



The Invitation

Clifton L. Taulbert

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What with the damning convolutions of ignorance, disingenuousness, and angst that shadow so much of the discussion of race in the United States, it is heartening when hope glimmers, as it does when Clifton Taulbert unpacks his defensive prejudicial baggage acquired as an African American child growing up in the '40s and '50s in a segregated Mississippi Delta.

Taulbert is an internationally recognized lecturer and the author of twelve books, including *Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored*, which was part of the United States' gift to Nelson Mandela when he was released from prison, and the Pulitzer Prize-nominated *The Last Train North*. *Invitation*, his latest book, was prompted by his experiences after he accepted invitations to speak at meetings aimed at improving race relations in and around Columbia, SC.

South Carolina represented “a past I wanted to forget and a modern history that was still troubling,” he thought. Still, a nostalgic note was struck, reminding him of the South he still thinks of as “this eternal place I love.” Nevertheless, to be on the safe side, he took along Little Cliff—the childhood self, who was raised to be wary of white folk.

And then he was a guest of Mrs. Camille Cunningham Sharp, the silver-haired matriarch of Roselawn Plantation, with hundreds upon hundreds of acres of cotton and a Civil War history, slavery included, leaving Little Cliff to think “I shouldn't be here.”

Miss Camille, as he came to call her, didn't agree. She said she was honored to know him and meant it. They laughed together, spoke with candor of the past and future, walked arm-in-arm. They planned to meet again, but she passed before that could happen.

He regrets upheld conversations, but now, “when anger swells inside of me,” he writes that he will remember the time spent with Miss Camille and “deal with racial bigotry as best I can.”

THOMAS BEVIER (Fall 2014)

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