

The Ballad of Lee Cotton

Christopher Wilson

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Eureka, Mississippi

When I finally slither out mewling, I've already given Mama hard labor, because she's been cussing and screaming seventeen hours. Then there's a calm until she sees me. Then she starts howling worse. And even though I come by the customary channel, and she feels me struggling out for sure, and we're tied by an umbilical, still she swears I'm not her child and she's not my mother, and what in God's name is going to become of us? On account of my crazy, scary looks, because I just don't present to the eye like a black baby should.

Word spreads round the homestead. Folks gather in huddles, whispering about the strange deliverance. Some say fetch the doctor, and some say save with the veterinarian, but in the end my uncle Nat rouses the Reverend Eugene Spinks for some theology because this baby ain't so much a medical issue as a rude package of life delivered in error to the wrong address, an ugly curse or strange blessing – a secret code written in skin. Besides, doctor is white and charges travel and labor, while the reverend is black and free and always comes willing and wordy whether he's needed or not, with Christ's answer for anything. After he inspects me all round, top and tail, and lets me suck on his finger, Reverend Spinks confers with my mama. He keeps his questions brisk, blunt, and worldly. He leaves no mattress unturned, he asks plenty personal, and he doesn't spare her modesty. Then he hears enough and he turns on his heels.

'Healthy, normal boy,' he booms, bounding down the sprung porch steps beaming. 'Eight pounds odd. Sound specimen. Praise the Lord.'

'How about his looks?' folks ask.

'Happens. As we sow, so shall we reap' – the Reverend smiles – 'And Salmon begat Booz of Rachab; and Booz begat Obed of Ruth: and Obed begat Jesse. This child comes to answer some purpose. Almighty always got his reasons.'

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'What's this child come to show us?'

'Can't speak for the Lord exactly,' concedes the Reverend Spinks. 'But never forget He's got himself an Almighty sense of humor.'

Eureka, Mississippi, where I got raised, is God's Own Place to grow cotton and stubborn, hardy trees. Clement Creek cradles the tallest cedars in the state. The nearby town of Briar prides itself as the pine capital of the South.

The folk are knotty and resinous too. They sink deep roots. They can handle heat, dust, and drought. Needles fare better than leaves.

Nowadays there's a Eureka community website. The History page says Eureka has no available history. The Community Information page announces The community has no information to share. The Links page has no links. The Contact Us page gives a box number in Hannibal, Missouri. The Welcome link leads nowhere.

That's Eureka folk. They keep things buttoned up, close to their chests. They can handle progress if it doesn't change things. They welcome any strangers who belong. If you come asking questions, they'll tell as much as they need you to know.

Highway 28 crosses the tracks. To the north are Clement Street and Front Street. They started to build Franklin Boulevard, but it ran out of tarmac and self-belief after thirty yards. To the south is South Clement Street and Back Street. They got most things most people need – a grocery store, three churches (black Baptist, white Baptist, and never-mind-your-color-pass-the-snakes), two diners, a gas station, a sheriff. And if you find yourself in need of a newspaper, tractor tire, haircut, high school, or hospital, you can drive to nearby Briar in less than twenty minutes.

You can see the heat shimmer off the tarmac, hear the rattle of teal, the whining blades at the sawmill, and a bad-transmission Studebaker pickup. You can smell pine resin, sawdust, and hog pens. But the blue sky and cotton horizon look hazy-clear.

Of course they got plenty history – far more than they care to remember or use. Most of it centers round cattle, cotton, and cars. We had some levitations too. Maybe we lie on some fault line of gravity, because we got problems keeping things tidy on the horizon, splitting the ground from the sky. Things sometimes fall upward, and things come down that got no business being up to start. You'll likely think it sounds fanciful. Take it or leave it. You got to experience it firsthand.

But it's the small personal events that stick in the mind. Like the time Lou Carey shoots his Chevy Apache 427 CU automatic, outside the Magnolia Diner, once through each headlight, twice through the radiator, and three times through the windshield, and then leaves the corpse to rust and rot by the curbside as a public warning to bad-attitude trucks, which sounds a mean and cranky thing to do, but Eureka folk always got sound reasons, and that's the trouble with history, serving it up cold and stale on the plate, when it needs to be savored fresh and hot.

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One month in ’57, farmers found their cows gutted or headless in the morning. There’d been buzzing sounds and neon flashes in the night sky. They were awful dazzling lights, of color folks never seen before. Some blamed aliens and some blamed the military. And it was God’s own task to recover the loss from the Yankee insurers, who sent down an Italian investigator with an attaché case, homburg hat, horn-rimmed glasses, and a stammer to try get to the bottom of it. But something spooked him into leaving early, after only seven twitchy hours.

There was Elliot Holly, a black kid out of Detroit, who came to stay with kin in Eureka in the summer of ’59, but got his neck broke for making repeated personal suggestions to a white girl serving in the grocery store, not knowing the difference between city and small-town manners, black and white.

And it’s hard to look at any of the telegraph poles down Highway 28 without wondering who’s dangled there, besides that boozed-up kid out of Vicksburg who got tossed out of his V-8 Mustang convertible (cherry red, auto, discs, and power hood with pony trim) onto the telephone wires when he drove himself straight into the post of the EUREKA WELCOMES CAREFUL DRIVERS sign at eighty miles an hour.

They got themselves famous sons too – Red McKee, who played tight end for the Dolphins, season ’61 through to ’63, and Larry Whitters, who played session music in Nashville, backing Patsy Cline, Hank Williams, and sundry other immortals from the Hall of Fame.

And they never forget their famous daughter, Angelina Clement, who just happened to be a close, personal childhood friend of mine.

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