

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF

MOON COUNTY



THE STORY OF ODESSA

MISSED101.COM

THE STORY OF ODESSA

There was not one thing wrong with the Crawford family name in Moon County until my older sister, Fancy, became a cashier at the five-n-dime and started letting Lady Estella read her palms and put crazy ideas in her head. Lady Estella told Fancy that a man would cause a fortunate event to take place in her life. Nobody but Fancy would get all excited about some love lie that would probably never come true.

Everybody in the house knew when Fancy had been at Lady Estella's. Supper would be late, and Uncle Paul would get the headache because he couldn't take his pills on an empty stomach. Our daddy, Deacon Charlie, would be missing clean shirts from his closet, or the day's paper would still be on the porch. Without the day's paper, I would never be able to keep up with the comings and goings in Moon County. Like last month, when the Midnight Bandit showed up here and the paper ran the story on the front page with a sketch of his face and all kinds of personal description. It threw everybody into a fit of fear. Folks were scared to sit on their porches, but that didn't stop Deacon Charlie from sitting in his porch rocker and enjoying his Bible. He just loaded up one of those old pistols he kept in the attic and held it in his lap. Deacon Charlie loved the church, and he loaned one gun apiece to all the other deacons. Things had to be pretty terrible in Moon County if Deacon Charlie felt he had to loan out a gun. Of course, most things that scared a normal Crawford just terrified Fancy. She slept on the floor in Deacon Charlie's room for a week because he slept with a pistol under his pillow. But do you think having a criminal on the loose kept Fancy from walking alone to the five-n-dime every morning and staying until dark at Lady Estella's house wasting perfectly good five dollar bills? Sure didn't. Being a Crawford, you would think Fancy had the good taste to pretend to know better, but she never listened to a word Deacon Charlie told her. She said Lady Estella told her she didn't have to listen to men.

Deacon Charlie always said Fancy was the selfish one in the family. I thoroughly agreed, and this was exactly why I told Fancy she would probably end up worse than our Cousin Addie. It really takes Deacon Charlie to tell you the whole story about Cousin Addie. She was so crazy they had to send her to live on Cherokee Island. It's the land in the middle of the Oconee River where folks go for vacation. It used to be where they sent the outcasts until the asylum was built. Cousin Addie eventually got

moved there, and she lived to be an eighty-year-old bird feeder. Deacon Charlie said that's just what happened to crazy women back in the old days.

Do you think Fancy paid attention to what Deacon Charlie said about Cousin Addie? Sure didn't. I don't think I told you about the time Fancy came home from Lady Estella's at ten o'clock at night knowing good and well Uncle Paul had to take his pills before six. Uncle Paul takes all kinds of pills, and he has a crowd of doctors and a hat box full of unpaid bills. He has seen every doctor in Moon County and Sparta County about his headaches. You can catch him at his best health after church services and in the spring when he sells lemonade on the corner. If you want Uncle Paul to like you, just ask him about caboose racing or that blue ribbon he won for eating fifty eggs at the Moon County fair. Deacon Charlie always said Uncle Paul was the talker in the family. I thoroughly disagreed. Just mention the name Mr. Reese and you'd have to throw Fancy into afternoon traffic on Main Street just to shut her up.

Mr. Reese was Fancy's artificial lover. Fancy denied it all day long. She said there was no such thing and that it was just something else I was using to make Deacon Charlie go against her for seeing Lady Estella. There most certainly was such a thing as an artificial lover. I read all about it in the newspaper while I was waiting in Dr. Pike's office. We had to drive all the way to Sparta County to see Dr. Pike because Uncle Paul swore he was the only doctor in the state of Georgia who could treat him for diarrhea. Well, there was a newspaper in Dr. Pike's office, and on page ten was an article on how grieving humans invent folks to take the place of dead loved ones. It was real psychology. My teacher talked about psychology all the time. A person like Fancy would never understand something like that. I read that article twice to make sure I had the meaning straight.

When I told Fancy that Mr. Reese was her artificial lover, she put up a wall of defense worse than Uncle Paul did when Dr. Pike told him he needed to see a head doctor. I told her Mr. Reese was artificial just as sure as the day was long and God would strike her with a bolt of lightning on a sunny day if she kept telling love lies.

"Mr. Reese is not artificial, Odessa. I suspect I'll have to have Deacon Charlie get the switch after you if you say another word against me."

"Then how come nobody has ever seen him? Lady Estella has been telling you for weeks that Mr. Reese was coming. Deacon Charlie wants to meet him. We all do!"

"There's no need to be all anxious. Deacon Charlie will meet him any day now. Lady Estella says

you can't rush good fortune. Patience is a woman's greatest virtue," said Fancy as she banged pots and pans and slammed cabinet doors, trying to get supper ready before Deacon Charlie and Uncle Paul got home from the barbershop. She sat plates on the newspaper I had spread out on the table just when I was getting to the good part about how the Midnight Bandit was all laid up in the hospital because Deacon Morris shot him in the arm when he tried to break into his house.

"It says right here that Deacon Morris held the Midnight Bandit at gunpoint until the sheriffs came and arrested both of them. They got one for attempted robbery and the other for carrying somebody else's gun."

"You don't have to tell me everything. I read it. Come help me with supper."

"You can't tell me what to do."

"I most certainly can. Deacon Charlie told me that I'm the woman of the house now, and I have to teach you how to be one, too."

"You know Deacon Morris has that heart condition that mamma had. It's just shameful the way that sheriff locked him up."

"So what? Folks go to the jailhouse every day. Deacon Morris is no different. Lady Estella says it will do him plenty of good to feel what it's like to be on the other side of justice. Lady Estella has one of those special minds. You're too young to understand a woman like her. She knows her rights."

"Well, it says here that the Midnight Bandit will go straight to the jailhouse next week when they release him from that new hospital they just finished building."

"So what? They should have built a hospital in Moon County years ago. If you don't come help me with supper, I'm going to tell Deacon Charlie to get the switch after you."

When we all finally sat down at the table to sort through the Wednesday leftovers Fancy threw together and called supper, she started explaining to Deacon Charlie why there were no clean shirts hanging in his closet. "Oh, I was late coming home from the five-n-dime. Mr. Tile likes for us to help him count the stock."

"This ham don't taste right. It tastes old," hollered Uncle Paul.

"The ham is perfectly fine, you sour fool. I think it is best you shut up and eat if you want to take your pills."

"It is too late, and who says you can talk to me like that? Who do you think you are? Deacon Charlie, you hear how Fancy just talked?" asked Uncle Paul.

"Deacon Charlie, don't listen to them," Fancy said.

"Well, you know that's not her real name," said Deacon Charlie. "Her real name is Beatrice—Beatrice Robinson. Only God knows why she started calling herself Lady Estella."

"She ain't no lady, either. I've seen goats with more manners than that woman," said Uncle Paul.

"She is, too," said Fancy.

"This ham don't taste right. I know something is wrong with this ham," said Uncle Paul.

"It's left over, Uncle Paul. Fancy is too lazy to cook a fresh meal."

"I suspect I need to beg your pardon, Odessa, seeing how you want to be all grown up, but you don't lift a finger to help around this house. Deacon Charlie, don't you think it's about time Odessa took on her share of responsibilities around here now that I am a career woman?"

"You know your cousin David ran a farm and raised ten children all by himself after Eugenia died. God knows Eugenia sure was a sweet woman. Sweet as can be, that Eugenia. Odessa, help your sister."

"But I wasn't the one who told Fancy she had to go out and get a job in the first place; was I, Uncle Paul?"

"It was you, Deacon Charlie. There's no denying it. I heard you tell her with my own ears," said Uncle Paul. "It's that Lady Estella that's got her talking this way. Months ago, you wouldn't even know Fancy was in the house. Now, every day she comes in late and brings in a thunderstorm with her. I haven't taken my pills on time in two weeks."

"That is not my fault," said Fancy.

"See? You hear that, Deacon Charlie? You hear that talk? It's disrespectful. That's what it is. And this is the worst supper I ever had in my life. It's worse than the worst. I'm never going to eat Fancy's cooking again."

"If that's the way you want it, fine then. You could drop dead right this minute of starvation of the stomach and see if I care. I suspect it's time for me to make my departure from this table and eat my supper in my room. I wish not to be bothered for the rest of my life, thank you very much."

As soon as Fancy was out of the room, Uncle Paul was stretched spread eagle on the kitchen floor hollering about food poisoning and having his stomach pumped. It scared every last one of us worse than the Midnight Bandit. So we all rushed Uncle Paul to the new hospital, and it's clean and lovely. Fancy said she was sorry and tried to take back those words she said to Uncle Paul. The only person who forgave her was Deacon Charlie and that wasn't a surprise at all.

We sat in the waiting room for hours flipping through magazines and admiring everything.

But do you think Fancy calmed down and prayed for forgiveness from God like Deacon Charlie told her to? Sure didn't. Fancy asked the nurse whether Uncle Paul was going to die of food poisoning about a hundred times. To keep Fancy from asking so many questions, the nurse told her that maybe she should walk around the hospital to calm her nerves.

Do you remember that fortunate event that Lady Estella said would happen to Fancy? Well, Fancy said it happened right there in the hospital. Of course, none of us saw it. While we were waiting in the visiting room drinking coffee and reading, Fancy was walking all around the hospital playing Ms. Nosey and came face-to-face with the Midnight Bandit in the women's bathroom. Fancy made me swear on the Bible and promised me her week's pay if I would not tell Deacon Charlie about the incident. She said she recognized the Midnight Bandit the minute he stepped out of the stall dressed up like some janitor.

I asked her if she was scared out of her natural-born mind. What she said sounded like something straight out of Lady Estella's mouth. Fancy said she saw his face and looked into those eyes of his and saw instant love. Fancy told me he looked exactly like Mr. Reese when he winked his left eye at her. I didn't believe a word of her story until I caught her sneaking out the back door with a suitcase later that night.

"Fancy, just where do you think you're going at this time of the night?"

"I'm running away with the Midnight Bandit. He asked me to go with him to Chattanooga."

"What! Fancy, are you out of your natural-born mind? You've never lived outside Moon County a day in your life."

"That doesn't matter. Guess what he told me at that hospital, Odessa?"

"What?"

"He said I was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen in the whole wide world, and he wants to spend the rest of his life with me."

"For God's sake, Fancy, what do you expect a man on the loose to say. Where is he? I'll get Deacon Charlie to go shoot him."

"He is waiting for me over at Lady Estella's. I told him to go there to be safe."

"What am I supposed to tell Deacon Charlie?"

"Nothing. You promised me you wouldn't tell. Lady Estella says silence is a woman's greatest virtue."

If you ask me, Fancy didn't stay away long enough for anybody to really miss her. Sure, Deacon Charlie asked me a thousand questions about why Fancy left home. I told him I didn't know, but I don't think he believed a word I said. Uncle Paul said it

would do Fancy plenty of good to get away from Lady Estella. I agreed. Uncle Paul was not around the house much because Dr. Pike drove over from Sparta County one day and arranged to have him committed to a two-week program at the asylum. He got his own room and his own personal attendant. Uncle Paul went into a rage when he realized he couldn't come home. It took three attendants to strap him to his bed. After a day or two, he started to like it a little. He said the cooking at the asylum was better than Fancy's.

For the first time, there was peace and quiet in the Crawford house. The ladies at the church took turns coming over to cook and clean because I wasn't lifting a finger. The place was a mess the week Deacon Morris was found dead in his living room just two days after he was released from the jailhouse and fined for carrying Deacon Charlie's gun. The doctor said Deacon Morris died of a massive heart attack. His obituary was printed on the front page of the newspaper along with the story about the Midnight Bandit being captured and locked up in the Sparta State Prison.

Of course, Fancy showed up at the funeral in the same dress she left in the night she ran away with the Midnight Bandit. She pitched the biggest fit over Deacon Morris. It was much more embarrassing than anything Uncle Paul ever did. Everybody forgot about the wife and looked at Fancy on her knees screaming about dedicating the rest of her life to serving the will of God. Folks didn't know whether to cry or clap for her. Then Deacon Charlie went over to help her up, and he gave her a big hug. Fancy slept for two days, and Deacon Charlie made me promise to be nice to her. That was harder than I thought because she was always trying to tell me what to do. Fancy took a leave of absence from her job at the five-n-dime and said she wanted to spend her time serving Jesus. She promised Deacon Charlie she wouldn't go back to Lady Estella's. Instead, she rushed off to every Bible study or church meeting there was. Fancy even joined the choir, knowing perfectly well no Crawford could ever carry a tune. Deacon Charlie loved every bit of it and suggested that I become a woman of the church, too.

Uncle Paul eventually came home, but he still had to go to group counseling every Wednesday. Sometimes, we all went. This was Fancy's idea. I thoroughly disagreed, but she told Deacon Charlie that we should support each other more. It was a lot like being in church on Sunday. The only thing was that folks had to talk about themselves instead of God. We all got along real fine until Fancy caught that virus that she said was going around. Fancy couldn't start the morning without spending twenty minutes in the bathroom.

"Deacon Charlie, I do believe I must have caught the virus. I hear it is going around," said Fancy at the kitchen table.

"I ain't heard about a virus," said Uncle Paul.

"Whatever you got, I hope it's not contagious," I said.

"Don't worry, Odessa. You'd have to go to bed with a man to get what Fancy has," said Uncle Paul.

"What are you saying there, Uncle Paul?" asked Deacon Charlie.

"I suspect I need to beg your pardon, Uncle Paul, seeing how you don't know a thing about a woman's body."

"You can't fool me. I know the signs of science," said Uncle Paul.

"What signs?" asked Deacon Charlie.

"Deacon Charlie, I think Uncle Paul is saying Fancy is going to have a baby," I said.

"Shut up, Odessa," said Fancy.

"With no husband in sight, I might add," said Uncle Paul.

"Shut up, Uncle Paul. You sour fool."

"Listen at how she talks. Deacon Charlie, I thought you said Fancy changed. She hasn't changed one bit and now she's got this bastard child coming into the world by God knows who. Just shameful, that's all. I'm glad my sister is not around here to witness the bad example you're setting for Odessa."

"Well, Fancy, what do you have to say for yourself?" asked Deacon Charlie.

"That's just some more of Uncle Paul's nonsense talk. Even if I was with child, I have no earthly idea how it happened."

"Don't play innocent. You know how it happened. Ain't but one way. You can't fool me," said Uncle Paul. "I know what you were doing while you were gone."

"I beg you not to put words in my mouth. There are plenty of other ways to get pregnant."

"Name one," I said.

"Immaculate conception!"

"My teacher says there is no such thing!" I said.

"How do you think we got Jesus?" Fancy asked me.

"There is no need for you to be dragging the good name of the Lord into the mess you've made. That's blaspheming if I ever heard it," said Uncle Paul.

"Just ask Deacon Charlie, if you don't believe me," Fancy said.

"That sounds like something Lady Estella told you to say. You promised Deacon Charlie that you wouldn't go to Lady Estella's anymore," I said.

"Lady Estella didn't tell me anything. I got it from the Bible, thank you very much. Tell them, Deacon Charlie."

"Fancy is right. It happened in the Bible, to Mary, the mother of the Lord."

"Fancy ain't no Mary!" said Uncle Paul. She might be Mary Magdalene, but she ain't Mary, the mother of the Lord."

"Are you calling me a liar in my own house?" asked Deacon Charlie.

"No, but if you let Fancy get away with dragging the Bible through the mud, I'm moving to Sparta County with Dr. Pike, and I'm going to live under false identification."

"Nobody's going anywhere until we all go to the hospital to get everything checked out for sure," said Deacon Charlie.

When we got to the hospital, the doctor paid more attention to Uncle Paul than Fancy. The minute we walked through the door, Uncle Paul started complaining about chest pains and an ingrown toenail. The doctor admitted him right on the spot.

After Uncle Paul was released, he told everybody in Moon County that the doctor said Fancy was going to have a bastard child. Well, the doctor didn't say the word "bastard." Uncle Paul added that part later. Of course, Deacon Charlie and Fancy told everybody the baby was a miracle from God.

And if you must know the details of how all this turned out, Fancy told Deacon Charlie that she thought it was a good idea if I held her job at the five-n-dime while school was out for the summer. Because I was going to be an aunt, he thought I should take on more responsibility, which sounded like something Fancy probably told him to tell me.

Working at the five-n-dime was just like going to church. You always got a chance to see everybody you didn't want to see. Folks made all kinds of jokes about the family. Some of them asked me when I was going to give Deacon Charlie another grandchild. The part about the marriage before the baby carriage didn't even matter anymore, thanks to Fancy. She sure set some fine example for me to follow. Folks thought I knew anything and everything about her just because we were sisters. I couldn't make it through the day without folks asking questions about Fancy's baby being the child of a convict. Honestly, who could be mean enough to start a nasty rumor like that? Folks asked me all the time what I thought about it. I told them to go ask Lady Estella because only she could tell for sure whether Moon County should be expecting a future criminal, a saint or somebody between the two.

Questions for Discussion and Writing

1. How does Fancy negotiate her traditional role in her family, and what does this suggest about the predicament of women in her community?
2. Why do you think Odessa is unable to see her sister's sophisticated maneuvering in a more favorable light?
3. What role does comedy play in highlighting the strains and stresses of family life?
4. 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?

This story is an excerpt from *The Autobiography of Moon County*. Copyright © 2016 Missed Education 101, LLC. All Rights Reserved.

For information, please visit MISSED101.COM.

ME:101

MISSED101.COM

Always Learning Outside the Box