

'Fever Season' by Sally Rutledge Moore

PROLOGUE: India Ink

I imagine, in all our lives, there comes a moment when we realize we are teetering precariously. Those wobbly moments of greatest fear, shock or sorrow are the ones that stick in our hearts leaving an indelible stain much like an upturned bottle of India ink seeping into the carpet or soaking into the deepest grain of the wood floor. I reckon it's the same with that flickering gaslight between life and death where everything sharpens, clear-like, and only the important things-the beautiful pearls remain in your head. Only the thrum of your beating heart assures you there is yet one foot staid in this sad world.

Awakening groggily, I slowly swam back to my senses, smack dab in the middle of the Manassas Junction battlefield. There was a thick drifting haze of black powder smoke wafting above me, or maybe I just couldn't see clearly yet. Through the smoke I could hear men shouting in a cacophony of clashing bayonets and heard the scream of a thousand whirring bullets. The pounding of horse's hooves mimicked the blinding pain throbbing in my head. Something sticky dripped into my eye. Dizziness swamped me when I lifted my hand to see what happened to my head. My stomach roiled and a sour mash threatened to rise in my throat. Vomiting seemed an onerous chore and I swallowed back the bile as I tried to summon myself to rise. I must get to cover.

It rained hard the night before and that must account for the clammy damp soaking my uniform. I wondered belatedly what had become of my horse and how I came to be face up, staring at a grubby sun and the tops of a stand of chinaberry trees. That's the last I can remember for a long time.

When next I woke, I wasn't teetering, I was sliding down a deep black hole and clinging feebly to a string of light. I scared myself awake with a scream of pain and found myself prostrate on a hard, narrow bunk on a moving train with my brother, Raymond's face hovering over me. He dabbed at the

tears on my face. I hadn't even known I was crying. He gave me a drink and then another and I was grateful, powerfully grateful. I'd never seen Ray look so scared. He put something cool on my forehead.... he talked to me and called my name and told me to hang on...so I did. I always did what Raymond told me. The train whistle screamed or maybe it was me. I retreated into the darkness and held on to that slender string of light.

Hanging on is powerful hard work.

I dreamed crazy things. I dreamed my bottle of India ink was kicked sideways- spilling out over my papers and ruining the story I was writing. As I watched the ink dripping from the bottle moved from the puddles and turned to dancing words. I wanted to stop the words from spilling...and I didn't even know words could dance! I looked and looked for the cork to stopper the jar.

I didn't know what had happened, but I knew the ink had spilled, the mess was made and could never be put back. Nothing written on those pages would ever be the same. As I watched the words on those pages they began to shine. Soon they began to turn into pictures. Beautiful, incredible pictures formed with the words still legible and changed and shifted and reformed. I tried to read the pictures, but the images shifted too fast. I couldn't believe this was happening. I called out for Raymond to come and see."

"Fever dreams, it's just fever dreams, Geoff," I heard my brother say. He gave me a swig of something thick and nasty, saying it would help me. I couldn't make him understand. I forgot those glowing word pictures. Ray just didn't understand what I wanted. It wasn't about me. It was about the war. This war was snake bit. There were too many Yankees and they just kept on coming. Sometimes they won and sometimes they lost, but Geoff knew in his core... there was no end to them. The war had just started and already the South was badly snake bit- they just hadn't yet felt the sting of the fatal venom.

He felt the sweet call of darkness as Raymond's medicine began to swirl through his system.

“What was I thinking, signing up for this war? Ray, he was the professional soldier. I was meant to stay home and keep the cotton growing, make the money and float the Tolliver Empire. Ray tried to tell me. He truly did...but I thought...I thought I needed an adventure. Everyone was joining up, a patriotic duty, quickly dispatched. Why should Ray have all the glory?”

“Ray! Ray, it’s so hot,” Geoff wasn’t sure if he said the words aloud or not, He couldn’t summon the strength to open his eyes. His head hurt so badly he thought he must be dying. Soon, he felt a tin cup touch his dry lips and the cool rag wiped his face then returned to his brow. He felt a breeze on his face as he slipped back into the deep, the rattle of the rocking train vibrating his fevered frame.

“Geoff,” a clear, unfamiliar voice roused him from a dreamless sleep. Geoff sat right up, rubbing his eyes, and running a hand through his tousled hair. On what appeared to be a perfect spring day he found himself in a meadow of brilliant green grass, surrounded by wildflowers as far as the eye could see. Not knowing where he might be, Geoff looked around to see who had called out to him. He put his hand in the grass to push himself to his feet and realized that the grass was vibrating: Humming a wonderful tune which seemed to harmonize with the song each flower offered up.

Startling realizations began to dawn on Geoff, and he spun around trying to figure things out. Sitting on a large flat rock by a gurgling brook was a man. His back was to Geoff, but just then the man turned and smiled at him with genuine affection.

“Hello Geoff. Are you feeling better?” he asked kindly.

“What?” Geoff had forgotten that he had been sick and injured. “Oh...oh, yes. I think I’m fine.” He touched his head and felt nothing awry. Looking around at his surroundings he asked, “Have I died? Is this heaven?”

The man grinned at him, and his warm eyes crinkled, “This is heaven, but you are not dead, I’m afraid this is just a visit.”

Geoff couldn’t seem to take his eyes off the fellow sitting on the rock. Just being near him filled Geoff with unspeakable joy.

“You are Jesus, aren’t you?”

“I am.”

“I’d love to stay, if you please.” Geoff was quickly forgetting everything he once considered important. The peace he felt here was palpable and magnetic.

Jesus stood from his place on the rock, shook out his robes and said, “Come closer, friend. I have something to tell you.” Jesus took Geoff’s hand in both of his. Geoff’s gaze dropped to the fleshy pink scar where a crude nail had ripped through his skin nearly 2000 years before. All Geoff could think to say as he looked up into the Savior’s eyes was a hushed, “Thank you, Lord.”

“My pleasure, Geoff.” Jesus cocked his head to the side for a brief moment as if listening to something Geoff could not hear. “We only have a little time and I need to share something with you.” The light surrounding Jesus was intensely warm and pulsing and Geoff thought perhaps it was now growing brighter.

Geoffrey Tolliver could only nod but was surprised the Lord had something special to tell just him. Surely it must be in reference to something bigger and more noteworthy, “Is this about the war?” he queried, stumbling a bit over the words.

“Not really, perhaps indirectly,” Jesus paused, patting the man’s hand once more before releasing it. “Come, why don’t we walk down by the water.” They walked a little way in silence before the Lord answered his question.

“I came to set people free, Geoff. Slavery is not found in heaven, and it always breaks my heart whenever and wherever I see it on earth.”

Light glowed around his face and Geoff could not pull his gaze from the Lord’s eyes, “Perilous times are coming. You now have a different battlefield. I need you to stand in the gap for sweet Jeanette.”

Geoffrey could actually feel the tangible weight of each word reverberating through his body as Jesus spoke the warning aloud. He was both comforted and confused. The Lord had spoken of Jeanette-- Raymond's daughter, Geoff's young niece.

"I don't know what that means. What does that mean, Lord?"

"You will not die, but you will live, and you will proclaim what the Lord has done." Tolliver watched at his brother's side and alternately prayed and quoted every scripture he could remember. A sudden crack of thunder surprised Raymond Tolliver and made him jump. A brilliant flash of lightning was almost instantaneous, and he soon heard the first patter of raindrops clattering across the roof of the moving train.

The low flame in the sooty gas lamp mounted to the wall guttered then surged. The lamp cast a wavery glow across Tolliver's determined face. He clutched his slim leather-bound Bible in his hands knowing it was too dark now to read the words. "Lord, you wrote in Isaiah 53 that you have borne our griefs and carried our sorrowsand by your stripes we ARE healed. I claim that healing for my brother, Geoffrey. In the name of Jesus."

Raymond was on one knee, crouched over his brother's cot praying aloud oblivious to the crowded car of wounded and broken soldiers. He knew his brother was dying. He had seen plenty of men die and knew well what it looked like. He could feel fever burning the life from Geoff's body and was conflicted about how he should pray-what would be best for poor Geoff. "Lord Jesus, I need a miracle. I..I don't know how to pray. All I know to do is stand on your Word and your promises..." Raymond paused, scrambling to recall every scripture.

"Ask and it shall be given to you...seek and you will find. In Matthew 18:19, You promised that if any two of us agreed on anything," Raymond's voice caught and he cleared his throat, "Anything that we ask will be done for them. For where two or three are gathered together in your name, there am I in the midst of them. I'm asking for Geoffrey to be healed, Lord. All the damage healed. Don't have me take him home dead to our poor mother. I

ask for healing. I stand on your promises. In Jesus' name, Amen."

A sob lodged in his throat as it belatedly occurred to Raymond, that he was alone. There were not two or three gathered in His name. There was only a car full of moaning, smelly, wounded dying men. Geoff couldn't even agree with him because he was slipping away and burning with fever. Not knowing what else to do, he rested his head on his brother's arm. "Jesus, help us."

In the rain spattered July night as the train traveled west, Raymond felt a comforting pat on his shoulder.

"Don't you fret none, Colonel Tolliver. I'm agreeing and praying with you. It'll be alright. I know our Jesus heals." Tolliver turned and saw the young man across the aisle his own wounds bandaged and his arm in a dirty sling. He felt perhaps he had met the confident young man earlier, this soldier in dirty butternut, but his name escaped him.

"Name's Gabe,"

"I'm sorry, it's my brother- I'm that worried." Raymond shook the man's good hand.

"That was powerful praying, sir." Gabe cast a meaningful glance at the unconscious soldier.

"We'd best not stop. We had better stand in the gap for him tonight." Gabe gestured to the seat across from him. "Rest your knees for a bit. Come on and sit here and we'll pray together."

Ray dropped into his seat across the aisle from his brother's shabby bunk carefully watching for each breath. "...I don't know what else to pray." Raymond Tolliver admitted sadly. "I don't remember the last time I've slept," he muttered by way of explanation, scratching three-days growth of beard.

"You are tired, I know. But you was standing on His promises and that's a mighty good place to start." Gabe leaned forward with a comforting smile and placed his good hand on Tolliver's arm. "Father, We come together

and stand on the promises of Psalm 103.” Gabe spoke with the confidence of covenant to the One who heals.

Raymond fell asleep as Gabe took up the watch in the dark hospital car. He prayed the scriptures aloud from heart. “Bless the Lord, Oh my soul and all that is within me—bless his Holy Name. Bless the Lord, Oh my soul and forget not all His benefits: He forgives all your iniquities, He heals all your diseases. He redeems your life from destruction. He crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies. Who satisfies thy mouth with good things: so that thy youth is renewed like the eagles? The Lord executes righteousness and judgment for all that are oppressed. He made...” Gabe smiled as the Colonel’s eyes closed.

The sun was cresting the pine trees when Raymond jerked awake with a start. He couldn’t believe he had slept so long. Gabe had disappeared. Raymond was uncommonly irritated the man had encouraged him to relax. Quickly, he crossed the aisle and bent over his brother, thinking to search for a breath or a pulse when he noticed that Geoffrey was looking directly at him, his hazel eyes clear. “Praise God! Geoff. Geoff...how you feeling, little brother?” Ray dropped to his knees beside him with incredible relief.

Geoff gave him a wobbly grin and with a raspy whisper, “You won’t believe where I’ve been.”

“Hush now. I know where you’ve been, and I don’t mind telling you that you have scared me out of several years I don’t have to spare!” Raymond put the back of his hand against Geoff’s cheek checking for fever. “Lie still and let me get you some water. We are on our way home.”

Geoffrey had already slipped back to sleep. Raymond watched the reassuring rise and fall of his brother’s chest, whispering, “Thank you, Lord. Thank you. If we can just get him home, back to Vicksburg away from the battlefield, he’ll be safe there and everything will be fine.”