "Cotton and wool jean. Stitched it myself."

"Way cool!"

Rob Hodge inspected the needlework, obviously impressed. He turned to me and said, "We're all GQ fashion snobs when it comes to Civil War gear."

"CQ," Joel corrected. "Confederate Quarterly." The two men embraced, and Rob said approvingly, "You've dropped some weight." Joel smiled. "Fifteen pounds just in the last two months. I had a pizza yesterday but nothing at all today."

Losing weight was a hardcore obsession, part of the never-ending quest for authenticity. "If you look at pension records, you realize that very few Civil War soldiers weighed more than a hundred thirty-five pounds," Rob explained. Southern soldiers were especially lean. So it was every Guardsman's dream to drop a few pants' sizes and achieve the gaunt, hollow-eyed look of underfed Confederates.

Rob had lost thirty-five pounds over the past year, leaving little or no meat on his six-foot-two frame. Joel, a construction worker, had dropped eighty-five pounds, losing what he called his "keg legs" and slimming his beer-bellied waist from forty inches to thirty. "The Civil War's over, but the Battle of the Bulge never ends," he quipped, offering Rob a Pritikin recipe for skinless breast of chicken.

Unfortunately, there was no food—diet or otherwise—in sight. Instead, the Guardsmen puffed at corn cob pipes or chewed tobacco, interspersed with swigs from antique jugs filled with Miller Lite and rimmed with bits of each other's burley. Eavesdropping on the chat—about grooming, sewing, hip size, honed biceps—I couldn't help wondering if I'd stumbled on a curious gay subculture in the Piedmont of Virginia.

"I've got a killer recipe for ratatouille. Hardly any oil. Got to drop another five pounds before posing for that painter again. He loves small waists on Confederates."

"Do you think we should recruit that newbie who came to the picket post? He looks real good, tall and slim."

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lot of guys look good at first but they don't know a thing about jackets and shoes."

The sleeping arrangements did little to allay my suspicions. As we hiked to our bivouac spot in a moonlit orchard, my breath clouded in the frigid night air. The thin wool blanket I'd been issued seemed woefully inadequate, and I wondered aloud how we'd avoid waking up resembling one of Rob Hodge's impressions of the Confederate dead. "Spooning," Joel said. "Same as they did in the War."

The Guardsmen stacked their muskets and unfurled ground cloths. "Sardine time," Joel said, flopping to the ground and pulling his blanket and coat over his chest. One by one the others lay down as well, packed close, as if on a slave ship. Feeling awkward, I shuffled to the end of the clump, lying a few feet from the nearest man.

"Spoon right!" someone shouted. Each man rolled onto his side and clutched the man beside him. Following suit, I snuggled my neighbor. A few bodies down, a man wedged between Joel and Rob began griping. "You guys are so skinny you don't give off any heat. You're just sucking it out of me!"

After fifteen minutes, someone shouted "spoon left!" and the pack rolled over. Now my back was warm but my front was exposed to the chill air. I was in the "anchor" position, my neighbor explained, the coldest spot in a Civil War spoon.

Famished and half-frozen, I began fantasizing about the campfire stew I'd naively looked forward to. Somewhere in the distance a horse snorted. Then one of the soldiers let loose a titanic fart. "You farb," his neighbor shouted. "Gas didn't come in until World War One!"

This prompted a volley of off-color jokes, most of them aimed at girlfriends and spouses. "You married?" I asked my neighbor, a man about my own age.

"Uh huh. Two kids." I asked how his family felt about his hobby. "If it wasn't this, it'd be golf or something," he said. He propped on one elbow and lit a cigar butt from an archaic box labeled Friction Matches. "At least there's no room for jealousy with this hobby. You come home stinking of gunpowder and sweat and bad tobacco, so your wife knows you've just been out with the guys."

From a few mummies down, Joel joined in the conversation. "I

just broke up with my girlfriend," he said. "It was a constant struggle between her and the Civil War. She got tired of competing with something that happened a hundred thirty years ago."

Joel worried he might never find another girlfriend. Now, when he met a woman he liked, he coyly let on that he was "into history." That way, he explained, "I don't scare her off by letting the whole cat out of the bag."

"What happens if you do tell her straight?" I asked him.

"She freaks." The issue wasn't just weekends spent away; it was also the money. Joel reckoned that a quarter of his income went to reenacting. "I try to put a positive spin on it," he said. "I tell women, 'I don't do drugs, I do the Civil War.'" He laughed. "Problem is, the Civil War's more addictive than crack, and almost as expensive."

The chat gradually died down. Someone got up to pee and walked into a tree branch, cursing. One man kept waking with a hacking cough. And I realized I should have taken off my wet boots before lying down; now, they'd become blocks of ice. My arm was caught awkwardly beneath my side, but liberating it was impossible. I'd disturb the whole spoon, and also risk shifting the precarious arrangement of blanket and coat that was my only protection from frostbite.

My neighbor, Paul Carter, was still half-awake and I asked him what he did when he wasn't freezing to death in the Virginia hills. "Finishing my Ph.D. thesis," he muttered, "on Soviet history."

I finally lulled myself to sleep with drowsy images of Stalingrad and awoke to find my body molded tightly around Paul's, all awkwardness gone in the desperate search for warmth. He was doing the same to the man beside him. There must have been a "spoon right" in the night.

A moment later, someone banged on a pot and shouted reveille: "Wake the fuck up! It's late!" The sky was still gray. It was not yet six o'clock.

The pot, at least, was an encouraging prop. I hadn't eaten since lunch the day before, and then only lightly in anticipation of a hearty camp dinner. But no one gathered sticks or showed any signs of fixing breakfast. I saw one man furtively gnaw on a crust of bread, but that was all. Recalling the hunk of cheese I'd packed the day before—the only item of mine that had escaped confiscation—I frantically

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searched my jacket pocket. The cheese was still there, hairy with lint and nicely chilled.

The Guardsmen rolled up their bedrolls and formed tidy ranks, muskets perched on shoulders. As a first-timer I was told to watch rather than take part. One of the men, acting as drill sergeant, began barking orders. "Company right, wheel, march! Ranks thirteen inches apart!" The men wheeled and marched across the orchard, their cups and canteens clanking like cowbells. In the early morning light, their muskets and bayonets cast long, spirelike shadows across the frost-tinged grass. "Right oblique, march! Forward, march!"

The mood was sober and martial, nothing like the night before. Except for a hungover soldier who fell out of line and clutched a tree, vomiting.

"Super hardcore!" his comrades yelled.

I spent an hour watching the men march and wheel as the drill sergeant called out his monotonous orders. "Shoulder arms. Support arms. Carry arms." The field was skirted by a split-rail fence. Just beyond stood the plantation house, a handsome brick edifice ringed by stately oaks; I'd been told the night before that the Confederate guerilla John Mosby had once climbed out a window of the house and down a tree to escape capture by Federal cavalry. To the west loomed the Blue Ridge, gentle and azure in the morning sun. There wasn't a single modern intrusion. Looking at the scene, I thought about Mathew Brady's black-and-white photographs, and the false impression they conveyed. The War's actual landscape was lush with color and beauty. The sky, always a featureless white in Brady's photographs, was a brilliant, cloud-tufted blue.

The sergeant broke my reverie, handing me his musket and suggesting I practice the drill steps behind the other men. At first, the maneuvers reminded me of learning to square-dance, with the sergeant acting as caller and soldiers taking turns as the lead dancer. The main difference was that a misstep here could result in a rifle butt to the chin instead of a step on the toe. The moves were also crisp and angular, lacking the fluid motion of a reel or do-si-do. "On the right by files, into line, march!"

Finally, after several hours of nonstop drilling, the Guardsmen stacked their weapons and sprawled under a tree. Reaching into their

haversacks, they began wolfing down cornbread, unshelled peanuts, slabs of cooked bacon. One of the Guardsmen, a new recruit named Chris Daley, offered me what looked like a year-old piece of beef jerky. I asked him why he'd joined up.

✓ "I work as a paralegal on Long Island," he said. "This is escapism. For forty-eight hours you eat and sleep and march when someone else tells you to. There's no responsibility."

Chris chomped into the jerky, adding, "I think there's a lot of people like me who want to get back to a simpler time. Sandlot baseball, cowboys and Indians, the Civil War."

Rob Hodge agreed. "When you get into the grim details of the War, you realize you've lived a soft life. I think we all have some guilt about that. Doing this is a way of making things a little hard for a change."

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This prompted debate about just how hard a hardcore's life should be. Rob favored total immersion in soldierly misery: camping in the mud, marching barefoot on blisters, staying up all night on picket duty. If he caught ticks and lice, so be it. "If that happened, I'd feel like we'd elevated things to another level," he said. "It would suck, but at least I'd know what it was like to scratch my head all day long."

A Guardsman named Fred Rickard went Rob one better. "There's something in me that wishes we could really go the whole way," he said. "I'd take the chance of being killed just to see what it was really like to be under fire in the War." He paused, munching on salt pork and biscuits. "At least then we'd know for sure if we're doing it right."

Fred leaned over to spit out a bit of gristle and noticed something in the grass. "Rob's bloating," he announced. Rob lay splayed on his back, cheeks puffed and belly distended, eyes staring glassily at the sky. Joel walked over and poked a boot in his ribs. "Suck in your gut a bit," he said. "It looks like you sat on a bike pump." Fred rearranged Rob's hands. "They don't look rigor mortal enough," he said. Then the two men returned to their meal.

Rob sat up and wiggled his fingers. "Hands are a problem," he said. "It's hard to make them look bloated unless you've really been dead for a while."

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I stuck out the drill until late afternoon. The temperature was dropping fast and another night of spooning loomed ahead. Better to farb out, I decided, than to freeze or perish from hunger. Rob urged me to come out with the Guard again when the battle season got under way, and I said I would. But there was something else I wanted to do in the meantime. Lying awake in the night, pondering Civil War obsession, I'd plotted a hardcore campaign of my own. Super hardcore.

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The South is a place. East, west, and north are nothing but directions.

—Letter to the editor, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 1995

Historians are fond of saying that the Civil War occurred in 10,000 places. Poke a pin in a map of the South and you're likely to prod loose some battle or skirmish or other tuft of Civil War history. The first pin I pushed turned up the town of Salisbury, North Carolina.

The scheme I'd plotted while spooning in the night was to spend a year at war, searching out the places and people who kept memory of the conflict alive in the present day. As my territory I'd take the actual ground over which the Civil War raged. This dictated a Southern strategy; apart from Gettysburg and stray Confederate raids on towns like Corydon, Indiana, the War occurred below the Mason and Dixon line. Given my mission, a Southern tour made sense. "We have tried to forget the Civil War," Edmund Wilson observed. "But we have had the defeated enemy on the premises, and he will not allow us to forget it."

It also seemed fitting to start in Charleston, where the War began with the shelling of Fort Sumter. But speeding south from Virginia, I tired of the interstate and pulled off at Salisbury to pick up a small

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road to South Carolina. Searching for a nonfranchise snack, I noticed a sign marked "Historical Salisbury" and followed it to an old train depot. An elderly woman sat reading a paperback with lovers in antebellum dress embracing on the cover. I asked her if historical Salisbury included anything to do with the Civil War.

"Oh yes," she said, riffling through a desk drawer. "The national cemetery." She handed me a yellowed pamphlet and a self-guided driving tour. "The graveyard's right next to the textile plant," she said, returning to her romance.

Strolling down Salisbury's main street, I passed a pawn shop, a Textile Products Outlet Store, the modestly named OK Wig, and an historical plaque stating that George Washington slept here in 1791. Reaching Spanky's Cafe, I settled in for a cup of coffee and a scan of the tourist literature. At first glance it looked unpromising, like Salisbury itself: a drab textile town with a doomed tourist trade built around a few old homes, a smattering of graves, and a cavalry raid three days after Appomattox.

A young black man sat at the next table gazing into space. He wore a blue bandanna around his neck, beneath a carefully trimmed beard and mustache. From time to time he scribbled in a leather-bound notebook. I leaned over and asked what he was writing.

"I'm trying to figure out what I'm doing here." He eyed the pen and pad I'd laid on my table. "How about you?"

"Same thing, I guess."

He smiled, exposing a gold-capped front tooth. James Connor was thirty-two and had just separated from his wife of ten years. "We married too young. Never had a chance to explore on our own." So after their split, Connor quit his hairdresser's job in Atlanta and hopped a bus for Salisbury, where his uncle lived in a trailer outside town. "I wanted to see some of the world for myself. I was tired of relying on what people told me about it."

He'd arrived in Salisbury at night. There were no blacks in sight. "I freaked," he said. "I was wondering, 'Where's mine? What did they do to 'em?'" He laughed. That was three days ago. "White people here treat me like any human being. That's the first thing I learned. I thought out here in the sticks it would be *Deliverance* and shit."

He lifted his pen. "My turn," he said.

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"How would you define prejudice?"

"Hmm. Big question. Can I think on that?"

"Okay. Question two. If I was to ask you, what are you looking for and how do you fit into the big picture, what would you say?"

I glanced around the coffee shop. A half-dozen customers stared back. "Got any easy questions?" I asked.

"Yeah." He pointed at the visitors' map and audiotape. "What's all that?"

"Driving tour of Salisbury. Want to come?"

We found the Civil War dead beside a denim plant with a billboard that said, "Bringing Fabric to Life!" On the other side of the cemetery stood a Frito-Lay warehouse. The din from the two buildings drowned out our audiotape, so we parked the car and walked among the headstones.

The first said "Unknown." Then "Two Unknowns." Then a monument that read: "Neither hunger, thirst, nor offered bribes affected their loyalty." The memorial had been erected by the state of Maine.

"Where's the dead rebs?" Connor asked.

I looked again at the tourist literature. The blandly named "national cemetery" was actually the burial ground for Northerners who died at a Confederate prisoner-of-war camp. We walked a bit farther and saw eighteen headstones in a line labeled "Unknown U.S. Soldier." Each marked the foot of a burial trench almost the length of a football field.

We found the cemetery's director in a small caretaker's building adorned with an incongruously sunny painting of inmates playing baseball in the prison yard. Abe Stice kept a computer log of the men buried outside. The log for Union soldiers wasn't long. "Most of the corpses were stripped of their clothes, tossed on dead-wagons and dumped in those trenches," Stice said, "so we don't know a whole lot of names." Salisbury's tiny graveyard held more unknown dead than any other national cemetery in America.

Most prisoners died from malnutrition and disease: smallpox, dysentery, scurvy and dengue or "breakbone" fever, so-called because

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it caused aches so intense that sufferers thought their bones were snapping. "The official figure's eleven thousand seven hundred dead, but we're really just guessing," Stice said. If the guess was correct, over a third of the inmates perished, making Salisbury among the deadliest of all Civil War prison camps, including Andersonville.

Stice showed us a few books and diaries about the camp. One Iowan weighed 181 pounds when he arrived at the prison and 87 when he left six months later. Another prisoner wrote: "It is not hunger or cold, sickness or death, which makes prison life so hard to bear. It is the utter idleness, emptiness, aimlessness of such a life, with nothing to fill the vacant mind, which always becomes morbid and turns inward to prey on itself."

Oddly, not all the prisoners were Yankees. There were also Southern deserters, Carolina Quakers jailed for being conscientious objectors, and convicts imprisoned for petty theft, drunkenness, or "trading with Yankees and inducing Negroes to go to Washington D.C." The roster also listed the teenaged son of David Livingstone, the famous missionary and doctor in Africa. Robert Livingstone dropped out of school in Scotland and caught a ship to America, apparently in search of adventure. Fearing his family would disapprove, he enlisted under an alias. "To bear your name here would lead to further dishonoring it," Robert wrote his father from Virginia, adding, "I have never hurt anyone knowingly in battle, having always fired high."

Confederate guards at Salisbury weren't so kind; they shot Livingstone dead during a mass break-out attempt. Hundreds of other inmates also died while trying to escape. "Our men will shoot them now on every occasion," one rebel guard wrote his wife. "I saw one shot down yesterday like a beef."

Like most Civil War buffs, I'd always focused on the grim but glorious history of battle. Salisbury was just grim: men eating mouse soup, "skirmishing" with lice, and "tied up like sticks of wood" on dead-wagons. But none of this surprised the caretaker, Abe Stice. "You know what Sherman said: 'War is cruelty and you cannot refine it.'" Stice turned around; the back of his jacket said Vietnam Remembered. "I dished out my share of cruelty in 'Nam and got some back."

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A twice-wounded helicopter pilot, Stice spent fourteen months in hospital before coming home. "I can't forget Vietnam. But I hope the next generation won't be hung up on it the way mine is," he said.

The same sentiment didn't extend to the Civil War. Stice had worked in Salisbury a year, long enough to recognize that memories endured here much longer than in his native Oklahoma. "In school I remember learning that the Civil War ended a long time ago," he said. "Folks here don't always see it that way. They think it's still half-time."

Stice scribbled down the phone number for Sue Curtis, who headed the local chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. "Go talk to this lady and you'll see what I mean," he said, closing up for the night.

Connor and I sat in the car with the heater running as smoke belched from the denim plant and clouded the graveyard. The place depressed me, but Connor didn't see it that way. Gazing out at the graves, he said, "Their dying was my freedom, straight up."

Connor had a job tryout at a hair salon. I had a date with Fort Sumter, or so I'd planned. But Stice's last comment intrigued me. "Want to meet a Daughter of the Confederacy?" I asked.

Connor laughed. "You heard what the man said. Some folks here think it's still Scarlett and Mammy days."

I remembered something. "You asked how I'd define prejudice. That's it. Making assumptions about people you've never met."

Connor shook his head. "You call it prejudice. I call it sense." So I dropped him off at the hairdresser's. He told me to stop by the salon next time I came through Salisbury. "Maybe by then you can answer my other question," he said.

I found a phone booth and dialed Sue Curtis. She seemed oddly unsurprised when I explained that Abe Stice recommended I come speak to her about the Civil War.

"I'm so sorry, I'd ask you over but I'm getting ready for our meeting tonight," she said. "It's our annual Lee-Jackson birthday party."

Robert E. Lee's and Stonewall Jackson's birthdays fell two days apart and were once major holidays across the South. I hadn't realized anyone still commemorated the dates.

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"Is the meeting open to the public?" I asked.

"Usually not, but it might be." There was a pause on the line. "The Sons of Confederate Veterans are meeting across the hall from us. If you'd like, I can tell them to expect you."

AT THE ROWAN COUNTY LIBRARY, I was greeted by three men who introduced themselves in order of rank. "Jim White, commander," said a man with a pastor's dog-collar and a long, coiffed beard.

"Ed Curtis," announced a second. This was Sue Curtis's husband, a tall, lean man with aviator glasses. "First lieutenant commander."

"I'm Mike Hawkins," said the third man, standing erect, like a marine cadet. "Color sergeant, Rowan Rifles, Army of Northern Virginia."

None of the men wore uniforms. The army they served had disbanded in 1865, or so I'd last heard. The best I could do was stammer out my name and town, which at least lay in northern Virginia.

"And where were you raised, Tony?" the commander asked. I took this as a diplomatic allusion to my lack of a Southern accent. "Maryland," I said. Actually, I was born and schooled in Washington, D.C., but my family lived a few blocks outside the one-time Yankee capital.

The commander clapped me on the back and sang out a line from Maryland's state song: "Huzzah, she spurns the Northern scum!" Maryland stayed neutral in the War, but harbored many Southern sympathizers. Apparently, as a Marylander, I might still qualify as one—or at least not as Northern scum.

"We can't boast Virginia's claims to aristocracy," the commander went on, "or South Carolina's fame as the cradle of secession."

"You know what they call North Carolina," Ed Curtis added. "A vale of humility between two mountains of conceit." He smiled. "Of course that's a conceited thing to say about yourself. But at least we're humble about how much better we are than anyplace else."

As the meeting got under way, the twenty or so men in the room pledged allegiance to the Stars and Stripes. Then the color sergeant unfurled the rebel battle flag. "I salute the Confederate flag with affection, reverence and undying devotion to the Cause for which it

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stands," the men said, effectively contradicting the pledge they'd just made to "one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

Then came a banner with N*C on one side. "I salute the North Carolina flag and pledge to the Old North State love, loyalty and faith," the men intoned, with heightened fervor. Yet another flag appeared, this one showing the familiar rebel cross, but arranged on a field of white with a red stripe along the border. "As I'm informed," the commander said, "the third national flag is still the official flag of the Confederacy."

I looked quizzically at the color sergeant, who took his seat beside me. "That's the last political flag of the South," he whispered. "It can't change until the Confederate Congress convenes again."

The birthday party that followed was even stranger. First, the commander pointed to a table spread with food: lemon snaps to honor Stonewall Jackson, who allegedly sucked the sour fruit during combat, and a snack called "Chicken-in-a-Biskit" to honor Lee, who toted a pet hen in his wagon during the campaigns of 1863. Then one of the Sons stood up and recapped Lee's military career—though only his successes up to July 1863. "Gettysburg—there were some mistakes made there, it's a sad thing and I'm not going to go into that," he concluded. "Then came the rest, to Appomattox. Lee died on October 12, 1870." He sat down to polite applause.

The next speaker, Dr. Norman Sloop, spoke about Stonewall. "I'll focus on the medical aspects of Jackson's career," he said, before discussing the general's dyspepsia, myopia and famed hypochondria (Stonewall believed, among other things, that one arm and leg weighed more than the other). Sloop ended with Jackson's mortal wounding by his own troops while leading the rebels to victory at Chancellorsville.

"Like the boxer Rocky Marciano, who died in a plane crash without ever losing a fight, Stonewall went out when he was still on top," Sloop concluded. "And when he reached heaven, the Lord used the words, 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant.'" The source for this last anecdote wasn't entirely clear. But the audience loved it and applauded uproariously.

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Then the men in the room split into two teams—the lemons and the chickens—for the evening's main event: a Lee-Jackson trivia quiz. Ed Curtis, the lieutenant commander, stood at the front of the room and read from a pile of index cards.

"How did Jackson graduate in his West Point class?"

"Seventeenth!" Dr. Sloop called out.

"Correct. What wound did Jackson receive at First Manassas?"

"Shot in the left hand. Broke his middle finger," the doctor said.

"Correct. What did Robert E. Lee weigh at the start of the War?"

"I'm wanting to say one eighty but maybe it's one seventy-three," called out the commander, who led my team, the lemons.

"No. One hundred seventy," Sloop corrected.

"Right. Who played the part of Johnny Yuma in the TV series *The Rebel*?"

It quickly became obvious the chickens would triumph, thanks to Dr. Sloop. So midway through the quiz, the lemons resorted to satire.

"In the Mexican War, what hazardous action off the battlefield did Braxton Bragg encounter?"

"Gonorrhea," the pastor-cum-commander shouted.

"No, I'm sorry. He was almost assassinated twice. General Lee's most famous mount was Traveller. Name one other."

"Mary Custis Lee!" the commander yelled again.

"Ajax," Dr. Sloop corrected.

"Right. How many Confederate regiments went into Pickett's Charge?"

"Too many," the color sergeant said.

"Forty-six to be exact. What were the odds of surviving a head wound in the War?"

"Not too good," I volunteered, getting into the spirit of things. The correct answer was one in six. Dr. Sloop again.

"Oh gee, fellahs, this one's a giveaway," Ed Curtis said, reaching the last question. "How many horses did Nathan Bedford Forrest have shot out from under him?"

"Twenty-nine!" the audience shouted in unison. Of sixty-five questions, only Jeff Davis's middle name—Finis—had stumped

everyone. I quietly resolved to hit the books. The store of Civil War trivia I'd carried around since childhood clearly wouldn't suffice if I hoped to hold my own among latter-day rebels.

After the quiz, we were joined by the women of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, who had met across the hall. Sue Curtis was a stout woman with large-framed trifocals and a suit the color of strawberry daiquiri. Draped over her ample chest was a ribbon pinned with shiny medals, in the style of a Latin dictator.

"I've got seventeen Confederate ancestors I can prove," she said, "and one who I think went Union." She laughed. "I'm not doing any more research on him."

I told her about the journey I'd just begun, and asked why she thought Southerners still cared about the Civil War.

"War Between the States," she gently corrected me. "The answer is family. We grow up knowing who's once removed and six times down. Northerners say, 'Forget the War, it's over.' But they don't have the family Bibles we do, filled with all these kinfolk who went off to war and died. We've lost so much."

Strictly speaking, she was right. Roughly half of modern-day white Southerners descended from Confederates, and one in four Southern men of military age died in the War. For Yankee men, the death rate was about one in ten, and waves of post-War immigration left a far lower ratio of Northerners with blood ties to the conflict. Still, I was struck by Sue Curtis's tone. She spoke as though her kinsmen died yesterday, not 130 years ago.

"Caleb Senter, my great-great-grandfather, was captured at Cold Harbor," she said, fingering an "ancestor pin" that bore his name. "He was on his way to Elmira Prison, but a drunk telegraph man directed his train right into a coal freighter in Pennsylvania. Poor Caleb was squashed to death and buried by the tracks." Her eyes misted over. "I made a magnolia wreath for his grave."

We were interrupted by her husband, Ed. "Sue boring you with her War stories?" he asked.

"Not at all. Actually, I'm kind of jealous. I don't even know the names of my great-great-grandfathers."

Ed winked. "Don't get her started on her great-great-uncles."

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The others began drifting out of the library. It was almost nine o'clock. "We're going across the street to Miss Lucy's for some iced tea and French silk pie," Sue said. "Would you care to come along?"

I suddenly didn't feel in any rush to reach Charleston.

AWAKENING THE NEXT MORNING in a \$27 room at Salisbury's Econo Lodge ("Spend a Night, Not a Fortune!"), I recognized the appeal of dwelling on the South's past rather than its present. Stepping from my room into the motel parking lot, I gazed out at a low-slung horseshoe of ferroconcrete called Towne Mall, a metal-and-cement forest of humming electricity pylons, a Kmart, a garish yellow Waffle House, a pink-striped Dunkin' Donuts, plus Taco Bell, Bojangles, Burger King, the Golden Arches of McDonald's and the equally gaudy signs for Exxon, BP and Shell hoisted like battle flags above the melee of competing brands. A few exhaust-choked bushes poked from the greasy asphalt.

I'd gone to bed reading about the Confederate general Albert Sidney Johnston, who urged his men into battle at Shiloh by declaring, "Remember the fair, broad, abounding land, the happy homes and ties that would be desolated by your defeat!" I wondered sleepily what Johnston would make of the view from the Econo Lodge.

Over coffee at the Waffle House, I also began wondering about the crowd I'd met the night before. It had included not only the doctor and pastor, but also a textile worker, a rose grower, a gun-shop owner, a state bureaucrat and several farmers in overalls. Apart from sports, I couldn't think of many interests that comfortably bridged such a wide range of people. I was curious to know more of what drew them together.

"Blood," Sue Curtis said. "That's all you really need to join this club."

I'd tracked her down at the Rowan County library, where she spent several mornings a week verifying applications for membership in the United Daughters of the Confederacy, or UDC for short. This meant hours of scrolling through microfilm copies of military records from the 1860s. I squinted into the machine at a muster roll.

In terse language and careful script, the records listed each soldier's home, occupation, age, and eventual fate. "Died in hands of enemy," read a typical entry. "Effects none."

From scraps like this, Sue reclaimed whole lives. Muster rolls led to pension records, wills, marriage certificates, gravestones. Diaries and letters fleshed the story out. She showed me a notebook filled with documents on Caleb Senter, her great-great-grandfather. "I have seen the cannon-balls strike men and the pieces of clothing would fly as high as the trees," he wrote his wife. In another letter he told of his constant hunger and pleaded, "If there is anybody coming to this company, send me a small ham of meat and some chickens and a few pies and a couple of onions and so forth." Soon after, Caleb was captured and killed in the Pennsylvania train wreck Sue had told me about the night before.

"When you've researched these people, it gets very personal," she said. "You know what color hair they had, if their eyes were brown or green, how tall they were, their dreams for when they came home. After a while the War doesn't seem that far away. It becomes part of your life." She paused. "Or it takes over your life."

When I asked what she meant, Sue laughed. "Come over to our place tonight and you'll see," she said, returning to her microfilm.

LATE THAT AFTERNOON, I went to see Mike Hawkins, the color sergeant I'd sat beside at the Lee-Jackson meeting. His fourteen-foot-wide trailer perched next to a narrow road through the red-clay farmland that surrounded Salisbury's sprawl of tract homes and malls. Inside, cluttering the main living space, was a guinea-pig cage, a large TV and an elegant table Hawkins's great-grandparents received as a wedding gift in the 1890s.

Hawkins was a spare man with pocked skin and a wispy mustache. He wore the same outfit I'd seen him in the night before: black denims, cowboy boots, red flannel shirt. He sat squeezed beside his wife, Kaye, a big woman who took up most of the couch.

"Mike told me he met a paper man last night," Kaye said, with a nervous high-pitched laugh. "Never met a paper man."

"Actually, I'm doing research for a book."

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Kaye was H an ugly legal fi three kids. He j hands," he said

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Hawkins to color sergeant body," he said honor." Flags at flea markets

"Oh, books," Kaye said, laughing again. "Mike loves his books. Loves 'em more than me, I think."

Kaye was Hawkins's second wife. His first marriage had ended in an ugly legal fight that left him with limited visitation rights for his three kids. He pointed to their pictures on the wall. "It's in the Lord's hands," he said. "I tell Him, 'Do for me what you can.'"

It was soon after his divorce that Hawkins became obsessed with the Civil War. To meet child support payments, he'd moved in with his parents and worked seven days a week at a textile factory. At night, he went to the genealogy room at the library. "I was trying to get my life back together," he said. "I had this want to find out about my kin."

One night, combing muster rolls, he found his great-great-grandfather listed as a private in a North Carolina regiment. Fields Hawkins was a twenty-year-old farmer when he volunteered. Shot twice in the spring of 1862, he married while recovering from his wounds, then returned to the War—though only for two months. "He got his leg shot off at Sharpsburg," Hawkins said.

Hawkins showed me Fields's application for an artificial leg, and census records from the early twentieth century that listed Fields and his wife, then in their sixties, as cotton mill workers. "Just like me," Hawkins said. But one crucial detail still eluded him: the site of his great-great-grandfather's grave. "It's been seven years, but when I find it I'll finally feel like I've accomplished something. A connection with my past that I can reach out and grab hold to."

Hawkins had taken his documents to the Sons of Confederate Veterans and paid \$33 in annual fees to join up. He'd made every meeting since. "It brings people together, like the War did," he said. "I sit in a room with a doctor and pastor and such, and I don't see them otherwise. We're all together for the same reason." The only other club to which he belonged was his factory's softball team, which competed in North Carolina's Industrial League.

Hawkins took particular pride in his status as the Rowan Rifles' color sergeant. "If we were going into battle, I'd be in front of everybody," he said. "It's an honor, though it would have been a short honor." Flags had another appeal; Hawkins could buy them cheaply at flea markets and souvenir shops.

He took me into the trailer's cramped bedroom, lined with secondhand volumes on the War. Hawkins read everything he could find on Sharpsburg (known in the North as Antietam) and dreamed of visiting the Maryland battlefield, particularly the sunken road known as Bloody Lane where Fields Hawkins lost his leg. "I go there a lot in my head," he said, flipping open a book with photographs of the Antietam dead. "I look at these pictures and it's like the music from *Twilight Zone* kicks on, like I was there way back when."

Kaye turned on the television and started fixing dinner. Hawkins lowered his voice. Late at night, he said, when Kaye fell asleep, he often slipped out of bed and continued reading, by oven light. "It's an escape," he said. "When I'm reading, I feel like I'm there, not here. And when I finish I feel content, like I've been away for a while." He smiled. "Sometimes I get brain fry from all the reading."

I asked him if he thought "there" was better than "here."

"Not better," he said. "I mean, my great-great-grandpap got his leg shot off. But I feel like it was bigger somehow." Hawkins flipped through pages of Civil War pictures. "At work, I mix dyes and put them in a machine. I'm thirty-six and I've spent almost half my life in Dye House No. 1. I make eight dollars sixty-one cents an hour, which is okay, 'cept everyone says the plant will close and go to China." He put the book back on the shelf. "I just feel like the South has been given a bum deal ever since that War."

Hawkins unstuck a rebel banner from a small flag stand by the bed. He waved it and said, "Here's a trivia question they didn't ask last night. What state sent more troops to the Confederacy than any other, and took more casualties, too?"

"North Carolina?"

Hawkins smiled. "Not too many people know that. We gave a hundred twenty-seven thousand and lost forty thousand. Do you know one reason North Carolinians are called Tar Heels?"

"No. Why?"

"Because Lee said we stuck in battle. At Chickamauga, for instance—"

Kaye poked her head in the bedroom. "Supper time," she said. Hawkins looked startled, like he'd been away for a while. Kaye invited me to stay, but I said I had to be going. For a few moments we

stood awkward window.

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I blushed an

"I liked you all those docto to me."

NAVIGATING that Salisbury at first suppos gardens and g lions that loca based superma Curtis home a fronted by an / museum of Co Lee adorned o a side table. St the mantel. "I spot," Sue said Stonewall's he of cork.

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stood awkwardly by the trailer door, as a chill wind rattled the storm window.

"We were honored, really," Kaye said.

I blushed and said, "I was honored, too."

"I liked you right away last night," Hawkins said. "There were all those doctors and such at the meeting. And you wanted to talk to me."

NAVIGATING MY WAY to Ed and Sue Curtis's home, I discovered that Salisbury was a far more pleasant and prosperous town than I'd at first supposed. Its residential streets were lined with parks and gardens and gracious homes (funded, I later learned, with the millions that locals earned from investing years ago in a Salisbury-based supermarket chain called Food Lion). From the outside, the Curtis home appeared ordinary enough: a modest brick ranch house fronted by an American flag. But stepping inside, I found myself in a museum of Confederate kitsch. Portraits of Jeff Davis and Robert E. Lee adorned one wall. A bell-jar model of Ashley Wilkes perched on a side table. Statuettes of Lee, Davis, Jackson and Jeb Stuart sat atop the mantel. "I always wanted something just the right color for that spot," Sue said of the gray figurines. She nonchalantly pulled off Stonewall's head. The figurines were actually flasks with necks made of cork.

There were also Lee and Jackson paperweights, a music box that played "Dixie," and a seashell filled with spent minié balls. "Goes with the painting," Sue explained, pointing to a watercolor just above the shell showing General Beauregard on the beach at Charleston.

That was just the living room. In the dining room there were plates and cups decorated with rebel generals and paintings of battles in which the Curtis forebears fought. Sue pushed open the door to the kitchen. I glimpsed rebel-themed fridge magnets and mugs decorated with Rhett Butler. "It sort of flows from here all the way to the garage," Sue said. "But the War does not come to the bedroom. That's where we draw the line."

Somewhere in this ancestral lava was the Bible a rebel forebear had carried into battle. One of Ed's ancestors, a Confederate scout,

Kitsch

had also preserved a piece of shin bone he lost after being shot from a tree. "He kept it in a bottle by his bed," Ed said. But most of the Curtises' relics and trinkets were gifts Sue and Ed had given each other on birthdays and anniversaries. They'd even courted on Civil War battlefields. "Instead of bells ringing I heard cannons boom," Ed joked.

It wasn't until after their marriage, though, that the Curtises' interest in the War turned from a casual hobby to an obsession. The spark was Sue's curiosity about her rebel ancestry. "A lot of people like me first got deep into Confederate history in the late seventies, when genealogy really took off," she explained.

Ironically, Alex Haley's novel *Roots* helped trigger this trend, inspiring blacks and then other Americans to dig through archives and ship records. Tracing pedigree wasn't new to the South, but it had traditionally been most popular among blue bloods such as the FFVs, or First Families of Virginia. In the past twenty years, Sue said, there'd been a dramatic upsurge of interest in common forebears, including rebel foot soldiers.

Sue's duties as registrar often took her to the state archives in Raleigh. As a special treat, Ed sometimes drove her to the National Archives in Washington. I asked when they'd last taken a trip unrelated to the Civil War.

Ed looked at Sue. "Have we ever?"

She shrugged and shook her head. "Not that I can think of."

Rarely a week passed without some meeting, or a ceremony marking one of the anniversaries scattered like saints' days through the year: Lee's and Jackson's birthdays, Confederate Flag Day, Confederate Memorial Day, Jefferson Davis's birthday. Sue also corresponded with Northern women whose ancestors lay in Salisbury's cemetery, and had even held a memorial service for a Michigan soldier with a wreath laying and the singing of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." "My great-great-grandfather died on his way to prison up North," she reminded me. "I like to think some Northern lady might have done the same for him."

The Curtises had no offspring of their own to enroll in the Sons or Daughters of the Confederacy. At least no blood kin. "I started the first chapter of the Cats of the Confederacy," Sue said, stroking a

diabetic feline pins and get to stance, a Confederate casualty during

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diabetic feline named Flurry Belle. "We wear gray ribbons with cat pins and get together and tell stories about cats in the War." For instance, a Confederate mascot named Tom Cat who became the only casualty during a Federal bombardment of Savannah in 1863.

Given all this, it seemed remarkable that the Curtises managed to hold down day jobs; Ed helped veterans find employment, Sue filled volunteer posts at schools, libraries and hospitals. But their passion for the War had crowded out everything else, including church.

"We were raised Methodists," Sue said. "But we converted to the Confederacy. There wasn't time for both."

"War is hell," Ed deadpanned. "And it just might send us there."

But Sue didn't worry about the afterlife. In fact, she looked forward to it. "The neatest thing about living is that I can die and finally track down all those people I couldn't find in the records." She pointed at the ceiling and then at the floor. "Either way, it'll be heaven just to get that information."

AT THE LEE-JACKSON BIRTHDAY PARTY, a shopkeeper named Michael Sherman had given me a business card labeled Firearms Etc. When I'd asked what etcetera included, he replied, "C'mon out and see for yourself." So the next morning, I followed a country road winding out of town until I found a cement-block building with a sign in the shape of a revolver.

Sherman stood behind the counter, demonstrating an assault rifle with a retractable bayonet. A man and a boy of about ten looked on. "The beauty of this one," Sherman said, thrusting the gun at the wall, "is that if you're down to just a few rounds, you can poke the guy through instead."

Across the shop sat two other men I recognized from the meeting: a bloated fellow in overalls and a camouflage jacket, named Doug Tarlton, and an even doughier figure, Walt Fowler, who sat drinking a diet soda and wolfing down Bugles.

"Had to cut down on the sugar," Fowler said. "Gout's got me again. 'Course it could be the acid in those tomatoes I ate this morning, or the cheeseburger they came on."

"Walt's a restaurant inspector," Tarlton explained, "so he's got to

sample everything to make sure it's safe for humanity. If you can call Walt human."

Fowler acknowledged this friendly jibe by rummaging in a plastic bag beside his chair and pulling out a crude, photocopied cartoon showing several men aiming pistols into a toilet bowl. "Polacks shooting crap," Walt said, convulsing with laughter.

Tarlton smiled. "Walt's not prejudiced. He hates all minorities the same." Tarlton pointed to a chair and offered me a chocolate-colored wafer that I took at first for a Mars bar. "Want some 'backer?" he asked. I tore a small piece from the dense plug of chewing tobacco and stuffed it in my cheek. For a few minutes, I concentrated on my cud and took in the rest of the shop. There were cases filled with Lugers, scopes, holsters, pepper spray, banana clips, Bowie knives, and felt bags labeled "soft cases for your dreaded ASSAULT RIFLE!" A sign by the door declared, "Shoplifters will be shot. Survivors will be shot again!"

The only nonlethal item in the shop was a picture called "The Last Meeting," a popular reprint of the most hallowed of Confederate images: Lee and Jackson parting at Chancellorsville on the day Stonewall was shot while flanking the Federal army. I pointed at the picture and asked Tarlton why he thought memory of the Confederacy was so enduring.

"You're looking at it, or at least one reason for it," he said, gesturing around the crowded shop. "Southerners are a military people. We were back then, still are today. Every man in here has carried a gun for his country and probably a few of the women, too."

Tarlton had served in Vietnam and taken so much shrapnel in his leg that he'd had seven operations and now wore a prosthetic knee. "Up close, war's kind of a stomach-turner," he said, tapping the leg of his overalls. "I like it better in books."

After Vietnam, Tarlton worked as a police detective before turning to farming. He was also licensed as a lay minister.

"What do you do now?" I asked.

"Die for a living." He lifted his hunting cap to reveal an entirely bald scalp. "Advanced leukemia."

I realized now that the puffiness around his eyes was watery and

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unnatural, due to chemotherapy or cortisone rather than Southern cooking. "I'm sorry," I said.

"Don't be. Doctor told me I'd be dead by Christmas. I'm enjoying the borrowed time."

Tarlton spent much of it studying the Civil War. "The present—I live it, it holds no mystery," he said. "The past does." He paused. "Plus the present to me is not all that attractive right now. When you're puking in the commode, the past looks a whole lot better."

The Civil War also kept his detective skills sharp. Tarlton helped friends track down proof of rebel ancestry. As a detective, he'd spent much of his time busting drug dealers and blowing up backwoods liquor stills. "Basically I was a narc," he said. "So I had a close-up view of all the sickness out there. Junkies. Thugs. Guys who'd pimp their daughters for dope. You deal with that all day and you feel kind of soiled." He pointed at the picture of Lee and Jackson. "When I read about them, I feel like man's a noble creature, like maybe humanity's just going through a bad patch."

He chuckled and pointed at Fowler, who was finishing off his box of Bugles. "Take Walt," he said loudly. "You'd never guess it from looking at him, but when his great-great-uncle, Henry Fowler, got killed in battle, his commanding officer sent a note saying he 'behaved with great coolness and courage.'"

I asked Tarlton what he knew about his own Civil War forebears. "Bunch of poor dirt farmers, like most folks were around here, and like a lot still are," he said. "Didn't own any slaves."

"Why do you think they fought?"

"The way I see it," Tarlton said, "they were fighting for their honor as men. They came from stock that was oppressed and they felt oppressed again by the government telling them how to live."

"Same as today," another man chimed in. "Government's letting the niggers run wild."

"Amen," said a third, looking up from a case of bayonets. "What they need to do is put all those crackheads on work crews and let them chop the right-of-way for a few years. You can bet your sweet bippy that'll adjust their attitude."

I plugged my mouth with a fresh wad of tobacco. Walt Fowler

broke the awkward silence by reaching into his plastic bag again. He extracted a piece of parchment that looked like one of those homilies people put on their living room walls. Fowler solemnly intoned: "Lord, give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, to change the things I can, and the wisdom to hide the bodies of those people I had to kill because they pissed me off." He hooted and slapped his thigh.

I got up to go and told Tarlton I might stop by to see him again. "Don't count on it," he said. "I told those doctors to quit everything. No more chemo." He tipped his cap. "Life's a bitch and then you die. If God wants me, he can take me. I'm ready."

Then, as if on cue, he and Fowler pulled revolvers from their coat pockets and held them stiffly across their chests, mimicking young Confederates posing for studio portraits at the start of the War. "Still armed and ready for action!" the two men shouted in unison.

IN THE CATALOGUE of Confederate organizations to which Sue and Ed Curtis belonged, one in particular had piqued my curiosity: the Children of the Confederacy, or C. of C. for short. An auxiliary of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the C. of C. was designed to prep youngsters for Confederate citizenship in rather the way that Future Farmers of America readied teenagers for agricultural life. "You age out of the C. of C. at eighteen," Sue explained, "and hopefully then you move right into the UDC or SCV."

Sue had "reactivated" a dormant C. of C. chapter in Salisbury and she invited me to attend a state meeting at the Plantation Inn Resort in Raleigh. This turned out to be a faux-plantation motel on a busy suburban road, right across from Kmart. About a hundred kids and their parents crowded inside a climate-controlled annex to recall and honor the suffering of their forebears.

At the front of the room sat girls in flouncy white dresses and red sashes labeled "page," beside boys in clip-on ties marked "aide." Parents popped up from the audience with video cameras, like proud and indulgent parents anywhere—watching a school play, say, or a junior-high debate. This illusion of normality evaporated as soon as the program got under way, first with the salutes to various flags,

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"We pledge ourselves to preserve pure ideals; to honor the mem-
 ory of our beloved Veterans; to study and teach the truths of history
 (one of the most important of which is, that the War Between the
 States was not a REBELLION nor was its underlying cause to sustain
 slavery); and always to act in a manner that will reflect honor upon
 our noble and patriotic ancestors."

One of the aides handed out copies of the "Catechism," a sixteen-
 page pamphlet that served as the Children's guiding text. It was
 published in 1954 (the same year that *Brown v. Board of Education*
 declared school segregation unconstitutional), and arranged in a
 question-and-answer format.

Q. What causes led to the War Between the States, from 1861 to
 1865?

A. The disregard of those in power for the rights of the Southern
 states.

Q. Where was the first slave ship built and launched?

A. In Marble Head, Mass., in 1636.

Q. What was the feeling of the slaves towards their masters?

A. They were faithful and devoted and were always ready and
 willing to serve them.

The treatment of battlefield history also hewed to traditional no-
 tions about Southern valor.

Q. What is considered by historians as the decisive battle of the
 war?

A. Gettysburg.

Q. Why?

A. Because it was conclusive evidence to an unbiased mind that
 the Federal supplies and forces greatly outweighed and out-
 numbered the Confederate forces.

Actually, Gettysburg was the rare clash in which the Confederates
 weren't badly outmanned. If the battle proved anything, it was that
 Lee could blunder and that Northerners could fight as doggedly as
 Southerners. Reading through the rest of the Catechism, I began to

hear echoes of defeated peoples I'd encountered overseas: Kurds, Armenians, Palestinians, Catholics in Northern Ireland. Like them, Southerners had kept fighting their war by other means.

After a break for milk and Animal Crackers, the children took their seats for what was known as the Catechism Quiz. A teenager posed questions from the text, and a group of twelve-and-unders competed to be the first to answer correctly, often with verbatim recitations of the Catechism. If no one could answer within fifteen seconds, the moderator called out "Books!" and the children riffled through their Catechisms until they located the correct response. The kids were stumped only a few times. It was an impressive display of rote learning and reminded me of my own childhood passion for Civil War trivia, though this was a level of fine print I'd never reached.

After the quiz, I went with the Curtises and a couple named the Crowders to a Southern-style restaurant chain called Morrison's. We loaded our trays with un-Confederate heaps of cornbread, fried chicken, mashed potatoes and collard greens. I was about to shovel in the first bite when Violet Crowder loudly cleared her throat. Then she turned to her four-year-old son, Warren. "Lord," he intoned, "we thank thee for this meal and especially for the great and wonderful Confederacy."

Violet smiled proudly. "You have to set them on the straight and narrow at an early age. Then, even if they stray, they'll come back to the faith."

I wasn't sure which faith she meant: the Confederacy or Christianity.

"We all stray, I know I did," Violet went on, hoeing into black-eyed peas. "I was a liberal once."

"No!" Sue Curtis exclaimed.

"Vi's even got a jail record," her husband said. "For a protest in Washington in 1969."

Violet blushed. "I grew up in a tiny town where everybody knew my grandmother and her grandmother. You never got wild. So when I went to college I did." She sipped her iced tea. "I've straightened out since."

Her son sat quiet, rebel flag and fillin' Confederacy, blue mother said, "tell t hate more than Ya

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Her son sat quietly completing a connect-the-dot picture of the rebel flag and filling in a coloring-book map of America: gray for the Confederacy, blue for Union, green for border states. "Warren," his mother said, "tell this nice man from Virginia, is there anything you hate more than Yankees?"

"No sir! Nothing!" he shouted. Then he dove under the table, yelling, "Someone told me there's Yankees around here! They hate little children!"

IN THE AFTERNOON, the C. of C. convened again for a memorial service at Raleigh's Confederate cemetery. The children read short profiles they'd composed about the dead, then recited sentimental poems about "sleeping Confederates" and laid wreaths at a mausoleum called House of Memory. Sue Curtis explained that the C. of C. spent many weekends this way: raking and fertilizing Confederate plots, decorating graves with flowers, visiting monuments and shrines.

One girl lingered long after the others, gazing back at the ranks of stones. "You know what I hate?" she said. "When people say that history repeats itself. That's the scariest thing I can think of."

Beth was a tall, intense girl of twelve with braces and a black barrette stuck crookedly in her hair. I told her I wasn't sure I understood the appeal of all this devotion to crypts and alabaster, which was beginning to strike me as a bit morbid for a children's group.

"To tell you the truth, I was kind of embarrassed to come today," she said. "When I told a friend at school about it, she said, 'What's that, some kind of redneck thing?'" Beth frowned. "I'm not prejudiced and I don't agree with all this 'South is great' stuff. I'm sure there were some good things about the North." She looked around. "I hope nobody hears me say that."

Even so, Beth served as president of her C. of C. chapter and reckoned she'd join the UDC when she aged out. But her passion for the Confederacy didn't spring from the C. of C. Catechism. In school she'd just learned about the Holocaust and become obsessed with Anne Frank and other Jews killed by the Nazis.

"What gets me is the heart of the Jews. They were underdogs, they knew they were going to die but didn't give up the faith," she said. "Just like the Confederates."

Beth saw another connection between the Civil War and the Holocaust. "I like the gruesome stuff, like about the prisons," Beth said. "I like Auschwitz—I mean, I don't like it, but I like to learn about it. That's my favorite concentration camp. It makes me wonder how human beings can possibly do that sort of thing to each other, and how you keep your spirit in that situation. Then I got to thinking about Salisbury's prison." Her voice lowered, the way a twelve-year-old's does when she's about to say something awful. "You know how some prisoners killed themselves at Salisbury? They drank potty water." She grimaced. "I guess if you were really sick already, that would do it. But you'd really have to want to die."

We caught up with the others at a punch-and-cookies reception at an antebellum mansion, followed by a banquet of fried chicken, potatoes with cheese, green beans, biscuits and peach cobbler. Digging into my third sclerotic meal of the day, I recalled a conversation I'd once had with the Tennessee writer John Egerton over a heart-stopping lunch in Nashville. "This meal's got all six of the major food groups in the South," he observed. "Sugar, salt, butter, eggs, cream and bacon grease."

The dinner was followed by speeches and awards: for the Catechism quiz winner, for the chapter "sending in the greatest number of accurate membership papers" (won by Sue Curtis's group, of course) and for "the youngest child registered in the division," a five-month-old who would become the C. of C.'s state "mascot" for the following year. This post was so coveted, Sue said, that some parents registered their children at birth, even asking the labor-room doctor to sign the application form.

It was ten-thirty when the meeting finally adjourned. I promised Beth I'd send her some material from the Holocaust Museum and told her about another museum, in Tel Aviv, where I'd dug up details on my forebears in Eastern Europe. Beth's eyes lit up. She'd recently become interested in genealogy, too, and was now tracing her rebel ancestry.

"My father's mother's maiden name is Frank, and they came from

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somewhere in central Europe originally," she said. "Maybe, oh maybe, I'm praying that I'm kin to Anne Frank. That would be the greatest thing in the world."

I STAYED A WEEK in Salisbury, attending several more meetings with the Curtises. By the end, I knew the words to every stanza of "Dixie" and had learned to distinguish the rebel battle flag from the first, second and third national flags of the wartime South. I'd also begun to realize that the Curtises logged more miles for the Confederacy each year than the Army of Northern Virginia.

But my last day in Salisbury, I decided to attend a remembrance of a different sort. The third week of January marked not only the birthdays of Lee and Jackson, but also of Martin Luther King Jr. In the reconstituted world of the 1990s South, the Confederates' birthdays were now discreet affairs, celebrated in library back rooms, while King's was a national holiday. Virginia, I later learned, had attempted a bizarre fusion of the Civil War and civil rights, creating "Lee-Jackson-King Day" (all three men were "defenders of causes," the state legislature proclaimed). But the hybrid didn't take and most Virginians continued to celebrate their heroes separately.

The same was true in Salisbury. Blacks observed King's birthday with a parade and a service at a small church a few blocks from the town's Confederate monument. Ushers handed out paper fans decorated with King's picture on one side and a funeral home advertisement on the other. A dozen or so whites sat near the front, including the mayor, sheriff and county judge.

The service began, like the other meetings I'd attended, with the pledge of allegiance and with tunes that echoed Southern history, albeit from the opposite shore of racial strife and liberation.

*Heaven help the black man if he struggles one more day.
Heaven help the white man if he turns his back away.
Heaven help the man who kicks the man who's had a fall.
Heaven help us all.*

The "birthday message" by a visiting minister also spoke to the legacy of the Civil War. "Frederick Douglass said over a century ago

that America cannot remain half slave and half free," he began. "He said the sky for blacks was dark but not rayless. I would say the same today. Do you hear me?"

"Yessir!"

"Some of us are still ashamed to be known as African-American. We have tried to assimilate harder than any other. We try to talk like other folk, we are afraid to laugh. When I was coming up, you could hear us laugh a block away. Talk to me, somebody!"

"Tell it, Rev!"

"We're not cannibals. We don't stew folks in pots or wear bones through our noses. When I was a child I read about L'il Black Sambo putting tiger butter on pancakes. At school I learned about Robert E. Lee. But nobody told me about the peanut man, Booker T. Washington. I didn't hear about *our* heroes. We can't all be superstars. Most of us are just hardworking average folk. But you are somebody special because God didn't make any junk. I'm going to pick at this bone just a little bit and then leave it alone."

"Nossir! Go on now!"

"Dr. King said you must be willing to stand for something or you will fall for anything. Jesse Jackson said it doesn't matter what boat brought you to this country. We're all in the same boat here. So let's come together. Let's hold hands now and smile at each other."

The choir broke into song and everyone joined in, belting out "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." I'd heard Julia Ward Howe's anthem to abolition a hundred times before. But listening to it now, through the prism of the Civil War, I was struck by its explicitly martial tone and its vivid imagery of 1860s army life.

"He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible, swift sword . . . I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps . . . He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat . . . As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free, while God is marching on!"

If "Dixie" was elegiac, a nostalgic evocation of cotton fields, buckwheat cakes and gay deceivers, the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" was its antithesis: apocalyptic, ironfisted, and almost industrial in its summoning of God's legions to march forth and crush iniquity. It would be a stretch to suggest that the two songs offered a tuneful

synopsis of what fueled the North's succession, I could see the two causes.

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synopsis of what had separated North from South—and what had fueled the North's triumph. But hearing the songs sung in such close succession, I couldn't help feeling the emotional distance between the two causes.

When the singing ended, I chatted with others in my pew, including a tall, aristocrat-looking man with pomaded gray hair. I told him about the Lee-Jackson gatherings I'd attended and asked how he felt about people still celebrating the Confederacy.

"I'm happy they have the freedom to celebrate those men, the same way we celebrate King here," he said. "But you didn't see nobody black at those meetings, did you? We had white folks here, at least a few. Anything you got to do with your own kind in secret, something's wrong with it. You feel bad about it inside." A wry smile creased his lips. "I got one word for those folks—Appomattox. The game's up, you lost. Get over it."

The other blacks in our pew didn't seem to care about whites honoring Lee and Jackson. "Whites have their day, now we've got our own," one woman said. But one man didn't share this indifference. Michael King was a young preacher with horn-rimmed glasses and a close-cropped beard and mustache. "The Bible says, if eating meat offends your brother, eat meat no more," he said. "Worship of the Confederacy offends me." ✓

When I asked why, he walked me to the Confederate monument, which occupied a median strip on Salisbury's busiest street. The 1909 memorial depicted a bronze angel cradling a dying rebel soldier and holding forth a laurel crown. Chiseled on the granite base was the Confederate motto, *Deo Vindice*. With God As Our Defender.

"What's the message here?" King said. "God dispatched an angel to ferry this brave rebel to heaven. As a Christian pastor, I got a problem with that. The whole notion that God was involved with one race putting down another, that's going against the grain of a Christian nation. God ain't with racism or anything to do with subdividing people."

The monument bothered King for another, subtler reason. "It's idol worship. I feel sorry for folks who feel like they have to put up idols to feel good about themselves."

King had lived in Salisbury his whole life. He knew his was a

minority view. Most blacks were apathetic, he said, or didn't want to ruffle Salisbury's racial calm by talking about old monuments. He had done so publicly once, questioning at a public meeting why the monument—owned by Sue Curtis's UDC chapter—should stand in the middle of a busy street where "I got to worship it every time I'm stuck at a red light," King said.

In reply, King had received hate mail. His protest also prompted an avalanche of letters to the local paper stating that the monument wasn't racial, it was just a symbol of great-grandfathers who fought and died for their beliefs. "The way I see it," King said, "your great-grandfather fought and died because he believed my great-grandfather should stay a slave. I'm supposed to feel all warm inside about that?"

I asked King if there was any way for white Southerners to honor their forebears without insulting his. He pondered this for a moment. "Remember your ancestors," he said, "but remember what they fought for too, and recognize it was wrong. Then maybe you can invite me to your Lee and Jackson birthday party. That's the deal."

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—JAMES

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