

FLAG DAY

David Swan

Darby knelt next to the weathered headstone, pushed the little wooden pole into the ground, and said a short prayer. Then he stood up and saluted Private William Clark, 8th Alabama Infantry, killed on August 30, 1862, whose resting place he'd just decorated with the Stars and Bars for Confederate Memorial Day.

Darby smiled to himself, proud as ever and savoring the warm spring sun, as he headed toward the next and last of the dozen or so graves he visited on this day every year. He knew some folks thought he was a racist redneck—and a few would tell him so to his face—but he had a right to honor his heritage whether the snowflakes liked it or not. And unlike the big flag his brothers in the SCV had put up by I-65, no one would see these unless they drove out to this cemetery, on a quiet country road a couple of miles from town. A few flags in a little old graveyard wouldn't hurt anybody.

His final stop was a family plot dating back almost two centuries, where many of the markers were discolored, faded, and barely legible, but the one for Sergeant George Knox was still clear. After completing his ritual, Darby brushed the dirt off his pants, straightened his gray cap, and was about to leave when he noticed he still had a flag in his satchel.

Wondering if he'd missed someone, he pulled out a map of the graves but couldn't read it without the glasses he'd left in his car. He debated whether to go get them, then saw another stone a few feet from the sergeant's, smaller than the rest and worn almost smooth. He bent down, squinted, and couldn't make out the inscription either. Might as well give 'em an extra, Darby thought, and stuck his last flag in front of the second stone.

As he walked back to the car, pleased with his afternoon's work, he noticed the air seemed cooler and the wind had picked up. A minute later he stopped, suddenly not sure where he was going. He'd parked just off the entrance road by the sweetgum trees—only where were the trees? He couldn't spot any landmarks, and even stranger, everything beyond a few yards looked blurry.

Now it felt like the temperature had dropped thirty degrees. Shivering and starting to get nervous, Darby looked overhead and saw dark, roiling clouds blowing in fast. Before he could move, the wind rose to a howl and out of nowhere a slashing rain came down. The gale tore off his cap and drove him backward, stupefied and struggling to stay on his feet.

A violent crack shook the earth, followed by a woman's scream. In an instant the rain turned to hail, not little stones but jagged chunks that drew blood. Another crack and scream. Another. Another. The noise was deafening, the sky pitch black.

Darby tried to run but slipped on the ice-covered ground and fell hard, breaking something inside him. With pain flooding his chest, he lifted his head and realized he was on top of the grave where he'd planted the second flag.

As he watched, the flag began to burn, the flame rising like a torch amid the hail and wind. He clawed at the mud in agony and terror, trying to drag himself away. A face appeared and the fire leaped toward him.

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"What do you think happened?" the groundskeeper asked as he stared down at Darby, lying on his back, mouth open and eyes pinched shut.

The deputy shrugged. "Won't know 'til the medical examiner gets here. Not a mark on him, though."

"I like to had a heart attack myself when I saw him," the older man said. "Probably sounded pretty shaky when I called 911."

The deputy opened his notebook. "You ever seen him here before?"

"No sir. Not yesterday neither," the groundskeeper replied. "He must've come in after four thirty, when I left."

"I'm wondering if he's kin to these folks," the deputy said, glancing at the Knox stones. "Looks like they been here a long time."

"They have," the groundskeeper said. "And this one is something you don't see every day," he added, pointing at the small marker in front of Darby's head. "I met one of the family one time and she told me this woman, Sylvia it says, was a slave. She died in 1830-something and they buried her right here like she was one of their own."

The deputy leaned over. "What's that?" He squatted and stared at something on the ground. "Looks like ashes. Wonder how they got there. Guess it doesn't matter to him though."

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