

SONS OF MY FATHERS by Michael A. Simpson

Excerpts

A dull metallic gleam caught Michael's eye at the edge of the woods on the far side of the tracks. A twist of steel jutted from a deep rut around the trunk of an ancient white oak. Michael realized, with a prickling along his scalp, that he was looking at one of the last surviving oaks garroted almost a hundred years ago with a Sherman necktie.

Michael knew that the spirits of rebel soldiers haunted these steel-girded trees. He dared not look into the darkness just beyond the oak, afraid of what he might see. Yet at the same time, he fought a part of himself that wanted to look.

A sudden, deafening crash on the rails ahead jolted him, followed by the long, drawn-out squeal of metal on metal. Then a long hiss. Then silence. The sultry voice of Patsy Cline called to Michael through the stillness: "I fall to pieces, each time I see you . . .

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Other than his mother's lullabies, the whistle of the Dixie Flyer was the earliest sound Michael Simpson could remember hearing.

Since the time of Baylis Simpson and the Confederacy, the locomotive's melancholy cry had announced its passage through Forest Park, a quiet Georgia town of hard work and modest dreams snuggled on Atlanta's southern doorstep. The rail line pierced through the heart of this blue-collar community, running parallel to Main for several blocks before bending south, just before the street emptied out onto Jonesboro Road in front of the Fort Gillem Army base. The road was the same one that Rhett Butler and Scarlet O'Hara used for their imaginary escape from Atlanta. The fictional Tara plantation was said to have been located just a short stride down its blacktop.

Every night of Michael's young life, the Flyer's whistle beckoned him, filling his imagination with a long-vanquished landscape of graceful mansions and stately plantations, of hoop-skirted ladies who thought about things tomorrow and men who frankly didn't give a damn.

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"As the cavalry sweeps back toward Sherman's line, we're in danger of being discovered if we stay here."

"I reckon there's no good answer, then."

"No sir, not one," Ulysses said. "There's no way to pick up a turd by the clean end."

Elon listened to this and thought for a moment. He announced to no one in particular, "It's best to be about the Lord's work." He stood, stretched. "Help me with this wagon."

Baylis and Ulysses rose, and the three men righted the flatbed. Elon moved over to the bodies of Otis and Willis, still lying stiffly where they'd been found in the darkness the night before. Elon turned to his brother. "Ulysses and I will place our cousins and the other recently departed on the wagon bed. Why don't you hook up the horses? Look for two that are lame and feeble."...

Ulysses looked to his uncle and spoke in a hushed voice. "Don't rightly see how tending to these poor souls is going to help our present situation."

Baylis turned to Elon. "What do you have in mind, brother?"

"Joining the dead," he replied.

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