

In honor of all those editors
Kilso
My place in the beautiful
stubborn state
of GA
Long Buddy

The Legacy of Roosevelt Clay

To folks about, she was like a heaped shadow at high-noon ghosting through the moss-screened house across from the café after her husband died. Done with living, on hold, maybe ashamed or whipped by time. Like a lot of old folks when their taste buds are all that is left of their senses and anything spicy gives them gas. But with one difference—being Mrs. Dr. Cunningham, widow of the only homegrown doctor in Swannoochee County, then or ever, was like being the widow of Elvis, or God.

She didn't get out in the mid-fifties, in Cornerville, Georgia. She didn't go to any of the three churches, or even try them all, like everybody else. Or to the post office—he did that for her. Not even to the store for a jug of milk, or eggs when her hens weren't laying. Her chickens were as penned up and passive as she was; everybody else's flew the coop and mingled. She didn't have a dog, so was never seen dragging her pet pooch off the highway, chastened and embarrassed, after it got hit by a transfer truck on 129. She didn't sit out on the front porch shelling peas or smoking like many of the women who had lately taken it up for their nerves.

No child played Halloween Trick or Treat there, nobody cut through her yard on the way to the cemetery to play or to the Alapaha River to swim. Nobody stood outside the aqua concrete-block café and peered down the sun-shot hall hoping for a glimpse of the good Mrs. Doctor. But plenty talked about her, inside the café, behind grease filmed windows with the strange blocky word EFAC hiding them. We made up stories and truths about her dull life and often peppered it up with lies.

Somebody said they saw Roosevelt Clay go up the front steps and onto the porch, one morning, meeting Mrs. Dr. Cunningham coming out of the fireroom, right side of the dim musty hall, stopping, asking him didn't he have some gall, a colored man just traipsing on in a white woman's house like that. Squat, odorless and dense-fleshed in a soft faded print dress, she had that grudging look on her face and him standing over her, a tall man in blue-gray twill, starched and ironed. I came to see if you needed anything, he said, that's what I came for. And she said, Since when did you quit using the back door? And he said, The day the old man died, that's when. She looked flattened by that statement, as if it carried more weight than what anybody in town might say having seen him standing in her hallway. I don't need a thing I can think of, she said. Do, I'll let you know.

Maybe when we weren't looking, she had the colored man raised by her and Dr. Cunningham to jumpstart her blue Belair and back it out from under the shed behind the house and wait sober-faced for her to get in with her bone purse hanging from her wrist to ride twenty-five miles to Valdosta, neither of them speaking or even eyeing each other they'd been at this so long.

Nobody could imagine it anyway. But what we could imagine was on a Sunday morning her maybe waking from a skimming sleep to the double-team clicks of Roosevelt and his five boys, like fine yoked oxen, marching up the just-paved highway from a couple miles south of town and the little farmplace owned by the good doctor's wife on their way to church. Not haughty but smart-stepping with their heads high. And how her eyes must have shined with pride, if for no other reason than the come-rain-or-shine Sunday morning sound having tipped off the ringing of the bell at the Methodist church as if Roosevelt and his boys had tripped a wire attached from the city limits sign to the bell steeple uptown.

Spring and fall, when the liveoaks shed along 129, you could see the five boys spaced about the Mrs. Doctor's yard. Yard rakes swinging and tines sproinging on the dirt, raking great piles of leather-tan leaves to which they set fire long about sundown and stayed with till the layered coals pulsed red as

the neon café sign and the smoke lay in calm even drifts like gray silk streamers flown behind soft humming airplanes. Then they would go around to the back door, without being told, and you had to imagine was she giving them money or warm pound cake but generally you figured she was only dismissing them. Either way, their happy round faces never changed expressions when around the house they came, trooping down the highway, home.

Some said they wore taps on their black polished shoe heels—lots of coloreds did back then. But they weren't the regular woods hands who congregated in the quarters behind the white school, or stood back along the wall in the grocery store across from the courthouse at the crossing until all the whites had been helped and had cleared the walkspace smelling of the stale butcher case between the cash register counter and the door. Not that Roosevelt and his family were uppity; they were humble and thrifty and so neat that when white trash commented on how they kept up the small seasoned-wood house and the sheds and yards they said how you have to hand it to that boy of Dr. Cunningham's, he's a credit to his race. They said a pine burr could fall from one of the tall yellow pines and somebody was there to catch it before it hit the raked ground.

Of course, what they meant by "that boy of old Dr. Cunningham's," was that Mrs. Dr. Cunningham may not have born him heirs but they'd bet a nickel to a doughnut that Roosevelt's mother, who kept house for the old celebrated couple before she died, had. Any light-skinned, clean-living colored person had to be half-white, and Roosevelt and his boys looked as bleached as their white church shirts, as stiff as their starched and ironed chinos. The wife was darker and more timid, respectfully mum, which made up for the other.

When Mrs. Dr. Cunningham died all the timber and farm land the old doctor had accumulated was suddenly bequeathed to Roosevelt Clay. And we're not talking about an acre or two, like a few other coloreds owned in the county where land ownership is more a symbol of power than cash money

or stocks or even political office. More a symbol of power than a crown on a king's head and just as easy to spot. Land is everything in this Southeast Georgia corner of the world, though outsiders will drive through on their way south to frolic in Florida and roll up their car windows to keep out the mosquitoes and gnats and whatever pesk or beast might come lurching out of the pine woods. A white tail deer might spirit across the highway and wreck their fine automobiles. At the Florida state line the outsiders might pull over and step out of their cars and stare back in wonder that they made it out of that flat green swampy unyielding wilderness, land bequeathed only once in a lifetime and passed down to next of kin or no kin at all when its owners pass away. A strange breed of people, Swanoochee Countians, evolved from beating the bushes for a living and the palmettos for snakes, clearing land for timber in an area you couldn't give away free to a one of those city slickers. Some three-hundred thousand acres divided up among less than maybe 500 people, back then, and old Dr. Cunningham the owner of about half of it. The way he came into it, the land, some said, was during the lingering Depression and sick people would pay him in chickens and acres, and even a widow or widower or two or three would leave him their entire farm just because they thought the world and all of him or sometimes maybe facing death and on the outs with their families and for revenge and because the old doctor was handy they would will over their land to him. Must have been a hundred babies named Winston after old Dr. Cunningham.

Regardless, somebody, the tax commissioner, at the courthouse, say, must have known that Dr. Cunningham was accumulating half the county, an acre here, an acre there, signifying a death, a birth. Nobody could know, for sure, how much cash had been passed down to Roosevelt Clay, but Mrs. Dr. Cunningham was directly responsible, we knew. She could have spent the money, she could have buried it, she could have given it to the church, God bless her soul. It would be her fault if Roosevelt took to gambling or drinking. And those boys...?

with the other coloreds; the mother slipped in and out to visit her kin without a wrinkle in her ironed skirt or on her bland face.

About the same time as when the Samson camp disbanded, coloreds became “blacks” and were forced to go to the white school. Roosevelt’s boys among them, or at least the three left out of the five, two of them having graduated from the old black school and gone off to Valdosta, to college, or to work. Nobody knew for sure.

Blood would tell, they said, and the other three boys now mixed with the whites would surely show their true nature. They would quit being humble and either be scared and timid as their mother, or they would be haughty and lost among whites.

People almost looked forward to it, much as they despised having to mix their clean white children with smutty black children who were rumored to have seen and heard all manner of disgusting language and actions. Too, in Swannoochee County, there was little entertainment—save for summer tent shows and skating rinks, school basketball games, funerals (our homage to the dead reflects how we treat the living) and church revivals in the spring and fall—and bad entertainment beat nothing. But the boys were the same boys marching off to church with their heads high, in their white shirts, making all A’s but not a bit of fuss.

Meanwhile, a full crop of new timber had been grown, or almost grown, almost ready for harvesting on the land owned by the white owners. But old Dr. Cunningham’s timber, lightning struck, or wind blown and buggy, old turpentine cups intact and catfaces fading like pictures in the attic, remained as it had been ten to twelve years before, but with Roosevelt Clay’s name on the deeds to the various large and small tracts. It made no sense.

Even Mrs. Dr. Cunningham’s blue antique Belair stayed under the shed when Roosevelt wasn’t building the battery on one of his weekly cruises around the courthouse square. The old two-story hotel,

east of the square, was torn down, and the old high-floored houses in and about had rotted down or been razed to make way for modern brick houses and even mobile homes. The house where Mrs. Dr. Cunningham had wandered, aged and died was sagging at the foundation and the roof was caving in. The car shed had been shored up with cross members, scavenged braces, and buckshot tin.

What didn't change, what never changed, was the neat homeplace of the now aging Roosevelt and his wife, that and their stubborn, celebrated humility, which you could call spiteful for lack of a better explanation. Real power, to many of us, is nothing but in legacy of something unsolved, numbing sameness, and time moving with the force of our slow clean river.

Of course you have to wonder what will happen to us when the land is passed down by Roosevelt to his next-of-kin or no-kin...