Harvest of Death

By Marilyn Seguin

Historical fiction

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*The Gettysburg Women’s Memorial depicts a pregnant young woman with a shovel, wiping her brow as she prepares to bury dozens of dead Union soldiers after the battle of Gettysburg. Her name was Elizabeth Thorn, and her helper was her 7-year-old son, Fred. This is their story.*

July 1, 1863

At dawn, the firing had begun. From the window in the upstairs bedroom, Fred could see fighting on the ridge. Union soldiers were coming from all directions, on horseback and on foot. Fred saw the smoke from the gunfire and the cannons. The Evergreen cemetery gatehouse house shook when the cannons were fired.

The cornerstone for Evergreen cemetery had been laid on the same day in 1855 that Fred’s parents got married. On their wedding day, his mother told him, church bells rang out all over Gettysburg. Elizabeth had thought that the bells were in celebration of her marriage. Her new husband had told her that the bells were tolling in celebration of the cornerstone laying. Soon after, Fred’s father was hired as the cemetery’s first caretaker at a salary of $150 a year. The young couple, as well as Elizabeth’s parents, had moved into the gatehouse, an arched brick structure that formed the main entrance of the cemetery. Fred’s parents lived on one side of the arch, and his grandparents lived on the other. Soon after, Fred had been born and then came George and Johnny.

At noon, a Union soldier rode up to the Thorn house. “General Howard sends his best wishes ma’am, and asks that someone from your house accompany me to map the roads. Is there a man in this house?” asked the soldier.

 “My husband is with the Army in Washington. My father is the only man in this house and he is too old to ride with you. My oldest son is but seven years old. I will go with you,” she offered.

The soldier’s eyes dropped to Elizabeth’s belly and he shook his head. “No ma’am. I don’t want to impose, seeing as you are in the family way.”

When the cannonading began at about 4 o’clock in the afternoon, the noise was terrible. The gatehouse shook from the firing until Fred thought it would be knocked off its foundation. At any moment, he expected to look above and see daylight instead of the low cellar ceiling that was the main floor of his home. Fred hoped his father was safe in Washington. Did he know that a great battle was taking place in his dooryard? How odd it must be to find that one’s own house sat smack in the middle of the battleground.

At last the firing slowed a bit and the cellar door flew open. “This family is commanded by General Howard to leave this house,” said a Union soldier standing at the top of the cellar steps. “Take nothing up but the children and go!” Fred grabbed each of his brothers by the hand and dragged them up the steps ahead of his mother and grandparents.

 “We will take shelter with our neighbors,” said Elizabeth.

July 5, 1863

The fighting finally stopped and now they could return to what was left of their home. The road was crowded with ambulances, wagons, and soldiers on foot and on horseback. Where dead horses lay alongside the road, some people were piling wood upon the carcasses and burning them. The stench was terrible, and Fred pulled his shirt up over his nose to filter out some of the stink. There were flies everywhere. All around them was the litter of war—paper torn from ammunition cartridges, shreds of clothing, broken crockery and a blanket trodden into the dirt road.

Fred had seen dead bodies before, but what Fred saw all around him now as he walked with his family along the Baltimore Pike on July 5 was KILLED bodies—men and animals. Some had faces bloated and blackened beyond recognition, and others seemed hardly marred, but their uniforms, some blue and some gray, were bloody and dirty. Suffering knew no uniform. Some of the dead were frozen in grotesque positions. Some faces smiled, while others grimaced in the fear and pain that must have gripped them in the moment of death. A sharpshooter hung from a tree at the edge of a field, held there by his cinched leather belt. Once, they walked past a soldier who had died leaning against the fence rails beside the road. The soldier’s arm was lifted and his finger seemed to be pointing right at Fred, who looked away.

For miles, living men, women, children and animals filled the road carrying household belongings, food and firewood in handbarrows, buckboards and two-wheeled drays, or sometimes, strapped to their very backs. After they had been walking for about an hour, Fred saw a wagon approach them loaded with furniture. Fred did not recognize the driver, but he recognized the cargo.

“Look there, Ma! That wagon has our furniture and that scoundrel has stolen it from our house. The family watched as the wagon sped off up the pike carrying their belongings.

Most of the travelers they met were citizens from Gettysburg, either fleeing their ruined farms and homes or returning to see what damage had occurred in their absence. One of the citizens they met was the President of the Board of Evergreen Cemetery, attorney David McConaughy.

“Hurry on home as fast as you can. There is more work for you there than you can imagine,” he said to Elizabeth. So they hurried on home and finally, they reached the cemetery gatehouse. Fred hardly recognized his home. The brick structure still stood but all of the window glass had been broken, and some of the window frames themselves had been knocked out of the walls and lay smashed on the ground beside the collapsed pump shed. In front of the house, Fred counted fifteen dead horses.

July 6, 1863

Mr. McConaughy rode up to the gatehouse. He removed his hat and nodded to Elizabeth who was helping Grandpa repair the pump shed.

“Mrs. Thorn, the Cemetery Board has decided that we must make temporary graves in the Evergreen Cemetery for our dead soldiers. I regret to ask ma’am, but there is nothing to do but begin to stake off lots and dig the graves as fast as you can,” he said. “In this heat, the bodies must be covered as soon as possible. I am sorry to insist, but the air is foul and we must get the corpses into the ground right away. If you can’t do it, I shall have to find a new caretaker, and you will lose your husband’s salary.”

That very afternoon, a wagon full of corpses was delivered to the cemetery. The driver heaped the bodies in a pile behind the gatehouse and drove off. Fred looked at the pile of mangled corpses and retched. Fred was not a stranger to death. He had played happily among the dead in Evergreen Cemetery for his entire life. Since his father had joined the Army the previous summer, Fred had sometimes helped his mother and grandfather bury a few of the former citizens of Gettysburg. But the dead bodies he helped to bury had been embalmed and then interred in wooden boxes made by their neighbor Henry Garlach, whose shop was on the west side of the Baltimore Pike. And most of the people he had buried had been old or sick before they died, not cut down in their prime.

They tied kerchiefs around their mouths and noses to block the stench, and got to work. Elizabeth and Grandpa Masser staked off graves as fast as they could. That afternoon, two citizens from the town came to help Elizabeth and Grandpa Masser, but as the heat of July went to work on the unburied corpses of the men and horses, the stench became unbearable, and the two citizens abandoned them. Then they began to dig, and Fred carried piles of rocks away from the shallow graves. He carried water to his mother and grandfather as they worked in the hot sun, covering the mangled and decaying bodies with the dirt that they had just dug out of the stony ground. When they were finally finished, they had buried more than 15 horses and nearly 100 soldiers.

“These dead boys were all some mothers’ sons, just as you and George and Johnny are my sons,” said Elizabeth. And below the earth of Evergreen Cemetery, the dead slept silently on, unaware of the terrible conflict that had gone on above them, spoiling the peace of their final resting place. To Fred, the world of his childhood seemed forever altered, the innocence of his childhood lost forever in the shadows of cannons and blood. The carnage marked a passage to his adulthood that he could never have imagined, one shaped by the brutality of a war that would forever define his country—and himself.