

Lean on Leon

Leon Lake was preparing yet another run at public office. He glanced admiringly at his own long features as his razor furrowed neatly down his cheek. The hair transplants had matured into a full head of sandy strands; razor cut in the manner favored by independent oil operators. The recent plastic surgery had removed the points from his nose and chin and smoothed the acne moguls on his cheeks. The result was a less-threatening face, until one reached the poisonous hollow of his unadjusted eyes. Those blue spots of original equipment were the only true signs of what lie within.

Only Lake's now deceased parents shared the secret that his first name was a shortened version of Leonid, not in fact the more common Leon known to south Louisiana. The secret was an important one since the name Leonid was largely associated with the Soviet Union, his mother's birthplace. Leon Lake linked all opinions in conflict with his own directly to that nation's doctrine. If not on deaf ears, his message of late had largely fallen on inattentive ears. The message, in short, was that his constituency of unemployed and underemployed rural white folks owed their unhappy state to the federal government, black citizens, and an international cabal of Jewish one-worlders. After losing gubernatorial and congressional campaigns, the perennial candidate was now seeking a more winnable seat on the parish council.

A late winter sunrise beamed onto the chipped plate of sausage and biscuits in front of Beasley Fellers. The sleeve of his orange, Louisiana Department of Highways jumpsuit played a dual role of kerchief and napkin in service equally to his head cold and his meal. Six days a week, at precisely 6:00 a.m., Fellers took his seat at the end of the long table on the east side of Wendell Hardy's Reliable Cafe for breakfast and conversation. The conversation varied little more than the breakfast, which varied not at all. At this particular moment, Fellers mind was sorting two future events: deer season and the last judgement. Having exhausted the subject of deer stand design with his fellow diners, he had moved to a subject of a profound moral dilemma. This was it: Fellers was in possession of a winning pick-3 lottery ticket, worth eight hundred dollars, bearing the numbers 6-6-6. Would cashing that ticket unwittingly put him in the clutches of the Anti-Christ, he wondered aloud.

"Don't want nuthin to do with no annie-crost nor false prophets, but eight hunnerd's eight hunnerd all right. Din't pick them numbers, machine just spit 'em out." A divided quorum concluded that the theological arbiter best be Apostle Jenkins, a local preacher do in for his complimentary coffee momentarily. Deep in reflection, Beasley Fellers rolled the mouthful of food in search of a comfortable chewing spot, then lifted an open-mouth gaze at the visitor to his table.

"Well Beez, see yo boy takin' another run, goin for the council this time. Save yo money and yo vote, son. Gonna be a loser again. People tired a hearin' that same ole shit bout the commies, the niggers, and the Jews." Wendell Hardy was in a mood to lecture his old friend.

"Stands up for the workin man, " muttered Beasley Fellers with little conviction.
"Speakin´ this evenin´ yonda the quick stop, I´ll for sure be there. Y´oughta come too.
Might learn somp´n bout what´s goin on. "

"Know what Beezy, I´m gonna go over too. Just so I can hear all that b.s. in person. Look they ain´t a Jew within fifty miles a here, a communis´ in a thousand miles, and what blacks is here done nuthin but iron yo shirts and mow yo grass; ain´t hurt you one bit. You afraid one´em gonna take that job paintin´ stripes for the highway department? "

"Good thing I got that job, cause with all that firmative action, I´d sure never get it today. "

"That´s where you wrong, Beez. Ain´t a soul in this parish: white nor black, man nor woman wants that job. Rather be cleanin´ toilets at the airport with them Viet Cong than bent over all day on the paint machine and them fumes. "

The empty lot next to the Reliable Cafe was a multi-purpose venue. Tent revivals, political rallies, and fireworks stands took their turns there in seasonal rotation. A pair of "on this site " plaques commemorated a speech by Governor Earl K. Long as well as an evangelical appearance by the Rev. Otis Presley, alleged to be Elvis´ long lost stepbrother. This day at 4:30 p.m., the lot would host a "Wake Up America! " rally for the candidacy of Leon Lake.

For two hours prior to the scheduled event, Lake supporters readied the site with bunting and posters promoting their candidate. A round, red-faced retiree with boiled peanuts for sale dropped the tailgate of his compact Nissan pickup, temporarily concealing his "Lean On Leon " and Confederate battle flag bumper stickers. "Hot balled nuts, " he recited unconvincingly. "Mo´ nuts in my bags then they is in this crowd, " he added to no one in particular as he hoisted himself onto the tailgate. He then hooked his thumbs around the braces of is overalls in preparation for Leon Lake´s remarks. His eyes soon fixed on a limping middle-aged black man wearing a tee shirt promoting the candidacy of Lake´s opponent. The peanut man smiled condescendingly at the black man as he tossed him a bag of his inventory and waved off any expectation of payment.

Whatever intellectual capacity Zephaniah Adams had been gifted by his maker was greater than he now possessed. Adams´ opportunities had declined since his older sister accidentally dropped him on his head in his second year. An elongated heel affixed to his left-footed Redwing workboot countered a congenital disparity of six inches in the lengths of his legs. For thirty some-odd years of his physical adulthood, "Z-man " fulfilled every stereotype, held by his white neighbors, of the slow-witted rural black male. Nevertheless, his handicaps and endless good cheer spared him the derision usually heaped on his brethren. Through a constant demand for odd jobs reliably executed, Zephaniah Adams got by.

At election time, Z-man was always heavily booked. Installation of yard signs and distribution of handbills paid well. This election found him in the employ of Leon

Lake's opponent. As Lake awaited his introduction in the empty lot, the Z-man bounced gleefully through the sparse crowd composed mostly of white middle-aged men.

"Read all de troof bout Missah Lake. Rah-cheeo in de paper. Ain't no LEE-on, he a Lee-OH-need, name afta a communis, hoo-wee! " Z had memorized his brief piece well and repeated it like a well-schooled mynah. Z-man's circular was a single piece of paper. On the front was a copy of a birth certificate for Leonid Josef Lake. On the back was a court decree granting a legal name change to Leon Joseph Lake.

Few in the audience accepted Z's offer, and fewer still viewed the paper closely. The ones that did were at first disbelieving, then they became annoyed.

"Look like yo boy a plum phony theah Beezy, " Wendell crowed as he juted an elbow into Fellers' ribs and thrust the paper before him. "Even got a notary sign on it. Look like the real thing, yessir. "

"Could be, could be, " answered Beasley with the regret of one betrayed. "Lied to us. Sure did. Can't vote for no liar, course not. " Fellers rolled and licked a cigarette paper after carefully filling it with sprinklings from the Bee Tobacco pouch in his shirt pocket. His hand trembled as he aimed it to the far right crevice between his lips. He had long since mastered the technique of drawing on the cigarette with only minimal impairment of his speech. While Fellers was still searching the pockets of his overalls for matches, Wendell Hardy whipped out his zippo, seemingly pre-lit, and snapped it shut after providing his friend a light.

Four speeches later, Leon Lake was driving home alone. His thoughts centered on the shape of his message. What new fears could he conjure and implant in the already plagued minds of his would-be constituents, he asked himself. His shortcut route took him on a dark, gravel, parish road, only partially lit by a new moon. Parsons Cutoff Road had a history as dark as the evening. A white company boss had murdered a black union organizer there only three years before. While Lake railed about conspiracies, his opponent built voter support by pledging to pave this very road with asphalt. Lake's contemplation was suddenly interrupted by a fiery ball in the ditch next to his side of the highway.

At the bottom of the ditch an aged, pickup truck lay on its side smoldering next to the moon of flames which totally covered and unidentifiable vehicle and whatever unfortunates it held inside. Lake's blue eyes normally filled only with anger and disdain now held only horror at the sight before him. Slowly he studied the scene, moving toward the rear of the truck, where there appeared to be a human leg protruding from below. Moving closer, his ears were stabbed by the moans of a still conscious victim and his eyes recoiled. What he saw was a foot, bent at a tortuous angle inside a Redwing work shoe with a six- inch thick heel. Briefly his horror gave way to a satisfaction in the recognition of his opponent's foot soldier.

Lake backed away from the heat, the smoke, and an association he had no interest in furthering. Turning his back on the scene, he slid onto the driver's side of his car where the moan was at first fading and then inaudible when the ignition key was turned. Not a single vehicle had passed since his arrival and none was likely before dawn.

Leon Lake moved the gearshift into drive as he weighed the chances of survival for Zephaniah Adams in life and for himself in politics. His thumb bumped along the keys of his cellular phone as he drove forward. The hopelessness of his candidacy now moved to the front of his thoughts. There was nothing he could do; he knew it, to overcome the exposing of his secret. The future of Zephaniah Adams was less conclusive, less interesting.

He shuffled the small phone from his right palm to his left, glancing away from the road towards the numbers in his hand. Carefully he moved his right forefinger over to them and pressed in succession: 9-1-1.