

John Van Roekel
11260 Briarcliff Drive
San Diego, CA 92131
858-689-8030, jvr@umich.edu
149,000 words

Agent: Laura Rennert
Andrea Brown Literary Agency
208 Lexington Drive
Menlo Park, CA 94025
650-853-1976, ljrennert@earthlink.net

BRAVER DEEDS

A Novel by

John Van Roekel

“Tell brave deeds of war.”

Then they recounted tales:

“There were stern stands
And bitter runs for glory.”

Ah, I think there were braver deeds.

Stephen Crane

The Black Riders and Other Lines

1895

For Pam

Contents

Prologue - Franklin County, Mississippi	1
Book 1, South Dakota, 1890	8
Map of Western South Dakota.....	9
Chapter 1 - Fort Robinson.....	10
Chapter 2 - Cheyenne River	37
Chapter 3 - Drexel Mission	71
Chapter 4 - Pine Ridge.....	105
Chapter 5 - White Clay Creek	130
Book 2, Florida, 1898.....	171
Map of Florida and Cuba.....	172
Chapter 6 - Fort Robinson.....	173
Chapter 7 - New York City.....	206
Chapter 8 - The Train.....	224
Chapter 9 - Havana.....	268
Chapter 10 - Tampa.....	320
Book 3, Cuba, 1898.....	349
Map of Santiago de Cuba.....	350
Chapter 11 - Las Guasimas.....	351
Chapter 12 - Siboney.....	407
Chapter 13 - El Pozo	441
Chapter 14 - Kettle Hill.....	459
Chapter 15 - San Juan Heights.....	499
Chapter 16 - Santiago.....	521
Epilogue - Montauk Point.....	560
Selected Historical Figures	576

Prologue - Franklin County, Mississippi

April 2, 1865

“Mama, come on!” Hannah cried as she raced up the steps and then danced on the open platform at the end of the old passenger car. At seventeen, she was tall like her mother Betty, whom she had left standing by the tracks. Unlike Betty, Hannah was lithe and sinewy, and she kept her curly black hair cut short.

“Girl, you just hold on to yourself for one minute,” Betty called from below. “And help me with this baby of yours.”

Hannah dropped the feed sack that she was carrying. It was stuffed with blankets and rags for the baby, spare clothes, a few trinkets, and three brown winter apples. She moved down one step and took her month-old baby boy from Betty’s outstretched arms. Climbing back to the platform, she hugged him to her and whirled around.

“Look, Archie. We gonna ride the train today. Ain’t that somethin’?”

She stopped and gazed back across the fallow fields. Not far away, the Big House stood gleaming white in the early spring sunshine, surrounded by a dozen neat outbuildings. She couldn't see the slave shacks, hidden on the far side of the creek, and that was just fine with her. Hannah gripped the worn wooden railing. A hundred times before, she had seen trains chug past as she worked these very fields. Now, a train had stopped and they were all climbing aboard, the slaves, the white workers, the Family. It was like a miracle, she thought.

"You gonna ride this train without your poor old mama less you helps her up these steps," Betty said.

Hannah laughed and wrapped one arm tightly around the baby, her long fingers gently cradling the back of his head. She braced her bare feet on the oily wooden floor and reached down to help her mother. The big woman was breathing heavily when she arrived on the platform. She looked around suspiciously.

"Hannah, don't touch nothin'," she said. "This place dirtier than the hog barn."

"Hey Betty! You two are holding up the line," Bill Jacobs, the white bossman, shouted from below.

"Bill, you jus' hush up," Betty replied. "We movin' as fast as we can." She rolled her eyes at Hanna and then turned to obey.

Hannah pulled her to the far side of the platform. "Mama, let's stay out here for just a little while," she said. "It gonna be hot in there, I reckon. And Bill won't say nothin' if he can's see us."

They stood and watched as more field slaves climbed the steps and went past them into the old passenger car. Like Hannah, the children were excited with the prospect of their first train ride. The adults, carrying their own bundles of belongings, exchanged pleasantries with Hannah and Betty, commenting on the train, the weather and how pretty Hannah looked.

“Where that nice husband of yours, Hannah?” Mrs. Jefferson asked. She was the last to board and stopped to talk. Mrs. Jefferson was a tiny old woman, but Hannah had picked cotton next to her and had often struggled to keep pace.

“Oh, Levi back with the Family,” Hannah said, glancing at her mother. “With them, I expects he got a nicer car to ride in.”

“I expects he do indeed,” the old woman said with a cackling laugh. She turned to Hannah’s mother. “Betty, you still sour on that boy?”

“Mrs. Jefferson, you know I got nothin’ to say about that.”

“Don’t you worry ‘bout your mamma,” Mrs. Jefferson said, patting Hannah on the arm. “She come ‘round.” She touched the baby’s cheek and then started to step through the door.

There was a scream, and they all looked up. It was a woman’s scream, coming from one of the other cars, shrill and seeming to go on for minutes. Suddenly it stopped.

Mrs. Jefferson and Betty looked at each other, and then Mrs. Jefferson shook her head and stepped through the doorway. Before she disappeared into the gloomy interior, she stared at Archie in Hannah’s arms and then turned away.

“Mama, what--”

“Hush, girl. Here, give me that child. You look and see if you can see something.”

“Yes, Mama.”

Hannah leaned out from the platform and looked toward the front of the train.

“There lots of steam comin’ out of the engine,” she said. “Maybe we be goin’ soon.” She turned and looked back toward the rear. “Uh-oh.”

“What? What you see, girl?”

“Here come young massa Tom. He got bossman Jacobs with him. They both lookin’ kinda mean.”

“Come here, girl,” Betty said, her brow furrowed. She handed the baby to Hannah. “Time to go in.”

“Hannah! Stop right there!”

They both turned at the sound of Jacobs’s voice. Tom Sullivan, the youngest of their owner’s sons, climbed onto the platform, followed by Jacobs. Tom was a big man, with sandy hair and a bluff, blank countenance. Next to him, Bill Jacobs was dark, small and nervous. Master Tom looked at him and nodded.

“Hannah,” Jacobs said, “there ain’t no good way of telling you this. We’re gonna leave the little babies behind. Master Sullivan says he don’t want you field niggers worrying about no babies.”

Hannah stared at Jacobs. She looked as though she hadn’t understood a word he had said. Her arms curled tightly around Archie, so much so that he began to cry.

“Beg pardon, sir,” Betty said, keeping her eyes on the floor. “You mean Hannah and her baby ain’t goin’ with us?”

Jacobs looked at Tom Sullivan and swallowed. Tom said nothing.

“You get inside the car,” Jacobs said, turning to Betty. He raised his arm and for the first time they saw the birchwood rod that he often carried. “Don’t give me no trouble, Betty. I mean it.”

“Mama! What’s happening? What he gonna do?”

Jacobs stepped between Hannah and her mother. Betty lifted her eyes and stared into his. “Tom, please,” she said. She grasped his hand.

Jacobs turned his head and for two tense seconds stared out across the fields. Then he turned back to Betty, pulled loose his hand and roughly shoved her through the open door. Betty stumbled and fell, and he slammed the door behind her.

Hannah cowered in front of the two men. Jacobs licked his lips.

“Do it,” Tom Sullivan said.

Jacobs took a step toward Hannah. Her eyes darted back and forth between him and Tom. When Jacobs reached out his arms, she shrieked and turned her back. Jacobs grabbed her shoulders and tried to pull her around, but she sank to the floor and curled herself around the baby.

“Use that stick,” Tom said.

Jacobs pulled back his arm and then hesitated for a second. Then he swung the birchwood rod and smashed it down across Hannah’s shoulders. “Give it up, girl,” he said. “There ain’t nothing you can do.”

She didn’t move. Jacobs hit her again. And again. Hannah bit her lip until she tasted blood, but she made no sound.

Someone inside the railroad car cautiously pushed the door open an inch, and a babble of voices arose. Young master Tom gestured for Jacobs to stop. His face impassive, he stepped in front of the door, threw it wide open and stood before his father's field slaves. Almost immediately, there was complete silence. His face still without expression, Tom closed the door and turned his back to it. He nodded to Jacobs.

Hannah lay with her face pressed to the filthy wooden platform. Her body shook with each silent sob. Jacobs reached down and grabbed her hair. He pulled back her head and bent down so that his face was close to hers.

"Don't make me hurt the child, Hannah. You hear me. Don't make me hurt your baby."

With a low moan, Hannah relaxed her fingers slightly. Jacobs dropped the rod and wrenched the baby from her. When she felt her son being pulled away, Hannah lunged forward, trying desperately to gather him back into her arms. But Jacobs was too quick. Holding the baby in his hands, his arms extended, he climbed down the steps. In a second he returned, his hands empty. He kicked open the door to the car, yanked the sobbing Hannah to her feet and pushed her inside.

* * *

A few minutes later, the engineer closed the release valves, and the shriek of the engine exhausts quieted. As steam rushed into the cylinders, the drive wheels began to strain against the rusted track. The engine eased ahead and then jerked against the weight of the coal car. Eventually the entire train moved forward and slowly gathered speed.

Before long, the caboose was out of sight and all was quiet. Quiet except for the crying of three little babies, one boy and two girls, lying in the foul gravel next to the railroad tracks.