

# The Outer Banks House | The Lost Chapter

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Picture this, if you will: A trigger is squeezed in earnest by a crooked Fed'ral forefinger, and a minie ball tears out of the rifle's slender barrel. It screams through the smoky air and slams into my skull bone like an iron stake pushed through wet, rocky dirt. My head explodes so quick I don't even feel a thing. I just fall down in the brain-splattered thicket, dead forever.

Only it didn't happen that way a-tall. While my unit camped in the slushy Virginia pastures, I acquired a bowel affliction that's slowly roasting my tender insides on the hot embers of its cookfire.

I'd take a minie ball to the brain over this rusty creak toward death's depot any day.

According to the blue-lipped lady nurse that comes round every other day, there's no liquid left in my parched body, and I'm slowly but steadily dying because of it. And I know it's true- I can feel the yellow life in me shrinking inward and disappearing into black nothingness, like burning paper curling up in pain at the edges and melting invisible into the air.

The popping blaze in my belly has robbed my sleep for a good three months now so I just lay here and watch the neverending processional of the sick and the dead. It's the soldier's theater, as close to bona fide entertainment as we can get.

The moon through the smudged window panes lights the old hospital room with a haunted glow, so I can see, among the shadows of the cots and heaps on the floor, almost every howling, miserable patient there is to see.

I've been laying here watching war's aftermath, curled on my side for so long that my left arm's gone numb. I don't want to unfurl my balled-up position, though, because straightening out my torso will incite my bowels to their hellish barking, and I've just now gotten them to curl up quiet on the hearth rug for a nap.

But my left side has its advantages. This way I've got a fine view of the poor soul in the cot next to me, moaning and hollering for his mama. I reckon he isn't more than 18 years old, and now he's missing both his young legs from a Yankee cannonball no doubt.

I've been staring at his wrecked body for about an hour now, after two men brought him in on a blood-soaked stretcher and layed him out like a leaking sack of rice. They left him with his short bitty stumps wrapped in thick bandages and thirst and pain, and without a care to his comfort went to fetch the next lucky customer.

In my delirium, I decided to tell him how things stood. "I'm sorry to tell you this, compatriot, but your runnin' days are over," I croak. My voice coughs thick soot from lack of use.

The peach-fuzzed, pimple-faced boy looks over at me with wild, faraway eyes, and whimpers like a scared filly. "What d'ya mean? Where am I? Who are you?"

Now I've gone and done it.

He pushes up on his elbows and looks down at his lower half, where he just recently had two working legs. “MY LEGS! God, what have you butchers done with my legs?” he hollers out to the room at large. “Sew ‘em back on, you’ve just got to find ‘em and sew ‘em back on is all!”

“Now, now, what’s done is done, Johnny. No use in stitching back legs that were blown to bits anyhow,” I say, with a hope to counsel him.

He heaves backward on the cot and lays there quietly sobbing and turning his face side to side, his face still splattered with leg blood. Bet he’s thinking along the same lines I am, and that’s that fighting in a war is a good way to waste your time.

Course, my attempts to speak have caused the demon-rumbling in my bowels to return. While my mid-section erupts in a spasm of pain, I quickly crawl off the cot over to the shit-splattered pot. As my innards empty of their foul contents in quick painful spurts, I wail like a newborn babe, strangely, with no tears.

My legs cramp with discomfort as I crouch like a dog over the pot, and my rectum burns with the acidity. My lower back half is covered in bits of my own feces and blistering sores, and I smell like an overused outhouse. It occurs to me, in my vulnerable, bare-assed position, that I am an animal, nothing more and nothing less.

Finally, when my weary guts have decided there’s nothing left to squeeze out, I climb back up onto my cot, exhausted and sweaty from the effort that constant shitting requires. I don’t even bother to pull up my crusty pants, too loose on me anyhow.

I wasn’t afraid to die, when I joined the cause. I don’t know why I wasn’t. Seems downright addle-brained of me. At first, I felt more alive than I ever did, sleeping in nature and feeling the earth crunch under my boots. And I liked the notion, of being a part of something as mighty as the earth.

But that’s about all I liked. I’ve killed men just like me, right after I looked them eye to eye. Watched as their bodies exploded in blood, wiped their guts off my face. Believe me when I tell you that the human body is soft, soft as the inside of a hot biscuit.

If there’s one thing that I’ve learned from this war, it’s that there are truly a thousand ways to die, and kill, horribly. And I had to be the one to succumb bit by bit to gut rot. If I weren’t dying right now, I’d laugh heartily.

*Please Lord, don’t let me die like this. I’ve been a good man. And though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil...*

I trumpet a snort at that, sounding like a little girl saying her bedtime prayers. I never was real good at religion. And anyway, from what I’ve seen these last few years, God has taken a holiday from us and we’re on our own. I’m not going to waste my time praying now.

But damnation, I’m parched! Where-oh-where is a doc? I conjure up Doc Newman, my childhood doc that visited the house even if we weren’t sick, just to see how we were growing up and give us some candy. I reckon he’s aging alone back in Edenton, far away from this hellhole of a hospital, and who could blame him.

I try to sit up on my cot that smells like rancid slops, call for a doc, but I don’t have the gumption. And anyway, no doc is going to see me now, with both feet in the grave. No more bark teas and castor oil for me. Too many men in here too, looks like some are laying smack on top of those already dead. Even the raw moonlight can’t ease the scent of rotting flesh and flowing blood.

My brain seems to shift inside my skull like a living thing, and I think it might be easier if I just went ahead and died already. I have lost myself.

I close my searing eyes and here comes my angel, decked out in red. She doesn’t mind the filth. She stretches out on the cot next to me and caresses my stubbled cheeks. I

just stare at her in the moonlight. My wife has the most beautiful skin, sleekly brown as the wing of a mourning dove. There are traces of salt on her face from dried up tears. She smells so clean I want to cry. She's going to look god-awful in black.

And there's Abby, running toward me through the fields, words on the tip of her tongue. I can make out the tawny freckles on her nose, her red eyelashes. I can feel her heart pumping just by looking at her. She is too alive for this sorry world. I reach out to her, but she won't take my hand. Now I see Nolan, beckoning me to come into the house, offering up his best whiskey to get me to stay awhile. But now, the hot sun over the land blinds me, and I can't see anything at all.

I am falling asleep- at long last- but it feels more like disappearing. Legs and arms fizzling out like a wet fuse. And with some minute degree of clarity, I see that death comes quick, in the end. One minute you're here, gloriously breathing the air into your lungs, and the next minute you're an invisible turtle, with nothing left to show for your life- even if it was a damned good one- except your empty shell. Then time takes even that from you.

Someone is sobbing, forlornly, like a lonely Canada goose a-calling a mate on a mirror-mountain lake. My dry eyes muster up a single tear that never leaves its well.