

BENJAMIN'S FIDDLE

A blanket of fresh snow covered the bodies, steam rising from those not yet quit of life as the sergeant's voice filtered through the din of shrieking horses and the cries of the wounded. "Corporal Laroush!" Templeton heard it through air thick with smoke, acrid and flush with the stink of piss and terror and carnage.

Templeton Laroush, though he was dead, now was free of all worries. The sergeant's shouts were a fading nightmare; Laroush was waking up and going home, and he was at peace with this until his Uncle Horace was standing before him. At first, recently deceased Templeton had no sense of his body or age as his Uncle Horace smiled down on him. "It isn't your time, Templeton. Go on now, son, go on back. You must be brave and endure."

With that, Templeton Laroush was alive again, and his heart broke. Awash in the screams and stink of gun powder agony tore at his limbs as he felt himself being dragged along the cratered landscape, his eyes rolling across the shape of Sergeant Bascomb. "Laroush! , I got Laroush here! Hold that wagon!", the sergeant hollered, his grip on Templeton's shirt front tightened. In one great swing, Sergeant Bascomb of the 1st Battalion Ohio Sharpshooters, tossed the corporal's body up into waiting hands. Laroush landed in the wagon surrounded by the weeping and groaning injured amid the blasphemous rants of Private Littleton. "He's more than half dead, Sergeant, I can't account taking him and leaving others", Littleton shouted over the blast of a nearby cannon.

The sergeant must have walked off, for Laroush didn't hear his voice again. Someone pulled him up by his arms and slung him up against the backboard, where he remained watching as the hellscape recede behind them. As they passed a small grouping of soldiers, he noticed they were circled around a man sitting down, his legs akimbo, his face tilted to the ground. One of the men heralded the wagon, but the driver either didn't hear or didn't have room. As the wheels rumbled past, Laroush saw the sitting man look up at the passing wagon. His hands draped down in front of his knees; his eyes were blue and bright with fever; the expression in his pallid face was unreadable, mostly because he had no jaw. His lower face had been blown clean off and his broken bloodied teeth hung over his shirt, like a broken toy. Laroush looked away in shock and shame.

At the back of the wagon was a young lieutenant; his torso still had the left arm intact, and he was studying what he held in his left hand - the gristle and torn flesh of what remained of his right arm. He looked over at Laroush and nodded. When Laroush gave a short salute, a spray of gore fanned out across the passengers in the wagon. He was puzzling this when the cannon ball exploded in the muck about five yards from the horses.

The wagon tipped, spilling Laroush, who had sense enough to crawl up under the blasted remains of what had been an enormous oak. A dead chestnut bay lay there, its eyes staring at the horror of whatever last minutes the poor beast had experienced. A half dozen Johnny Rebs were scattered about the russet soup of clay and dirt, along with their canteens and a few rifles. Laroush burrowed into the muck behind the bay and tried to see which way the battle was heading. One of the Rebs was down on his side, like he was asleep, except for the great red stain soaking its way across the back of his uniform. Reb's knapsack had a cup hanging off it, so Laroush rummaged for some water. As he pulled the pack off, he heard a familiar note. Careful

to stay low, he unhooked the straps to find a cloth wrapped around a bow and fiddle, nestled together like lovers.

Water was a necessity, but theft was a sin, and Templeton Laroush was no thief. Johnny Reb had been a fiddler, what do tell. Peering at the boy's face, Templeton realized with a start the dead Reb was younger than himself by more than a few years. There wasn't a sign of down, the boy wasn't even shaving yet.

Laroush damned the generals who brought on the war. He knew plenty of well to do on both sides paid the \$300.00 deferments to keep their sons in offices far from the shadow of death. Now here was this child, dead, and no one to know his fate.

The sound of gunfire had fallen back and drifted over to the East closer to the creek. Templeton wrapped the cloth back around its prize and packed it deep in the boy's rucksack. It was in this way he discovered the packet of letters. A woman's soft cursive across the front of each addressed to "Benjamin Gwynne". They came from "Minton's Hollow", a place likely to be the boy's home. A pencil and sheaf of paper was tucked neatly in the top of the letters. The day was winding down and growing cooler, it would be dark in another hour, what with the haze of smoke over the fields. Before it was too dark to see, Templeton sat down and wrote: "Dear Missus Gwynne: It is with great sadness I write to you of the loss of your son, Benjamin Gwynne. I am sending his belongings back to you with my condolences for your terrible loss. Kindest regards, Templeton Laroush, 15th Pennsylvania Cavalry." The report of rifles and explosions continued as night fell. Corporal Laroush huddled beneath the great carcass of the chestnut bay and fell into a deep sleep.