

A book by Maiann Stachnik

Bryan Johnson

*A Path Through
Blood and Dust*



This belongs to Bryan Johnson

To Maria, my sweet daughter, sunshine enlightening every single day of my life, allowing me thus to keep fighting to the end of this war and to keep away from evil thoughts. To you, Maria, and to your future children, and to the children of your children. May you all live in a world of peace.

I'm sorry for not having completed my diary as I should have -moreover, I unfortunately lost it in battle. But all you have to know is that we were facing the most monstrous of wars : brothers killed brothers, sons had to run away from fathers, and sisters came to wish the death of brothers, so that their family could be all safe and united. It was likely that a member of your own family fought for the other side (remember that we, Johnsons, do have cousins in Georgia). Yet, someday, we all got tired of burning our country to the ground, but that's not the point - not yet.

Do you know how this all got started ? Maybe you're going to learn it at school -or maybe not, for a country must be ashamed of facing such a ravaging Civil War. We have never faced a war that great and that ruining, trust me.

Well, it's not all about slavery, as you may be told, it's just about a few states that had no great benefits beside cotton and bought pretty much of their resources from European countries, and these states felt threatened when they thought Lincoln would lead the country : they feared he was an abolitionist who just waited to come to power to free their slaves, thus taking away from them any of their riches, any of their coin to buy resources, making them weak and poor, while they had profitable cotton plantations. South Carolina seceded first in December 1860 and by February 1861, 7 southern states joined it to found the Confederate States of America. In April 1861, Confederates fired on federal soldiers for refusing to vacate Fort Sumter in South Carolina, one of the two southern forts controlled by the Union : this proved to be the beginning of Civil War and made thousands of Northerners join the rank of our army. Four other Southern states seceded afterwards.

Their army wasn't numerous, they had no great navy, not many factories to provide them with guns and cannons, as we did, but they had cotton to buy to the Europeans everything needed to wage a war, and they had greater generals and more experienced soldiers, for they were those who had fought during Texas Rebellion and the Mexican-American War.

The Union strategy relied on the Anaconda plan : it consisted in exploiting the South's dependency on foreign trade and its inability to manufacture by blockading the coast, thus prohibiting Europeans from supplying the Confederates, whose only strategy was to keep away the Northerners by fighting on the Southern land. Because of all the advantages given to us, we all think that the South can't win a long war, but it seems to me that the situation is turning to an everlasting conflict. We thought the battle of Antietam would bring an end to the fight : we found a copy of Lee's orders to divide the troops and took advantage of it by attacking the Confederates. This had to be the total destruction of the Confederates' army, but Lee managed to withdraw to Virginia. Yet, it remains a strategic victory that had important consequences : it led Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation freeing the southern slaves and made Britain back away from recognizing the Confederacy.

Today is the the third of March. I am writing on the wet ground of the new built prison of Camp Sumter – so new that it doesn't even have a fourth wall. The prisoner exchange system has been broken down because since the Emancipation Proclamation, color troops are fighting among Union soldiers – and you will come to know that Confederates didn't want to exchange colored troops. Prisons became overcrowded, that's why Camp Sumter has been built, and that explains why we are kept in a prison that isn't even completed. We have to build our own shelters with what we had with us when we were made prisoners.

There is Roy. Roy is forty-two. An old man already, he says, while I can't be stuck here forever with my early twenty-seven winters and my new-born child – you, Maria. He fought since the beginning, with all his heart : he held on the siege of Vicksburg, thus proving the strength and the willpower of our army, for he believed that we were fighting not only for our lives, but for the sake of liberty. Republicans had to rule the country, and he fought for this cause without ever doubting of its legitimacy, because it mattered much more than human lives, though he felt reluctant to kill men that were, as he is, fathers, brothers or sons.

I, on the other hand, just joined the war in July 1863, when the new conscription act lead most of the men capable of fighting to battle, and yes, I saw how cruel war can be at Gettysburg, but ever since I began fighting, I was assured, in my heart, that we would win, for the outcome of the battle of Gettysburg foretold the Union Victory and destroyed the confidence of the South.

I don't remember how I got to Camp Sumter, but I know that when I woke up when we were heading to there, Roy was there to help me. My head had been brutally shocked in battle (so did Roy hear our jailers say), but Roy explained me our situation as softly as he could, the whispers of his warm voice appeasing me like the calming words of a father to his son, and he has, indeed, been a father to me – and to James. James has barely twenty years old, but his face wore the solemn air of an old man that has faced all the ordeals of life, though he had, as I had, joined the army in July 1863. Where Roy was combative and reassuring, imagining the most incredible tricks to escape while keeping saying that we would get out of this hell on earth, James did nothing. He just sat among the weak and sick, looking at Roy with a glance that meant “Fool, you're wasting all of your strength and brains for nothing. We're all going to die anyway.”. *Note from july 1864 :*
Oddly, it is James who died first.

Once arrived, after a long walk in a chilling rain, we have been divided by squads of ninety men that are themselves divided by groups of thirty men to share rations of something that has to be corn uncooked and sometimes infected with insects. Some men have already lost their teeth lacking of vegetables, and I guess lots will die of it. How cruel it is that they let us suffer from our stomach when there is a mine of kaolin just atop that hill... Our water isn't better : it comes from Stockade Branch, a spring wasted with our dropping.

Squads must have their leaders, men of confidence and organized, men able to establish discipline but who are also strong enough to keep us alive and avoid foolish escape attempts : everyday, the prisoners are called by squads to check they're still in the prison : if anyone is missing, the whole squad is deprived of food for that day.

It seemed logical to us that Roy would be the leader of our whole squad. While behaving like the ideal prisoner for the sake of his squad, he explores the camp, noting in his mind the position of the cannons and of the guards, the weaknesses of the stockade and the comings and the goings of strangers to the camp. I watch him snaking in and out, merging into the shadows. Roy truly loves our country and our Republic, and for nothing in this world, he would give up in serving it. It really matters to him that he follows the Code of Conduct by trying to escape as soon he can, but he is a clever man and will never make a move without carefully thinking about it.

“ - Ok, so there's only one stockade for now. We can hardly look outside, and that isn't going to make escape easier, plus, there is a pack of enraged dogs waiting outside for fresh meat, but the cannons point outside. There are two kinds of jailers : boys too young to fight and old men. The first are the more cruel ones : they must feel like they have something to prove, so what better occasion to prove their strength than beating prisoners to death ? The old men, on the other hand, can be more likely to be bribed. There are peasants coming to sell their production on fridays : it is very expensive to buy, yet, these peasants could convey hand-outs.

- What do you think we should do ?

- Nothing for now. We're going to wait some time till there's some escape attempt, think about it and why it succeeded or why it failed, get more familiar with this place without planning anything for now and keep taking care of this squad.

“ He just finished his sentence when a loud noise rose among the prisoners. A jailer, a blond boy with pale skin and light blue eyes – just like me, when I was his age, I thought - began to shout at one of us.

“What do you think you're doing ? Digging a tunnel to escape ? Don't even think about it ! Listen ! All of you, stinking rats, shall listen to me ! Look at me ! Look at your comrade ! If you ever try to escape, or even think of it, I will be aware of it, and I will make you suffer the way I'm going to make your comrade suffer. You're going to have a long and painful agony, and you'll never be able to rest in peace, trust me. Look at him, now, look at your brother.”

Two other men arrived and seized the poor prisoner by his shoulders while the young man cut off one of his legs and let him die in the dirt. The soldier's cries sounded like the cries of the damned that one must hear in Hell.

It took him about one hour to die, a friend of his trying to stop the bleeding of his leg, crying that he couldn't go for he was needed not only by his friends here but also by his family in the North. A silence settled between us all before Roy broke it.

- “Well, we have to burry him, now.
- They're not burrying the prisoners ?, I answered.
- Of course not, have you seen how many died these days ?
- I must confess I was... concerned about other matters.
- Your wife and your baby child ?
- Yes... I can't help thinking of them. My wife's too young to be a widow, and Maria can't grow up without a father.
- Don't worry, you're not going to die. Not now, not yet. “

The blond boy who butchered the unlucky man was walking back and forth, staring at us, hate deforming his angelic features to an evil figure. I stayed quiet a few seconds. I got closer to Roy and whispered to him.

- “He looks like my cousin.
- The dead man ?
- No, the one who killed him.
- Oh.”

He was starting to pace away from us when I yelled at him. “Peter !”, I shouted. This was the name of my cousin. He kept walking in the same direction, so I feared it wasn't him. The last time I saw him, Peter was only ten. He had to be almost a man then. I eventually walked to him.

- “What do you want, you vermin ?, he asked in the most kindly manner.
- Peter Johnson ?
- How do you know my name ? He answered, frowning at me.
- I am your cousin, Bryan Johnson from New Jersey.
- Speak sense if you don't want to end up with a bullet in the eye, or even better : don't speak at all.
- But I really am your cousin ! I was there at your tenth birthday with uncle Jim ! Do you remember uncle Jim ?
- Go away ! I won't warn you twice.” He pushed me when he left.

- “So ? Inquired Roy.
- He is indeed my cousin, but he's gone stupid.
- He wouldn't do what he does if he wasn't stupid.
- True.

- Where is James ?
- I don't know, I haven't seen him for hours.
- Me neither.
- Can it be that... “ Our eyes widened.

We both gathered all our energy to look for James, asking every prisoner “James Branett, have you seen him ?”, wasting our force in vain efforts for a few hours.

We reached a place where two desperate men who rather killed themselves than starved hanged their bodies. A third one was about to do the same.

- What are you doing, James ? Have you gone mad ? I screamed at him.
- We're all going to die anyway.
- So you've been telling us, retorted Roy.
- I can, at least, offer myself a more peaceful death.
- Listen to me, boy, Roy yelled. You're not going to do anything of the sort. You'll have your peaceful death old and wrinkled.
- You're far too optimistic.
- I'm not. I'm working on a safe escape plan. We'll be able to leave soon.
- As I said, far too optimistic. There's no safe escape plan, and if one wants to escape, he'd be more likely to succeed alone than with ten more prisoners.
- I'm not talking about freeing every prisoner. The three of us could bribe guards to lend us uniforms to escape. We just found out that Bryan has a cousin working here.
- Actually, he doesn't even believe I am his cousin and calls me a vermin, I retorted.
- You'll convince him. We're going to make it all together, Roy assured us.
- Well, I guess we can at least give it a try, concluded James.

James held, *for a few months.*

I know what you're going to say : I'm not even able to write a diary properly. I'm now about to take a few days of my time – trust me, I have plenty – to tell you what happened here in Camp Sumter and in our nation's History.

Here, they created the dead-line, which is a border between our shelters and a no man's land which spreads to the stockade. Since March, if any part of your body comes to cross that line, you're dead. Yet, I believe God is starting to show us mercy : he blessed us with the presence of father Peter Whelan, ministering the sick and the dying since June. He purchases wheat flour to feed us so that we can eat good food : “Whelan's bread”, so we call it.

The prison is overcrowded : meant to host ten thousand prisoners, it hosted twenty-six thousands by June, so they expended it North. Prisoner exchanges have been taken on, and Roy left in April, being one of three thousand men to get thus back to our lines. I hope he is being well now. James should have been among them : I don't know how long he will be able to hold. I know he sees no future for us, though father Whelan is here to help keepig us alive and strengthening ourselves to face our fate with brave.

Settlers come to provide supplies : you can buy a watermelon for ninety-five dollars or a cube of soap for fifty dollars. We use what we can to barter with other prisoners...

There's a group of prisoners spreading terror among us, “the Raiders”. Better be poor in these times, for they don't hesitate to steal and even kill the others to get more supplies. There are dozens of them.

Sherman is invading Georgia, leading our troupes to Atlanta in a “total war”, burning buildings that provide the ennemy with supplies – factories, foundries as well as warehouses -, destroying everything, railroads as farms and even homes. Our families have written to him, begging him to come to Andersonville and free us, so they have fortified the prison. Cannons are now pointing in and out to frighten us. They even make shows of force to make sure we kept in mind that if we try to get out of the camp, we would probably not managed alive.

“You, there.” Peter was kneeling by my side, trying to sound like a tyrant while looking concerned. He glanced around and when he figured out that anybody was caring about us, he got closer to me, his voice turning from a shout to a whisper.

- “Do you eat well ?
- Quite well, thanks to father Peter.
- Do you have enough money to buy fruits and vegetables ?
- I'm afraid me and my friend James won't soon have any, though we barter as we can.
- Would you like beans ? Maybe watermelon ?
- What do you mean ?
- It won't be said that I sacrificed my family to a silly war.” He winked.
- “You eventually admit I am your family.
- I can provide you and your friend with any kind of supply you need – as long as this remains a secret, of course.
- Thank you, cousin. This won't be forgotten.” He dropped two carrots out of his coat, no one even noticing.

I feared that with the gifts made every week to us by Peter, me and James would be perfect preys to the Raiders. Anyone could see how well we were, but the other prisoners just let us be, however, time going, I started to find James thinner. I fetched father Peter, believing he was getting ill, but the father said he was in good health and that he had no clue of what was making him thinner if he had the same food as I did, while I was gaining fat. James left bluntly right after his examination. The cleric shared his concerns with me : “Watch over him”, he said, “he is affected with a sickness that I can't heal. Make sure he's never alone.”

I slept with him the night after. I was dreaming of home. Of your mother, of you. I was thinking of all your first times I had missed : your first paces, your first words, and I was wondering if I would

even be there to see you growing up. I cried in my sleep, realizing that I couldn't even remember your face.

A shout woke me up. Men were beating James. "Where's the food ?" they whispered while he was spitting blood. One of them noticed I was staring at them seizing a rock, ready to throw it at them. I threw it, but it failed reaching them and hit a poor man sleeping behind them instead. He came to me. "What did you think ?" he said, mocking me. "That we would let you have all this delicious food for free without doing anything ? Of course, I couldn't take some from you ; I wouldn't risk to be butchered by your fierce cousin... But your friend, on the other hand... Who cares about him ? You don't even care enough about him to notice what's happening to him." "We know you're hiding more !", someone screamed at James. "If you don't give us the rest tomorrow, you won't be there the day after to do so." He kicked him in the stomach and the whole group vanished in the night.

I moved near to James to find out how bad his injuries were. His whole body was doleful. I told him to get some sleep, that I would show his wounds to father Peter and that we would both take care of him, but he forbade me to do so. Despite his command, the father was seating by his side when he woke up in the morning,

James didn't say a word. His face was grim. He stared at us a before struggling to get up, refusing our help. When he eventually stood up, he started to shuffle. We followed him a while before realizing that he was heading straight to the dead-line. "You fool ! Step back !" I yelled at him. The closer of the border he got, the more imploring I went. I found myself falling on my knees crying. "Please, don't" I said over and over again. "Now is the time." he answered, before his foot got beyond the line. Another body laid in the dust.

I sat on the ground for a while. I was completely lost and couldn't even think nor talk. Nevertheless, I came back to reality when I heard a strange conversation between a man and a younger person that has to be one of the boys guarding us, yet I couldn't see them.

- "Should we tell him ? the man said.
- No, we shouldn't. He couldn't make it to the end of the war if we did so.
- He has to know.
- If we don't tell him, he'll never know.
- Can we hide such a secret ? Somebody will speak about it someday.
- And somewhere, but this doesn't have to be here. He is already suffering enough with James' death."

I realized that it was father Peter and my cousin that were talking. I got up to face them, anger blinding my reason.

- "What are you hiding from me ? Tell me, I bid you ! You can no longer say to be part of the family if you keep secrets of consequence from me, Peter !
- Bryan, said cousin Peter with a calm voice. Roy is dead.
- Dead ?" Both surprise and grief deformed my face. "How ?
- The boat he embarked on was overcrowded. It exploded."

The following days have been hard for me, but I held because I kept thinking of how wonderful it would be to see you and you mother again, and how the three of us could be happy together. When this war will be over, I want Peter to come and visit us to New Jersey so that you can see him. He's really becoming a good man. I'm proud of who he is now, and I want him to make the pride of our family and to allow northern and southern Johnsons to be closer.

Some day, he came to me, looking excited and anxious at the same time.

- Bryan, listen to me. One of our guards just died. He is thirty, his hair is blond and his skin is pale.
- And ?

- You are to put on his uniform and to escape. I'm having everything settled. I paid peasants to host you and help returning you to the Union. You are to leave tonight.
- Peter, I have to tell you that you're making me proud, and I will always remember how much I owe you. You are, in fact, a true hero of this war : instead of killing your brothers, you're actually saving your cousin.
- Don't forget to come for my next birthday.” He smiled warmly.
- “If I can make it out of here – which is more than unsure.
- You will. I promise you you'll have to come to my sixteenth birthday, and at least to the thirty ones following.”

I did as Peter told me to do. I put on the uniform and got out for the night's watch, volunteering myself as a gunner. When every guard was occupying his post, I ran the faster I could. Soon, dogs started to follow me. They were longing for fresh flesh... I couldn't see them, but I heard their barking getting closer and closer... “Go North”, Peter said, “always North. You'll find a house with people who will help you.”

I couldn't figure out how far the dogs were from me, so I took out the gun given to me for the watch and fired behind me. I heard a heavy mass falling down : they were at range. Jaws closed on my pants. I fired once again : in vain. Sharp teeth entered my left calf...

When I woke up, I thought being dead. I was laying in a bed, wrapped in soft blankets.

“Hello”, said a feminine voice.”Your wound isn't serious, don't worry. You should be able to walk today if you want to. I would strongly recommend you to do so as soon as you will be able to, if you don't wish to be retrieved by the guards. Would you like to have breakfast ?”

This woman was far too chatty for a person talking to someone waking up. I just nodded. Despite the food provided to me by Peter, I had the better breakfast I have had since I left home to join the troops.

I stayed there a few hours before thanking the peasant. She gave me instructions to reach the Union lines and I left her house. I walked as fast as I could, knowing that the guards were wanting to retrieve me. I thus reached the Union lines near Atlanta in less than two days. When I came to them, they just won the battle, but the Confederates managed to retain control of the city.

- “What now ? I asked.
- Now, we're beginning the siege of Atlanta. We have to destroy this city for the great number of supplies that it produces for the Confederacy”, a soldier answered me.

Today, the siege is over. It lasted from the 22nd of July to the 2nd of September. A siege's purpose is to cut off every supply line to the city to force it to surrender. In a battle, it is soldiers that are dying, being most of the time willing to sacrifice their life for their country and the ideas that it stands for, but during a siege, it is also civilians that suffer. I watched Sherman's maneuvers to stop the arrival of supplies from Macon thinking that it was our brothers that we were starving. In fact, since I met Peter at Andersonville, I am no longer willing to spill anyone's blood, even if it has to be done in the name of liberty. Civil War is foolish : agreements should be made rather than start a war that weakens the people. What is this land called ? The United States of America ? Better call it the Disunited States. This shall never happen again.

Of course, I'll be glad when our fair Republic will rule over the whole country. But for now, Atlanta is ours, and I have to watch Sherman burning the city to the ground and follow him doing the same all the way to Savannah.