

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF

MOON COUNTY



THE STORY OF EARL

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THE STORY OF EARL

We don't have long-car caboose racing in Moon County anymore; it ended a while back. I was standing right there in Big Chaney and Little Chaney's hardware store the day it happened. I was measuring rope on the third aisle when Sheriff Espy and his men marched into the store and rounded the two of them up like cattle. The sheriffs kicked down the door to the back room, where Little Chaney sold his homemade gin. Then they stomped out with a stack of cash, jars of gin and the big chalkboard Big Chaney used to register all the runners and tally up the bets on the long-car caboose race. Sheriff Espy took the baseball bat that Little Chaney used to hit Sutter Jefferson on the head. He took all of the guns, including the pistol Big Chaney fired to start the caboose race. Old Judge Delahunt sent them both to the Sparta State Prison for racketeering. The whole thing scared folks in Moon County so bad that nobody even wanted to talk about long-car caboose racing, but Jesse did.

Jesse said locking up Big Chaney and Little Chaney had more to do with the county getting its hands on their cow pasture so it could be sold to some businessman who wanted to build a carpet factory close to the train track. The track curved into the pasture from the east and ran all the way to Atlanta. The two o'clock train that came on Saturdays always had the long caboose, and this was the one used for the race. Little Chaney lined the runners up beside the track and made sure they pinned their numbers on. When Big Chaney thought that the caboose was far enough ahead, he fired the pistol and the race was on.

Everybody waited at the top of the hill to see if the man who caught the caboose was brave enough to jump into the Oconee River before the train crossed the bridge into Sparta County. The man who made it back to the starting line first won the prize money, but he had to be able to swim the currents. Thunderbird Eddie was one of the fastest men around for years, but one year he wasn't able to swim the currents. We buried him near the long wire fence that separated the two graveyards. Then Lightfoot Leo started winning all the races. The man ran every race with bare feet until his leg got stuck in the caboose door when he tried to jump into the river. The train dragged him to his death. We ended up burying Lightfoot Leo next to Thunderbird Eddie.

Then Cluke had to go and get himself drowned in the river, and I had him buried next to our momma and daddy. Cluke loved the long-car caboose race more than any runner I knew. Cluke loved

running so much he ran away from home every chance he could get.

One time, I had to search all over Moon County for him. It was even harder trying to find him when Jesse wasn't around to help me. Old Judge Delahunt finally told me that if I didn't keep good eyes on Cluke, he was going to send him back to the asylum. Any time Cluke ran away, I knew I had to go out and find him quick or there would be trouble.

Mostly, he liked to go out to the cow pasture and run along the tracks, or he'd go sit on the bank and throw rocks in the river. That morning, I walked down Main Street towards the river. I called Cluke's name, but the only thing that came to me was my own voice. I walked past the cow pasture and deep into the backwoods. I saw Cluke standing right in the middle of a field of grass. When I walked up to him, I noticed he didn't have any shoes on. His feet were bleeding and tears were in his eyes.

"Cluke, what's wrong?" He didn't say one word. "You know I've been looking all over for you." I expected him to say something. He grabbed my hand and pulled me along. "Cluke, where are you taking me? We need to get home while it's still daylight."

He kept pulling me along, telling me he saw a dead dog. Nobody but a person like him would want to take the time to look at a dead dog. He pulled me along until we got over by the brush. There it was. I saw it with my own eyes, a human skull. I told Jesse the next day. He didn't believe me. He said the older I got the more I acted like Cluke. I told Jesse I thought the skull we saw in the woods might belong to one of those missing boys we used to hear about on the radio news. Jesse said it wasn't worth reporting to Sheriff Espy because the person was already dead.

On the day before the last caboose race, I told Cluke to take my pocket watch out of his mouth so I could see just how late Jesse was. It was noon sharp and Jesse was nowhere in sight. Jesse used all kinds of excuses for not showing up when it was time to take Cluke out and let him run free. I saw Jesse hurrying down the road. Cluke waved at him. Jesse didn't bother coming up to the porch. He bent over on his knees and lifted his chest like he was going to blow the words out of his mouth with his breath.

"Come on, Earl," Jesse said. "Hurry up."

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Sutter Jefferson is trying to sign up for the caboose race and Big Chaney won't let him. Little Chaney's got the baseball bat, and folks are starting to place bets on Sutter's life!"

I straightened my hat and tightened the rope around Cluke's waist. The smell of trouble was always in the air any time one of those Chaney's got

worked up.

“We ain’t going to make it in time, Jesse!” I said.

“If Cluke hurries, we will. Pull!”

“Sutter’s going to fly away to heaven like the fox and the rabbit, and they’ll be eating sweet potato pie without napkins,” said Cluke.

“Shut up, Cluke. We ain’t got time for that foolishness today,” Jesse said.

“Don’t holler at him. It ain’t his fault this is happening.”

“I just don’t understand why he always has to sing that stupid song when it doesn’t make any sense. Nothing he says ever makes any sense. Shut up, Cluke!”

“Just pull, Jesse. Fussing at Cluke ain’t going to change anything. You’ll just make him nervous, and he’ll have a conniption and wet his pants.”

“I don’t care. We have to get to Main Street and save Sutter,” Jesse said.

Sutter always used to run up and down Main Street when he worked as a messenger for Old Judge Delahunt. When Sheriff Espy wasn’t patrolling, a few of us used to sit on the courthouse steps and make bets on how fast Sutter could get a message from one place to another. Sutter wasn’t even out of the courthouse doors good before somebody would ask, “Where’re you going, Sutter?” He’d tell us and we’d place bets on a time using my pocket watch. Jesse won more bets than me because he knew before anyone else that Sutter liked to stop and sweet talk Sara. The last time we saw Sutter come out of that courthouse, he came out married to her. Then Old Judge Delahunt let Sutter go because he said he didn’t have much need for a messenger anymore. All me and Jesse had left to bet on were the caboose races.

Not long after the marriage, Sara died of the cough. Nobody saw much of Sutter after that happened. Jesse said he never answered the door when he went to his house to check on him and asked me if I had heard anything about how Sutter was holding up. I told him I hadn’t seen or heard anything about Sutter since Sara died.

Cluke told us he knew exactly where Sutter was. Then he started singing a song about Sutter flying away to heaven with a fox and a rabbit. Old Judge Delahunt said Sutter couldn’t get a job driving the ice truck, so he took a job working on Jack Moffett’s farm near Sparta County.

Early one morning, I tied the rope around Cluke, and me and Jesse put on our hats and walked out to the Moffett farm. When we got there, Mr. Moffett said he wouldn’t tell us what happened to

Sutter until we helped him move ten sacks of planting seed to the barn. I told Jesse that Cluke couldn’t do work like that, but Jesse said the two of us would have to do it if we were ever going to find out about Sutter. I told Jesse the whole thing smelled like a skunk to me. Jesse said I was acting like Cluke again. I made Cluke sit with his back against the tree that stood next to the barn. Jesse tied the rope around Cluke and knotted it real tight. Cluke didn’t even cry.

Me and Jesse almost threw out our backs for Mr. Moffett, only to hear him go on and on about how Sutter was a good worker until he disrespected him by accusing him of lying about his pay. Mr. Moffett said he always gave Sutter his fair pay, and he’d never cheat a man out of a day’s pay when he knew he had a sick wife at home. Me and Jesse didn’t say one word after Mr. Moffett said that. Cluke didn’t say anything either. I asked him why he was so quiet, and he said the tree was talking to him. Jesse told him to stop telling lies. Cluke said the tree told him that the fox and the rabbit were friends, but the rabbit jumped out while the fox stayed in. He said he wanted to eat sweet potato pie and rabbit for dinner. Jesse threw his arms up and let out a long breath. He said he would hold his hands over his ears all the way to Sutter’s house if Cluke didn’t shut up.

Sutter’s house had one window and sat behind a line of trees. He probably heard Cluke singing as we walked up to the porch because the door opened, and he walked out without his shirt and shoes. Jesse asked him how he had been getting along. Sutter said he was fine. I told him what Mr. Moffett said about Sara. He said he didn’t work for Mr. Moffett anymore, and Sara was much better thanks to Dr. Pike over in Sparta County. Sutter told us the doctor gave him the medicine Sara needed for a basket of eggs. Then Sutter said he had to go because she was calling his name. He walked into the house and closed the door behind him.

Jesse said he didn’t hear Sara’s voice, but Cluke said he did. Jesse asked me if I heard Sara’s voice. I told him I wasn’t really listening. As we turned toward the road to head home, Jesse stopped and told me that he wasn’t crazy, and he knew when he heard a human voice and when he didn’t, and if Sara called Sutter, one of us would have heard it. I told him that Cluke heard it, but he said that Cluke didn’t count. Jesse frowned and scratched his head. He told me he had a sensible head on his shoulders, and he wasn’t going to let Mr. Moffett and Sutter confuse his mind with lies when he knew Sara died about a month ago from the cough. Jesse bet me two dollars that if we walked over to that graveyard, we’d find Sara buried there. I told Jesse I wasn’t much in the mood for betting after such a long day of walking.

He said I didn't want to bet him because I knew I would lose. I told Jesse that maybe Sutter heard a ghost. He told me he didn't believe in ghosts, but Cluke said he did.

We finally made it to Main Street without Cluke giving us any problems. Jesse pointed at Little Chaney standing in Sutter's face holding a baseball bat in his hand. Sutter wiped blood from the side of his face and wiped it on his dirty shirt. We tried to get closer, but Big Chaney warned the crowd not to move. He lifted up his shirt, and we saw his pistol tucked in his pants. Cluke didn't understand why we couldn't move. We stood there pulling him back while he tried to move forward.

Jesse asked Sutter what he was doing. Sutter told him he wanted to sign up for that caboose race. Little Chaney told him that it was too late. Big Chaney just laughed and told Sutter to go home. Sutter said no.

Little Chaney moved closer to Sutter. "My brother said go home, Sutter."

"I want to run. I've got to win that prize money," Sutter said.

"I'm going to count to three. One," said Little Chaney.

"Go on home," Jesse said.

"I'm not going nowhere. I want to run in the caboose race."

"You'd better listen, boy ... Two!"

"Don't be a fool, Sutter. You don't want to cause any trouble around here," Jesse told Sutter.

"Fly, Sutter! They can't catch you if you fly away," said Cluke.

Little Chaney never said *three*. He swung the bat and hit Sutter on his head. Sutter went down on his knees. A line of blood ran down the side of his face and puddled at the collar of his shirt.

"Stay down, Sutter! Stay down," said Jesse.

"Get up, Sutter!" Jesse looked at me like I was making the situation worse than what it was.

"I've got a right to run in that caboose race," Sutter said.

"You ain't got no rights. All we got are rules around here, and the rules say you can't run in the caboose race. It looks like everybody can remember that except you," said Little Chaney. Sutter tried to rise to his feet again. Big Chaney pushed him down with his foot.

"Get up, Sutter," I said.

"You'd better thank God I didn't shoot you dead," said Big Chaney.

"I have a right to run in that caboose race," Sutter said. Big Chaney looked at Sutter and shook his head.

"Folks, everything is settled. This boy is crazy. That's all. Go on home and rest up for the

caboose race tomorrow." Little Chaney followed Big Chaney into the hardware store, and one of them put up the sign that said "closed."

"Sutter, are you all right?" I asked. "Help him get to his feet, Jesse."

"No. Leave me alone," Sutter said.

"We can't leave you here. We've got to get you to a doctor," Jesse told him.

"It won't do no good to go see a doctor in Moon County if you don't have the money to pay him. He'll just leave you there, waiting."

"Ain't too many men around here who'd stand up to Little Chaney the way you did," I said.

"But nothing changed. Nothing is ever going to change around here, and Sara is going to die!" Sutter was on his knees.

"Sara is already dead," said Jesse. "You're talking like you need to be in the asylum." Sutter scratched his head. He looked at the people standing on the sidewalk staring at him. He turned and watched me tightening the rope around Cluke's waist. He cried. "Don't do that. Leave him alone."

"But I have to tie him or else Old Judge Delahunt will send him back to the asylum," I told him. Sutter looked up at the sky. He dropped his head.

"You hear that voice?" I frowned when he asked the question.

"What voice?" asked Jesse. "I don't hear anything."

"I don't hear anything either," I said.

"You hear it. Don't you, Mr. Cluke? You hear what I'm hearing. Don't you?" Cluke nodded.

"It's God talking. He said that the fox and the rabbit were friends, but the rabbit jumped out while the fox stayed in." Cluke laughed like it was the funniest thing he had ever heard in his life.

"Mr. Cluke, I think you might be right. It is God." Sutter wiped the blood from his lips and laughed.

"I hear God talk all the time," said Cluke.

"Cluke, we ain't got time for all of your foolishness," Jesse said. "Sutter, you ain't thinking right. You need to get to a doctor. He'll tend to you. You just got to talk to him real respectful, that's all. Let him feel he's the one with the upper hand."

"They'll be finished with that new hospital real soon, and you won't have to wait for a doctor like you do now. They'll have doctors for everybody," I told Sutter.

"I don't believe that will change things. I took Sara to see a doctor and no matter how much blood she coughed up, he always told her she just needed some rest. He never examined her because I didn't have the money to pay him. Doctors will let you die if you don't have the money to pay them."

Sutter held his handkerchief against his head as he walked down Main Street. We pulled Cluke along and listened to him mumble his song. Jesse said the song still didn't make any sense to him. Sutter turned around once and looked at us like he couldn't focus his eyes. He dug into his pockets and pulled out some change. "Right here in my hand is all the money I've got. It's all I have left to give to Sara, but she's not here no more. What can I buy, now that she's not here no more?" Sutter asked us.

"You might be able to get a piece of sweet potato pie. You get the napkins for free. Don't you, Earl?" asked Cluke.

"Well, Mr. Cluke, that sounds like a reasonable thing to do with this money. I'm going to see if I can buy myself a piece of sweet potato pie," said Sutter.

Sutter turned around and walked up to the restaurant on the corner.

"You can't go through the front door. We're not allowed. We'll have to go to the back," Jesse said.

Sutter ignored him and marched right through the front door. We walked to the back of the restaurant. The owner brought Sutter out by the collar of his shirt and told him where he was supposed to go. Sutter didn't say a word.

We ordered sandwiches at the window. Cluke took out all of the change in his pockets and told me to buy him a piece of sweet potato pie. We sat on the ground watching Sutter eat his pie and stare at the dirt. Cluke finished eating his pie and started filling his pockets with rocks. Sutter looked at him, and he started filling his pockets with rocks, too. Jesse asked Sutter where he was going, but Sutter never said one word. We followed him farther down Main Street, stopping along the way so he and Cluke could pick up rocks and put them in their pockets.

By the time we reached the Oconee River, Cluke had a pocket full of rocks and so did Sutter. I whispered to Jesse that I thought Sutter was going to jump into the river. He said Sutter had better sense than that. Sutter kept walking. Cluke kept talking about how he was hungry and wanted to have fox and sweet potato pie for dinner. I promised him he could eat all the sweet potato pie he wanted to keep him from having a conniption, but I told him that most people didn't eat foxes. Cluke asked me why. He said that people ate rabbits. Jesse frowned at us both and told me I made it worse by trying to explain things to Cluke when I knew it would get all twisted in his head. Jesse said explaining life to Cluke was a waste of time. We moved closer to the river and watched Sutter walk along the bank. I asked him what he was going to do. He didn't answer. Cluke started to sing one of his songs. Then Jesse put his

hand over his mouth and Cluke bit it. Sutter just stared at us.

Just when we were all quiet enough to hear the crickets, Sutter jumped into the river. We stood there watching him fight the currents. Cluke tried to jump into the river, too, but me and Jesse pulled him back. He screamed and it echoed. Then Cluke got quiet. I pointed to his wet pants. Jesse threw his arms in the air and let out a deep breath. I told him that at least we knew Sutter could swim the currents. Jesse said that it didn't matter because there was no way Sutter was ever going to run in the long-car caboose race.

Nobody in Moon County was sure who would win that last race. Most folks had placed their bets on Motor Ross, the human engine. He was the best runner and swimmer around. He was the only man to ever win the race three times in a row. He could run with his shoes or without them. He could swim for miles without getting tired. Everybody knew that Motor Ross could easily beat Charlie Watson, Stanley Turner, Shed Morgan and Bobby Joe Tateman. I placed bets on all four of them, just to be safe.

Me, Cluke and Jesse gathered on the hill with the crowd. The train curved into the cow pasture at two o'clock. Big Chaney fired the pistol, and Motor Ross shot past all the others in a flash. Shed wasn't too far behind him. Stanley was running a strong third. Then, out of nowhere, came Sutter, running past Charlie and Bobby Joe in the rear. Seeing Sutter running in the long-car caboose race was like a dream. I was proud, but Jesse wasn't. He was afraid some folks in the crowd wouldn't like it because Sutter was breaking the rules, but nobody said or did anything. We all just stood there watching as Sutter ran past Stanley and Shed, but he couldn't seem to get past Motor Ross. Motor Ross made it to the caboose, and Motor Ross kicked at Sutter as he reached for something to hold on to. Finally, Sutter grabbed the side of the caboose and didn't let go. They fought all the way to the bridge; then the two of them dropped into the Oconee River. Motor Ross made it back to the finish line. Sutter didn't.

Questions for Discussion and Writing

1. What holds Earl and Jesse's friendship together?
2. In what ways does Cluke's alternative view of the world raise questions about the racial customs in the community?
3. Do you think Sutter's death was an accident?
4. In what way is Sutter similar to Cluke?

5. Based on the Matrix Map you selected, which case provides the best context for this story? How does the information in the case add to your understanding of the story?

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