

The Night Before ...
A Conversation With William Pettigrew
A monologue by Dan Lookabill

William Josiah Pettigrew sits alone in camp, keeping company only with a small fire and his tin cup of coffee. He observes a lone soldier, apparently lost and separated from his unit, pass by.

William: Evening, son, you look lost. No, can't say where the 3rd Mississippi boys are. You just arrive? You look like you came a long way. I believe that it is unlikely you will find them tonight. Must be 60 thousand men hereabouts. You might just sit down awhile and get yourself some coffee. Yes, I am alone but my unit is not far ... just over there by the guns. Eleventh North Carolina Artillery.

Two years. Two years and I have not seen the elephant. I expect that will change for both of us tomorrow. Well, since you have asked me, and we have nothing else to do tonight, I will tell you a bit. I am William Josiah Pettigrew of Pelham County, North Carolina. I am a farmer. From before I was ten, I have worked the land. When I was 15 our father died and I ran the farm from then on. Took right to it, mind you. I have a younger brother and three younger sisters. Robert, my brother ... was different. He hated farming. He was always a lively child who loved every minute of every day with as much noise and claptrap as possible. But he made us laugh ... at every hard time and painful moment, he found a way to lead us back to loving life almost as much as he did. He had some kind of magic in him ... and it saved me once.

You see, my father had marched me out into the woods on my twelfth birthday. He explained to me that this would be my first day as a hunter. I do not believe my father was impressed with my joy in this new task. He had me hunkered down behind a log while we waited. And then the deer came. I took a breath and let it out slow and pulled the trigger. But oh, oh, how things changed with me that day.

Tomorrow, son, remember what your sergeant told you – aim low. New soldiers always aim too high and miss the enemy. I aimed a little too high that day. When we went forward I saw this crippled deer thrashing in the bushes, trying to scrape away the pain from the hole in his head where his eye used to be. And I remember my father telling me to finish the killing. But I could not move. I got sick and I asked God to take back my shot and give the deer his eye back and God was not listening.

When we got home, my father put away the gun and never asked me to hunt again. For my own part, I resolved that I would never again take a life, but to save my own, if then. But that very same night, Robert, not knowing of these matters, began some silly song and dance that left us all laughing ... and I was never so grateful for him as I was that night.

I lived peaceful, working the land for many years. And then back in '45, one of our own – James Knox Polk of Mecklenburg County – became the president. And inside of year, he had us in a war. Oh, there was a ferment in the land then. We were all to leave our farms and rush off to some far country to fight Mexicans. Son, I didn't even know what a Mexican was. But my brother, Robert ... he could hardly wait. And he could hardly believe that I would not join him. We had some awful fights. And then finally, he rode off to war.

You have to understand, I loved my country. But my world was Pelham County, North Carolina. And all that I held dear and would defend with my life was there on the farm. And I couldn't see any Mexicans coming up the road. I was not about to ride off to lands I would never want to fight people I didn't know in a war I could not understand. My brother just thought I was a coward.

He never wrote to me ... only to my sisters. And he never mentioned me. And then one day we got this letter from a place called Bona Vista. And Robert said he was going into the biggest battle of his life. And he said he was glad I wasn't

there. He said he'd seen too many men who gone off to war and never should have – because they did not have the courage to be good soldiers. And he said I was like that ... and that's why I was better at home.

My sisters had looked a bit peculiar at me when Robert rode off alone. But that letter was like that deer – it changed everything. They ever after looked at me kind of sad, like they were sorry about the truth.

Well, some time passed and we heard nothing further. Then one day in '47, we see a man riding down the road toward our gate. And the girls went screaming to see him – it was Robert. And I came along right after. But by the time I reached him, the girls was crying. Seems Robert's left leg ended at the knee. And there was terrible scar on his face that kept one eye slightly open – staring out. And it was as if he had never left – he looked at me with such contempt and hatred ... as if my being there might have saved his leg.

And that was the way we lived after that. Him hobbling around the farm, doing what work he could and treating me like a dead man. And our sisters married off and went their ways ... and Robert and I were left with each other. At least until I got married. Then he moved to a little house at the edge of the farm. And nothing ... not my wife, nor my children, nor even my prayers, could cause Robert to forgive me.

It wasn't fair, you know. I had responsibilities – a farm, a family – I wasn't fooled by that war nonsense. I was standing on principle – it was wrong to go. But there were nights when I would lay awake and shiver with ... what? Anger? Regret? Maybe fear that what I was feeling was my own cowardice? And things stayed that way for a long time.

Well, you know what's happened. That man Lincoln called for 75 thousand volunteers. People to sing their own praises and march across the South and

destroy everything they find. And now, now Mr. Lincoln's war was coming to me. Well, I didn't much want any part of this one either. And I'll bet you that once we win, there will be many who will point to some moment – some magical instant - when we might have won our independence without a shot being fired. And we will the curse the day that the man who could have seen that moment – was not born.

Well, for me, this war was a last chance. I'd spent a lifetime being hated by my brother, pitied by sisters, ignored by my wife and shamed by children. So I joined up as a private soldier and they sent me to Charlotte city to guard warehouses. Later they found I could read and figure, so they sent me to the artillery.

And finally we marched north. And we crossed the Potomac River. And here we are. In a place I never would visit, facing people I do not know ... but at least I know why I am here. Because if we do not fight the enemy here in this little town, we shall need to fight them down there on my little farm. That is my life, my heart and my soul.

And I, who would never kill a man or an animal, can stand back a mile from the center of battle and rain down on men with weapons that tear a man to pieces – and not have to look at my handiwork ... my butchery.

Oh, Lord, I fear more for the lives I shall take than the life I shall lose. Which is the greater cowardice? To fail in one's duty for the fear of doing it ... or to fail in one's duty for the fear of dying? And if I live tomorrow, and kill a hundred men, what will I say to my God, then? Thank you, Lord, for letting them die and not me?

Well, I do not expect soldiers should talk about these things. It confuses those among us who care and it deprives the others of sleep. You might as well bed down over there ... and tomorrow, we will see the elephant together.