

HOW TO
DODGE
A CANNONBALL
A NOVEL
DENNARD DAYLE



HOW TO DODGE A CANNONBALL

OR

The Traitor

OR

The Coward's Journey

OR

The American Future

OR

The Making of the Living Abacus

OR

A Civil War Cartoon

OR

Why We Gamble in Nevada

OR

**General Lee Is the Most Overrated
Fuckup in Military History**

OR

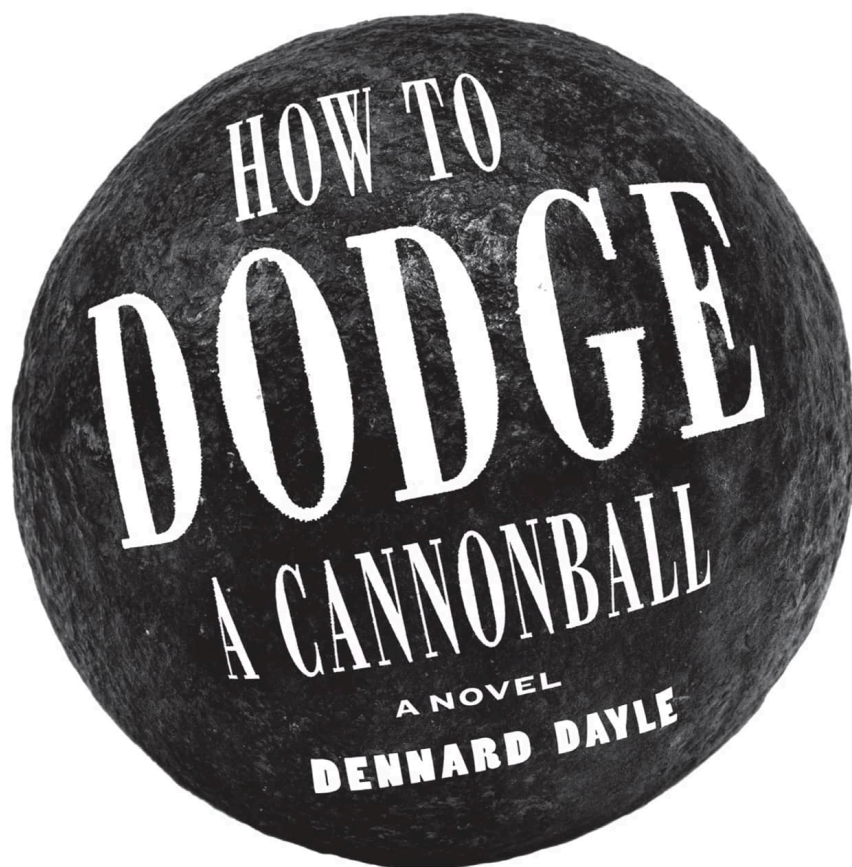
The Yellow Badge of Survival

OR

Allegiance

ACTUALLY JUST

How to Dodge a Cannonball



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FOR MY MOTHER, EUGENY HIGGINS. WHO, FOR POSTERITY, I
SHOULD NOTE WAS NOTHING LIKE THE LUNATIC MENTORS THAT
FOLLOW. WITH HER, THIS WOULD BE THE STORY OF ANDERS
GETTING WISE, LOVING, INDISPENSABLE SUPPORT FOR EQUALLY
INSANE DREAMS.

THE CIVIL WAR? RIGHT NOW? YOU MUST HATE PEACE.

—LISA M. GOTAY



GOOD LUCK.

—KADEISH RUSSELL

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GLEASON'S NOTES

“This is the struggle for everything. Freedom. Dignity. The American Future. I’m proud to give whatever Columbia requires.”

—Tobias Gleason, *To Arms for Liberty* (1861)

“I don’t know what’s happening. But I know that when the last sword is sheathed, it will have been worthwhile.”

—Tobias Gleason, *One Man’s War Journal* (1863)

“They died for nothing. Dead men aren’t free: they’re trapped in wood and dirt forever. The living have even less. A white burial in a clean cemetery is kinder than Black life.”

—Tobias Gleason, *The Pyre of Hope* (1863)

1

ANDERS TURNS SEVEN

“Good morning, niggers!” announced Anders, waving through the schoolhouse window. Cheer shone through his voice, emanating the joy of being alive and American, in that order. The bulk of the assembled students ignored him, but two waved back. Anders mentally marked them as his friends.

His mother thought he’d gone swimming, which had been true fifteen minutes ago. Anders found the water hard to enjoy: he couldn’t figure out floating, and letting the current drag him back to shallow depths tired him out. Now that he’d finished connecting with the Illinois River fish (and the rocks in the riverbed), it was time to learn.

Learning remained a core value, to the extent that he understood what core values were or why they mattered. Thus, it deserved special attention on his birthday. An event that mattered simply because it was his, and lowered the odds of an unprovoked kick from a moody adult. Visiting the only children in town that acknowledged him didn’t hurt.

Despite some dampness (overcast weather preempted his usual sun-drying method), he enjoyed his perch. Peering from the window put him above everything, as if he held court. A theater balcony had to look something like this, sans the risk of falling. He resolved to invite one of his

two known friends to try it. The stools spread around the room looked shabby, so they'd appreciate the tip.

The teacher eyed Anders the way shopkeepers did, complete with a confused squint. Or practical: the teacher *owned* bifocals but only wore them under duress. Anders gleaned her first name from Mother, but proper learners stuck to last names. Bell never introduced herself, so she was the teacher. Shorter than most adults, equally confounding, and less impatient. She only looked tempted to smack him half of the time. But she always looked tired, even before he got on a roll.

Anders waved again, hoping to stir more of a reaction. Instead of responding, she turned back to her charges and opened a thick blue book. Tiny, tilted, hand-drawn letters dotted the browning pages.

"Are we doing figures?" asked Anders. He liked figures. Numbers made sense, which was why he could count all fifteen kids in the room and their twenty-two shoes. Words got complicated and made everything else complicated. Someone needed to find a way to replace them with numbers, so people could get through books faster. If the Bible used numbers, the world would be at peace.

With numbers, he also knew most of the black kids were older. The oldest were twice his age and had lost general enthusiasm for education. Sitting in on their session felt like capturing a piece of adulthood.

"Today, we'll explore some history," said the teacher. She expertly ignored and answered Anders at the same time. He considered it their personal game.

"How much history? Is there a lot?"

"Who knows why this town's called Liberty Valley?" asked the teacher. She'd only ignored without answering, so Anders was ahead.

A girl two heads taller than Anders raised her hand. Anders might have called her cute, if his mother wouldn't thrash him for that. Instead, he'd call her ... something else. She was very something else.

"Robin." The teacher acknowledged the girl with a point. The girl (Robin!) stood up (no shoes?) and spoke.

“Because we’re free.”

“Like me!” said Anders, participating.

“Yes, like you, Anders.”

The teacher had answered him without ignoring him. Anders was *dominating* this round of the game.

“We can be mayors,” Anders continued.

“No, *we* can’t.”

“Oh. Well, we can vote!”

“Just you.”

“Oh. Then Liberty Valley’s a dumb name.”

“Now then,” said the teacher. It was her go-to strategy when he’d made a point, but she planned to keep going. “Liberty Valley was founded in—”

“Mama calls it NiggerTown, which makes Auntie laugh. I think that’s nice, having your own town. Is there a WhiteTown? I hope they have a river.”

“It’s WhiteTown everywhere, Anders.”

“Oh.” Anders chewed on the words, and the whiff of venom that had entered the teacher’s voice. The sport had left the game. “That’s untoward, we should make a NiggerTown.”

A younger boy—one of the shoeless ones—in front made a sound between laughter and choking. Other students looked through Anders or made a show of staring at the teacher. For her part, the teacher started and stopped multiple responses, never making it past the first two or three syllables. Finally, Robin gave Anders the first look he could identify as a death stare.

Then Anders caught the edge of a familiar shape in his peripheral vision and let himself fall. He landed hard on his knees but knew worse approached.

Anders, like most surviving children, owned strong instincts. Those instincts told him to move after seeing his mother’s shadow. He heard metal ricochet off wood as he dove left, shielding his head with his forearms for the landing roll. By the sound, she’d only thrown a medium lid. That bode well: the medium cookware lacked the arrow-like speed of the small and the brutal heft of the large.

“Boy!” she shouted before launching a medium saucepan. “What in hell are you doing here again?”

“Learning,” volunteered Anders. He primed himself for a second roll, watching her hands. Whether she pitched with her main or off hand would shape his next move.

“At the nigger school?”

“It’s the only school here.”

“Are you a nigger?”

“Maybe?” The question intrigued him. “It’s a nigger town.”

A small bowl bounced off Anders’s forehead, shifting the world to a shaky blur. She’d caught on and brought a mixed set. By the time he rallied and found his feet, she’d be in switch distance.

Drawn by either the noise or a stray projectile, the teacher’s black (mulatto? octoroon? there were too many shades) head poked out the schoolhouse window. She peered at Anders, then his mother, and then back at Anders. The bewildered squint returned and faded. She made a small, polite wave, adjusted a small white latch, and let the window fall shut. He was on his own.

His opponent paced around him slowly, stalking her prey. She had the size advantage, speed advantage, and an ocean-blue dress hiding unknown improvised weaponry. He had courage, which never seemed to outclass improvised weaponry. Nonetheless, Anders barreled to the left, taking the slim chance of making it to freedom. He refused to be remembered as a coward by his two friends in the schoolhouse. Or Robin.

He never saw the cookware that took him out.

★ ★ ★

Mother, who other adults called Katrina, dragged him by the shoulder. Her grip impressed Anders, even as its target. The vise had strength beyond her slight form.

“It’s supposed to be my day,” whined Anders.

“Is it?” Katrina scoffed. “Then you’re going to learn,” she added, resolute. Anders flinched by habit. There was nowhere left to roll.

“Not like that,” she said, her voice and posture softening. Her grip loosened from iron to a gentler, maternal copper. “I’m going to tell you about our family.”

Curiosity earned silence and stillness, two things Anders seldom surrendered. The boy eyed his mother carefully, searching for a hint of the lies adults wove with ease. He found none of the few hints he knew. Katrina looked too tired to lie convincingly to anyone. If she were any less irate, she might have nodded off.

The exhaustion etched into Katrina had a short history. Years of conspicuous effort to avoid a “worker’s tan” had recently failed, which seemed to Anders fair for a worker. For her, it was a private apocalypse. Looking one shade closer to the other Liberty Valley residents had put her in a permanent foul mood. Jokes and errors that would have drawn a laugh from her a season ago attracted a projectile instead.

Katrina gently dragged him to the riverbank, where a sizable and unattended fire waited. The display almost impressed Anders, whose only effort at firekeeping had consumed a copse of rare trees. Katrina had let that go, since “Mayor Spade” owned them. Now she sat Anders down on the grass beside her makeshift pit.

“Do you mean Pa?” Anders hazarded. It wasn’t his only question, but the others pertained to fire. Why had she started one on a summer afternoon? Why hadn’t she taken the time to put it out before picking him up? Whose iron poker was she holding? Such trivia wasn’t worth risking a real conversation about where he came from.

Katrina nodded.

“You’re seven and ready to work. That makes you a man, in every way that matters.”

“Do men have to read more?”

“A gentleman never has to read anything.”

"I'm a gentleman?" asked Anders. He reflected on his recent swimming attempt. Gentlemen should float.

"You're a soldier's son. And a soldier's grandson. And a soldier's great-grandson. If any had gotten their due, we'd still be down south. With our own land, and niggers, and future. But they didn't, and usurers chased us here."

Anders bit his cheek, his habit while thinking. Katrina chided him for it, so he'd dialed down the thinking in recent weeks. The new information, however, demanded it. Illinois was his whole world, and he liked it. The idea of a previous, lost life was beyond him.

Except his father's absence. Stories about the man were rare, and time, youth, and multiple falls from trees distorted Anders's memory. All he knew were the two orders relayed by his mother: to pursue an education and avoid asking for hugs. He'd excelled at the latter, and avoided any clutches, grips, or embraces that might weaken his grit. The first still felt out of reach.

"That's good," Anders said. He congratulated himself for contributing to the conversation and waited for Katrina to keep going. If more was coming, it'd be at her pace. She didn't answer or return eye contact, focusing instead on prodding their fire. Sparks danced as she thrust, floating a few inches too close for Anders's taste.

"The fire's good too." A compliment seemed worth trying.

His mother gazed into the flames for too long, as if they had insight to offer. Anders had almost committed to asking what they said, and if they liked numbers, when she sat down beside him. She put her arms around his shoulder, a gesture generally reserved for Bible study. The fire had finally inspired a response, hopefully about his other parent.

She produced a small glass bottle of whiskey. How it hid or even fit among her pockets was a mystery.

"Here. It's time you learned to handle your liquor."

Anders did his best, pushing through the instinct to spit the harsh wooden flavor out. There were only a few scant drops left. His mother must

have given the rest to someone else. Nonetheless, she beamed with rare maternal approval, patting his head.

“You’re strong. That’s good, the current drags everything else away.”

With the heat getting stronger, the current sounded nice. Anders switched between eyeing Katrina and the growing pyre. Sparks now encroached on their family breakthrough.

“What’s the fire for?” Anders asked. An explanation hadn’t come on its own.

“Underlining the point.”

“What’s *underlining* mean?”

“You’ll see.”

“What’s that fancy poker?”

“A branding iron.”

“Does it underline points too?”

“Yes.”

Half satisfied, Anders let the rest of his questions lie fallow. His mother usually had little patience for them, and fewer answers.

“Son, I need you to trust me,” added his mother. “You’re going to learn about our entire line. Just let me collect myself. It’s not an easy lesson.” She rolled up the sleeves on her dress and then lifted the fancy poker. “Stick out your arm.”

Anders, the son of a soldier, stuck out his arm and began his education. Katrina pressed half a star onto his arm, for half-fulfilled dreams. It only hurt until he blacked out.

2

ANDERS TURNS FIFTEEN

Anders twirled flags for the Union, until he'd been captured and shown the light. Now he twirled flags for Southern freedom. No man deserved to lose his property, human or otherwise.

Tonight, Anders twirled with pride. He was the only flag carrier intelligent enough to be trusted with military intelligence. The others didn't understand a proper spin's role in preserving morale. An underperforming flag-twirler might as well hang his commander himself.

His skill shone better under the sun, with more than a dying lantern to illuminate his sets. But he could use the tent's long shadows and cramped spacing to his advantage. The silhouette was simply another character: a larger, stronger version of the rebel ideal.

The silhouette's sleeves stopped short of its wrists. Anders's jacket once belonged to someone shorter and perhaps younger. He didn't know if they'd died or defected, and never asked. His thoughts stayed with the mission.

"If morale fails, the enemy prevails," Anders whispered under his breath. Croaks and chirrups crept into the tent, distracting Anders from the mosquitoes floating around his forehead. He'd spun through battles, but Pennsylvania wildlife tested him. Perhaps they were Union mosquitoes, scouting for Meade.

He repeated his maxim, shaking mosquitoes and (underperforming) frogs from his mind.

“What was that, son?” asked the general. Anders had drawn the eyes of all his superiors away from the war map. This was like a normal map but with chess pieces. Understanding it was beyond Anders’s duties.

“Nothing, sir! I’m being judiciously silent, save responding to your question, sir! Thank you for choosing me as your flag-waver, sir! If another general is a Union spy, I will take the bullet for you, sir! Please send my body to my mother, sir!”

Lee stared without comment, confronted with his first unsolvable puzzle. The others looked amused. Anders wondered what the joke was and resolved to pay better attention. A spy could have already lit a stick of dynamite behind his back by now. He remembered the Union as a pack of wily cowards who didn’t even have decent beans in their rations.

“Is the boy touched?” asked General Ewell. He sat in Jackson’s old chair and wore his beard in Jackson’s old style. When anyone slipped, he even answered to Jackson’s name. The war prophet’s death had left a hole in the men’s hearts and the command chain, and Ewell dutifully filled it.

“No. Maybe. We need to nurture the next generation,” answered Lee.

“Nurture a cannonball,” said General Pickett. He spat on the war map, drowning a detachment in saliva. Lee grabbed the chipped game piece by a dry edge, wiped it against Pickett’s shirt, and replaced it on Cemetery Ridge. Pickett spat on it again.

Distracted by heresy, Anders nearly missed a spin and let the stars of freedom slip out of his grip. Like all the men, he loved Lee like a father. More, since Lee had never abandoned him without strategic benefit or struck him directly. An insult to Lee attacked the very image of a soldier. That image’s beard had grown whiter, longer, and more jagged over the current campaign. It had also picked up spots of fresh blood from Lee’s new nervous habit of chewing his fingertips. As European intervention drifted further away, the bites grew faster and deeper. This sacrifice of personal comfort and sanity was yet another holy gift to the men.

“I’m detecting some hostility, Pickett. Let’s explore that,” said Ewell, the only general still seated. One leg rested comfortably over the map’s edge. “The Lord respects a still heart.”

“Nurture two cannonballs. This plan is a suicidal fever dream, and you’re enabling it.” Pickett followed this with a few insults that Anders didn’t understand. Bayonets didn’t even work that way.

Morale, his charge, had sunk deep underwater. Anders stretched his right wrist, and then gave the flag a nervous test twirl. Only his best tricks could save the young nation, and earlier birthdays hung over him.

The family honor was at stake. His great-grandfather had twirled flags for the British, spinning even as the last ship fell to Hessian raiders. He spent the rest of his life looking out for gangs of drunks with tar. Anders’s grandmother ran away from home, cut her hair, and bound her breasts to twirl against the Canadians in 1812. This looked foolish in the shadow of the burning White House. She came back thoroughly broken and passed it on to her child. After growing into a broken adult, Katrina met a Texan flag-twirler bound for the Mexican War. Specifically, a mercenary on the Mexican side. They never had a second night together. The romance, long after her rearing days, still left her with Anders. A miracle unstained by martial defeat.

“Promise me you’ll never twirl flags for another man’s war,” she told Anders, once a year, every year. The first time stood out. Her eyes were wild, and the whiskey was empty.

“Mother, I’m afraid of the fire.”

“Promise me!” she screeched, drawing his hand closer to the branding iron. The rest was a blur of shouting and pain, punctuated by black oaths. Anders had earlier family memories, but this was the sharpest.

Back to the task at hand. Pickett had torn out a tuft of his own hair, followed by his sword. Bloody roots and permanent hairline damage underlined his commitment.

“Send your own men sprinting into hell!” spat Pickett.

“I’m your superior. They *are* my men,” observed Lee. He drew his own sword. “Not that I expect a half-educated wretch from the Pig War to

understand the chain of command.”

They circled the map, beards bristling with enmity. Pickett took light and measured steps, ready to spring across the table like a wild cat. Lee’s steps were loose and confident, informed by the aristocratic surety that death was a peasant problem. Ewell seemed content to watch, tapping a Bible in Jackson’s old manner.

No one acknowledged the virtuoso flag-twirling performance unfolding in the back of the tent. Anders sweated through the *Georgian Furl*, *Three-Fifths Shuffle*, and *United Virginia Wave* to no effect. It was heartrending; if the *Sumter Two-Step* didn’t remind them what they were fighting for, what could?

Lee struck first. He looked insulted when Pickett sidestepped the thrust, as if some gentleman’s agreement had been violated. After blocking the riposte, he hopped back to cradle his wrist.

“Treasonous oaf,” Lee spat.

“Do you academy engineers learn to fight? Or skim that with the books on strategy?”

Lee lashed out mid-quip, and Pickett’s sword flew out of his grip. It landed at Anders’s feet, halfway through a flawless execution of the *Dead Yankee Twist*.

“Anything else?” boasted Lee.

Pickett drew and leveled his pistol. A German import, without a sporting chance of misfire. The confidence and blood drained from Lee’s face.

“Listen, the plan is sound. A committed charge is perfect because they think we’d never do it. In the pedestrian Yankee mind, a complete lack of cover for two miles is insurmountable. I encourage you to have more *vision*. What our men lack in terrain advantage, they’ll more than make up for in fighting spirit. If we don’t seize this chance, historians will mock us for the rest of time.” Lee remained remarkably loquacious before the barrel of a gun. Two years on the edge of ruin had served him well.

Pickett shook his head and took aim.