Manuscripts

I grew up in the land of rebel flags flying on front porches and people who make a living with their hands. My childhood home is nestled in woods that Sherman and his men marched through on their way to burn Savannah. Before the land overcame itself, there was the Denham plantation and a tannery that transitioned to making boots, saddles, and other leather goods for confederate troops. You can still see a chimney splattered with cannonball holes from the road, if you look just right between the trees driving down Tanyard.

I can remember sitting in Peepaw's shop, in the office he'd built for himself with a wood stove in the far corner and a mini fridge stocked with Bud Light. He shows me a drawer filled with composition notebooks, picking one up and thumbing through pages of cursive. His memoir, he said. Stories about living in the dorms at trade school in Clarkesville, family vacations to Daytona, his brother who passed a few years ago. Some I've heard dozens of times, and others that remind me of the man he is. He tells me to remember these notebooks when he's gone, and I say Yes, sir.

In the drawer below he pulls out a thick booklet held together by staples. The pages yellowed and worn, I can almost hear typewriter keys clicking. Inside is the story of the Denham's fleeing from Putnam County upon word of Sherman's approach, as told by the daughter of the patriarch. The rush to pack baskets of food and clothes into wagons. Burying silver and other relics. Loading the children into carriages, with the help of a "loyal servant," Epsie. The caravan heading to South Georgia. The uncle who stayed behind, hiding in the man-made swamp loaded with chemicals from leather treatments at the factory. The fear of what they might return to. The fear to lose the life so many people had worked so hard to build.

The Denham's return home to the ashes left behind of the tannery, the smoke stack still standing with the metal fish weathervane standing tall at the top. The plantation home still standing, but gutted. They find the rosewood piano in the barn, where it had been used as a trough to feed and water the Union horses. The china and crystal left in shards on the parlor floor. The valuables that had been dug from the dirt and taken with Sherman's men to Savannah. And they thought this was destruction.

The manuscript doesn't mention the sixty-three slaves left behind, expected to defend the property and fend for themselves. The slaves the family considered as "our people." The slaves who escaped the Denham plantation, never seen again. The ones captured under the guise of liberation and the few who returned later as "practically skeletons," accepting a place on the estate, because it was better than starving. What became of those who left? What became of those who stayed? Sixty-three human beings without a seat at the table, without a place in the story. How did they forget about sixty-three people?

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The manuscript doesn't warn me about how I will feel when I transfer to a public high school and have math class with a boy who has Peepaw's last name. And how I know he isn't a distant cousin. The pit in my stomach when it clicked. It doesn't tell me how to navigate making friends with the black girls in musical theater, and the shame I feel knowing my ancestors fought against the right for them to be in that classroom. Watching them braid hair in the dressing room, in awe at the speed and intricacy. How that must've mirrored the women in the slave quarters when they had a moment to breathe and just be women.

The manuscript doesn't prepare me for the fights I'll have with Momma at the kitchen table, when she tells me this is my heritage and I tell her I'm ashamed of it. And she says it would break Peepaw's heart if he knew that. The man that taught me the importance of a skill and a smile. The man who goes to church every Sunday and invited my best friend to thanksgiving after she came out to her family and they shamed her for it. The man who could tell a story a million times, and still keep me hanging on every word. The man with a bicep tattoo of Brer Rabbit holding a Confederate flag. The proud member of the Putnam County chapter of the Sons of Confederacy. The man who raises sheep and competed in rodeos. The man I made a grandpa. The man who gives goodbye kisses on the cheek and finishes the day with a cigar.

The manuscript doesn't teach me how to balance the love for my family and the shame for our past. It doesn't prepare me to live through a second wave civil rights movement. It doesn't foresee how little really can change in two a century and a half. But the manuscript isn't a finished story.