

## **The Third Loss**

by Titus Smith

Trees were tall in this part of the woods. Their leaves shuddered gently in a soft breeze. A full moon illuminated the forest floor, along with the small lake, with a pale glow. The lake was gently rippling from the wind, but aside from that, it was calm. Beside the lake, on a beach, there were two sets of footprints, which led to the glowing embers of fire.

The creators of both the footprints and the fire lay ten yards off from the fire on the grass. One lay beneath a thick wool blanket on his back. The other sat against a tree, a rifle across his lap. Beside the man sleeping on the ground was a pack. This pack, along with one just like it sitting beside the man propped against the tree, contained all the provisions they would need for the week-long trip they had embarked on. The pack of the man resting against the tree contained the pair's cooking supplies, jerky and other food that would provide them with fuel on their trip. The pack of the man on the ground contained cooking supplies, and a single envelope.

Less than a mile away, a tall, wild looking man crept towards the lake. He was wearing clothes that had once been among the finest produced at the time, but now were worn down and ragged. The tall, wild looking man came to the edge of the lake. He crouched down on the opposite side of the two men sleeping beside the beach which contained their fire. The large bearded man saw first the glowing remains of their fire, then the reclining figures, and did not look surprised. Despite his gun and the snarl that had crept onto his face, the man made no move toward them. He appeared to be deep in thought, and sat by his tree for a significant amount of time, pondering his options. That is when he saw motion behind the pair of men.

In a cave, not far from the lake, about twenty minutes earlier, she had woken up. She was, to put it lightly, very hungry. She had woken up several times during her slumber, but only to change her position. She had not satisfied her hunger once during the past four and a half months, and now, her cubs were demanding milk. The female black bear wasn't large. She was about three and a half feet tall at the shoulder, and normally weighed roughly 175 pounds. After her long hibernation however, she had lost 25 percent of her body weight, and was down to a lean 130 pounds.

Emerging from her cave, she gave a long dramatic stretch and yawned her large maw. Her incredibly sensitive nose caught something carried to her on the slight and yet ever present breeze on that April night. Beckoning her two cubs to follow, she walked into the gentle wind, and the scent of meat grew stronger. She knew that she was headed in the direction of the lake. She often drank from it, and ate berries from the bushes on its banks. Finally, the bear, slowed by the necessity to shepherd her cubs in the right direction and keep them together, saw the edge of the lake lapping against the familiar beach she had often visited. Then she noticed that something was wrong.

A loud roar woke up the pair of men who had been sleeping on the grass. The mother bear, mad with fear for her cubs, was tearing at the man who had been leaning against the tree. Within seconds, he lay prone on the ground, a thick, dark puddle spreading around him.

During this time, the man who had been laying on the ground had picked up a rock. The bear dove at him, and his swing with the rock aimed at her head missed. She

latched onto his leg; biting, gnawing, and tearing. He swung the rock again, and this time, connected with her skull. Enraged, she swung a massive paw at his face. He took the brunt of the impact with his forearm, but still saw stars, swimming around in his vision where they should not have been. He heard gunshots, a thunderous growl of pain, and then fell into darkness's cool embrace.

Eventually, the man's consciousness came back, but strangely, the darkness had stayed. He realized his eyes were still closed. He tried to open them, and only his right eye complied. He tried to move his left arm up to feel his left eye, but when his hand reached his face, found that it was bandaged to the extent that he could feel nothing. Instead, he used his undamaged right arm to feel his eye. It was swollen shut. Upon this realization, it began to ache, along with his bandaged left arm. His leg however, burned with a pulsating throbbing heat that spread over his entire lower body.

The grizzled, bearded man sat in a chair across from the bed that the boy, for that is how the man saw him, as he was only eighteen years old, lay. The bearded man had been the one to shoot his rifle during the bear attack. When a well placed bullet had hit the bear in what he believed to be her shoulder, she and her cubs had retreated. When she was gone, the bearded man ran to the boy laying on the grass with weary eyes on where the bear had retreated, and inspected the wounds. Obviously he had still been alive, but was bleeding at an alarming rate from the bite wound on his leg.

The bearded man tried and failed to staunch the bleeding by pressing on the leg wound. Instead, he applied a tourniquet that he found in the boy's medical equipment bag. After it was twisted tight enough to cut off circulation, he checked the head wound.

There was nothing he could do there. Last he set the boy's broken arm using a stick as a splint. He threw the boy over his shoulder and carried him back to his cabin.

"You were camped on my property" stated the bearded, wild looking man. "I saw the smoke from your fire last evening, and luckily for you, I came to investigate last night," he said without emotion. He just curiously looked at the boy, who, in the light, was clearly wearing a blue overcoat. "What's your name, boy?"

The young man in the blue overcoat looked at the wild seeming man with a beard, and trusted him. He seemed caring. The boy thought he even seemed fatherly, the way he sat there; leaning forwards, elbows on his knees. His voice, hoarse from lack of use and dehydration, croaked, "William Stevenson, sir."

"You're a yankee soldier aren't you," The bearded man asked in a tone that left no room for denial.

"I am," William admitted, then asked, "Who are you?"

"Formally, I was Colonel Peter Kennedy, of the confederate army. Now, I'm just Peter."

William had questions, but his throat hurt too much to ask them. Instead, he looked around the inside of the cabin. It was spartan. The bed which he lay on, a small table by the wall opposite him, and the chair that Peter sat on were the only furnisher inside. In terms of decoration, there was a window on the wall to the left of the door, and a framed picture of a beautiful woman, a boy who looked to be several years younger than William, and a less wild Peter, with a shorter, more kempt beard.

Peter noticed where William was staring. "That was my family before..." his voice trailed off, and his eyes became unfocused. "Alice, my wife, she got sick and died three

years ago. Johnny, my son; he'd be a bit older than you now if..." his voice failed him again, and he stared into space. Finally he looked at Peter with a bitter glint in his eyes. He finished, "If the confederate army hadn't killed him."

After that, the story gushed out of Peter. William could not understand all of what the older man was saying, but he understood the basics; Johnny's troop had been used as bait by the confederate army, camping in a vulnerable position, so that other confederate forces could take a vital base. Johnny had, along with hundreds of other young men, been reported dead in the battle. Peter was so filled with sadness at losing his only son and last remaining family member, and rage at the confederate government and army, he had abandoned his post, and come to this cabin in the woods. Now, the Confederates wanted him for abandonment, and the Union wanted him for committing treason, and joining the confederacy when the war began. Peter's unbridled hate however, was completely aimed at the confederacy.

Peter asked William what he had been doing so far from any union camps, and after wetting his throat with warm tea Peter had boiled, answered, "I have an envelope in my bag. It has information about a confederate camp that can help the union finish this God-forsaken war."

Peter had seen the envelope, and replied, "Then we'll need to get you healthy enough to deliver that letter."

"Promise me that if I don't make it, you'll deliver the letter for me."

"Boy, those yankees will shoot me the moment I step into that camp. Luckily for you and the union, I have nothing to live for. The confederacy took everything from me. I promise to take that letter if I can't get you healed up."

William struggled on for two more days, but despite Peter's best efforts, the infection spread into his bloodstream. He died the next day. Making good on his word, Peter got a pack ready, collecting all the supplies he would need for the week-long hike to the union camp. When he was ready to go, he buried William beside the cabin. Peter had come to love the boy as a son during the time he cared for him, and his hatred for the confederacy grew even stronger with each shovel of Georgian clay infused dirt, as he blamed them for everything wrong in the world.

Peter hiked for miles and miles, and eventually made it to the union camp. He entered the camp under custody, and successfully delivered the message to the general. He had not yet seen the contents, but he believed that William had been telling the truth about the message in the letter. He had been so desperate for Peter to promise to deliver the message. A single tear rolled down his face as he thought about William, then his dead son, Jonny. As he expected, Peter was sentenced to death. His execution would take place on May 13th at noon.

On the appointed day, Peter stood before the firing squad. Before his execution took place, the general walked behind the firing squad. He said, "Peter Kennedy, before you die I want you to know two things. First, the information in the letter you delivered led to the union capture of the city of Atlanta. The union thanks you for your service. Second, before you die, I Thought you should know," he hesitated.

"Your son is alive, and he is a prisoner in a POW camp in Massachusetts. That is all. Firing squad, you may continue. Peter barely had time to be shocked and confused before he heard someone yell "FIRE!" and the sound of gunshots filled the

camp. Darkness fell around him. This time, the shots did not mean salvation from a beast for a scared dying teenager, but the loss of his son one last time.