

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF

MOON COUNTY



THE STORY OF MATTIE

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That Baby Ramus was just as devilish as ever—kicking Dr. Pike in the shin and hiding under my bed with a jar of crickets. Dressed in a suit and thick spectacles, Dr. Pike drove all the way from Sparta County to check on me. He told me I was not allowed out of the bed. I had heard those same words a long time ago, when I fell on the floor in the kitchen and lost the baby. A smart man like Dr. Pike seldom minced words when it came to telling a woman like me the truth, especially when she had lost such a special part of herself. He let me rest all alone before coming into the room to whisper in my ear that there would be other chances. Why did I believe him? In those days, I believed in other chances, and I felt the door had not closed on me forever. After all, I was already a wife and a mother. There was cooking and cleaning. There was planting, picking and milking. Porter and his daddy were always there, rising up between me and life and pushing out the fresh air and quiet. His daddy died when Porter was seventeen, and I had grown used to Dr. Pike coming in and going out of our house and closing doors. I could see him when I closed my eyes to sleep, and now his whispers were too loud. I laid in the bed listening to him in the other room, talking to Porter and Laura while he tended to Baby Ramus.

“Laura, Baby Ramus is fine, and a good spanking wouldn’t hurt him none! He is running a little fever but catching crickets in a jar probably didn’t cause it. If anything, he might be coming down with a September cold. If you can, you might want to keep him inside for a day of rest. And Porter, you shouldn’t be making many plans that include old Miss Mattie. Let her die in peace. Nowadays, that’s the best way.”

Who was Dr. Pike calling old? There were days when I felt as young as I was when Porter was born. He talked as if somehow death had already met me walking along the road and would not let me pass. Laura was always there to comment, like what Dr. Pike couldn’t tell Porter she could. Porter should have married a smarter woman. What made her ever believe that chicken soup could replace what seventy years of hard living took away from me? It never could. But Laura didn’t believe much that didn’t come from her own mouth—or Dr. Pike’s. Her tongue was too quick and her ears were closed. She was so hard to talk to because she didn’t listen to me. There were times I had to remind her that Porter didn’t listen to her and she could never know a man like the back of her hand. She was a young mother

with too much hair and pride. She hadn’t lived long enough to know that sometimes the loved did not always love the lover.

“Baby Ramus, get down from there! If you don’t get yourself down off that dresser, I’m going to have your daddy come in there and get you good! Don’t let me catch you climbing on that dresser bothering those crickets again. Dr. Pike has already been out here once today. Get down from there before you wake up Miss Mattie. I told your daddy she wasn’t well enough to keep good eyes on you. Sit in her rocking chair, like I told you. Get there! Right this instant!”

“Grandma Mattie is dead. I don’t want to sit by her.”

“No, she’s not. Dr. Pike said she’s just heavy sleeping. Now get down before I make your daddy take his belt off and come in that room and get you good. And you’d better not take off that sweater.”

“Take a picture of me!”

“What?”

“Take a picture of me!”

“I don’t have time to take a picture of you now. Didn’t I tell you that I have to help your daddy out in the field? Now get in that rocking chair right this instant.”

“This morning, you said if I’m good you’ll take a picture of me. I’ve been good too long.”

“You haven’t been good since the day you were born. Sit down in that rocking chair and don’t let me peek through this window again and see you out of it or else your daddy is going to get you good.”

Why did Laura like to waste time with such silliness? She thought she was a good mother because she said and did all the right things, but she didn’t like washing the windows and scrubbing the kitchen floor. I told her that sometimes the windows and the floors were the only things a woman had to call her own.

Porter wouldn’t have time to bother her about things like that. He always walked around the house looking worried. His daddy was like that. He worried about the payments he owed to Mr. Murphy over at the Moon County Bank. I worried that Porter would never learn to walk. I complained that the baby crawled for too long. His daddy thought that was what all babies did. I stood Porter up, only to watch him fall heavy on the floor and cry. It was too much for a mother. I remembered those days of falling and crying, and I realized that it was just too much for any mother. Dr. Pike came. Each time he told us that Porter was a child full of health. He should have given me some medicine to give to Porter. It would have put my mind at ease, and maybe I wouldn’t have demanded so much from him.

One of the ladies in the church told me that Porter had weak legs and that I should rub a little cow manure on them and wrap them in wet cloth. Porter's daddy said that could never help Porter learn how to walk. But those were days when I had short patience and uneven love. Many days, I worked late into the quiet of the night. There were too many times when we'd both come in late from the field. Porter's daddy was either killing hogs or plowing the field. I remembered the day he walked into the kitchen with bloody hands and saw Porter spread across my lap with cloths wrapped around his legs. He watched me stare at the walls with my head held high. That evening, he sat Porter in a corner and walked to the other side of the kitchen. He pulled out a little toy. Porter rose on his own and walked across the kitchen floor to him. His daddy looked at me and told me that I was silly and foolish and that he did not want gravy on his chicken. We sat down at the kitchen table for another quiet supper.

"Baby Ramus, is Porter sitting at the kitchen table?"

"Grandma Mattie, breakfast is over and my momma said I was a good little boy because I ate all of my food."

"Go tell Porter it is time for dinner and his daddy wants him to get out of that corner and come sit at the table."

"My momma told me not to leave this room, and I ain't moving because she said she was going to take a picture of me."

"Baby Ramus, come hold Grandma Mattie's hands."

"No! I don't want to. I'm drawing a picture."

"Don't you want to hold Grandma Mattie's hands so they can stay warm?"

"No! You're going to pinch me."

"Grandma won't pinch you."

"I ain't moving. My momma said she was going to take a picture of me. If I move, she won't take it."

If Laura had listened to me, she never would have wasted so much time telling him lies. She would have known that truth was somewhere waiting for Baby Ramus. I wished I could sit her down at the kitchen table and make her do her homework all over again. I kept pencils in the kitchen drawer because Porter was always losing his. I walked in and saw him with his head down and papers and pencils were scattered all over the kitchen table. I put down my coat and the egg basket and sat there until he finished. Porter could not leave the table until he finished his homework. If I had known better, I might have been able to see then that this was the beginning of what the teachers at the schoolhouse would later

call the "problem" with Porter. I wished there was some good woman somewhere who could have told me what it was all supposed to mean.

Would I have listened to her? I was pulled in so many directions with so many things to worry about. I was tired. I looked older than my years. I didn't want to add to the worries already sitting on my shoulders like heavy laundry baskets. School was such a small thing to worry about. Talk about teachers and books was such a small thing. There were too many long nights of fighting about small things. We were a family that was uncomfortable with one another's ways. We were all so stubborn in quiet ways. I let the small things be. There was always cotton to be picked. There were all those dead corn stalks that needed to be cut down. There was the constant weariness in my mind about frosts lasting until late March and the sinking feeling I had in my stomach when we explained to Mr. Murphy why our payments were late again. I didn't see much use in arguing with a man who blamed me for doing nothing to stop Porter from burning the first book the teacher had ever given him. I believed that fire could make children good. Silly woman. Foolish woman. Later, I realized that pulling the pages out of a book and throwing them into a fire really couldn't make a child good at all.

"I'm hot!"

"Baby Ramus, you put that sweater back on!"

"I'm hot."

"You're not hot! Put that sweater back on or else I'm not going to take a picture of you."

"This morning, you said that if I'm good you'll take a picture of me. I've been good all day, and the crickets in my jar don't sing anymore and I'm tired of sitting in this rocking chair."

"Stop that crying before you wake Miss Mattie up."

"Grandma Mattie is dead! She won't say one word when I ask her something. I've been good too long. You said if I'm good you'll take a picture of me."

"Hush up with all that silly talk! Work on your letter printing."

"I don't want to work on letter printing. I hate letter printing."

"Draw then. Don't you want to be a artist when you grow up?"

"No, I want to be like Dr. Pike, so I can make Grandma Mattie talk to me."

"The only way you can be a doctor is if you stop crying and draw."

"Then you'll take a picture of me?"

"Yes."

She should have told him no. It would make things easier for him if he learned to trust that word sooner rather than later. It would help him to survive. Many children do not survive no matter how much the reverend's wife prays for them and begs them to give Easter speeches in church. The reverend's wife begged Porter to give his speech in front of all the church members. She handed him a piece of candy wrapped in foil paper and he said yes. His daddy thought a twelve-year-old boy was too old to give an Easter speech. He said there was not enough money to buy a new shirt for Porter after Mr. Murphy came to the house and told him that it did no good to keep explaining lies. He asked me why I didn't make Porter a shirt, like I had done so many times before. I told him I thought it would help if Porter was dressed like the other children. He said Porter was not like other children and that some people might not understand his ways. But I knew Dr. Pike would understand because he had a son about Porter's age. Dr. Pike told me his son had a closet full of new shirts. He gave Porter one of them to wear to church that Sunday. Dr. Pike told him everything would be fine.

Porter stood up in front of the congregation and opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He looked up toward the ceiling for the words to his speech, but they weren't there. He looked at the reverend's wife standing behind him. There was no candy wrapped in foil paper for her to give. Porter's daddy told me that Porter couldn't give an Easter speech in front of all of those staring eyes. Somehow, I convinced myself that Porter could. I prayed about it. I spent all of those late evenings at the kitchen table listening to him repeat the words like a song. That Sunday morning, he asked me if everything was going to be all right. I told him everything would be fine, not understanding how much it might cost me if I was wrong.

When the children laughed Porter out of the church, his daddy stood up because I couldn't. I watched all of those eyes turn towards him as if people expected him to give the speech for Porter. His daddy only apologized. I sat there because I had no words to say. I was wrong and I just hoped God would make my punishment something I could bear. I hoped the good people in church knew that Porter wasn't the cause. I was. It was too late for me to explain everything, so I sat in silence. I was ashamed to admit that his daddy was right; Porter was different. He had probably run off to hide in some corner somewhere, recognizing for the first time in his life that some people weren't good at all and that there were no reasons left for him to trust me ever again.

"Baby Ramus, are you being a good little

boy, sitting in that rocking chair drawing a picture for your momma?"

"Are you and Daddy almost finished working?"

"Yes."

"I want to be a doctor when I grow up, because I have been good since this morning and you're going to take a picture of me."

"I'll take it when we finish, and only if you are a good little boy."

"What if Grandma Mattie died before you finished?"

"Miss Mattie will not die before I finish. Dr. Pike said she has plenty of time to see you grow up. Put your pointing finger under her nose."

"I feel air!"

"See. What did I tell you? Miss Mattie is just heavy sleeping."

"I don't want to sit in that rocking chair anymore. I'm sleepy. Can I go to sleep in the bed, too?"

"Only if you are good and go straight to sleep just like Miss Mattie."

Just like Miss Mattie, Laura said. I was never the model. Was my experience of any use to her? I wished she would cut her hair and close her mouth. I wished that she would clean the windows and scrub the kitchen floor before she cooked the chicken. And no gravy. Porter will not eat gravy on his chicken and neither would his daddy. When his daddy died, Porter was seventeen years old and had run away from home more times than I care to recall. He left home with his books every morning, but he didn't go to school. I spent so many days at the sheriff's office trying to keep Porter from being sent to the reformatory. He missed too many days in school, so he had to repeat grade ten twice. Miss Beetlewell was Porter's teacher. She was young and sat behind a wooden desk full of papers. She held a folder in her hand that she said indicated that "Porter's ability to learn certain basic concepts was low." Miss Beetlewell never told me what those basic concepts were and why they were so important. I asked her if she knew anything about cotton fields, and she stared at me with suspicion. I asked her what she thought her momma might have lost raising her and helping her daddy make a living when times were hard. She said my questions seemed "irrelevant to the conversation at hand, because the real problem was why Porter couldn't learn the basic concepts." I told her how Porter once nursed a cow back to health after infection took her down for two weeks. I told her how he could kill a hog and have the meat tied and hanging up in the smokehouse before dark. I asked her did she have a test that told her what those

things might indicate about him. But she just looked at me like she was surprised I could even form the question. She never answered me. Silly woman.

Porter sat in a chair in the corner the whole time I talked to Miss Beetlewell. I called him over to her desk and asked him what he thought. Porter told me and Miss Beetlewell that he didn't see much use in school anymore and he thought he was better at growing things. Miss Beetlewell told him she thought he was making a big mistake and he would regret the day he ever left school. Porter spoke before I could. He told her she didn't know what he would regret because she didn't know him. I reached out to him, but he pulled himself back as if the hand that tried to touch him would do more to hurt than help. Porter walked out of that classroom, and I knew that had changed him more than fire ever could. That day changed me. It was the day that the part of me that was a part of him died. I didn't need a folder full of indications, like Miss Beetlewell, to know that.

I told her God would help Porter. I told her that putting everything in the hands of God was the best way. One day, Laura will have to travel the same road with Baby Ramus. I hoped that she would be ready for the journey. The world had a different story to teach her, and she would have a different story to tell. All of those years I fussed and fiddled and Laura never understood what kind of woman I was. I was a silly woman, a foolish woman and a woman who killed a part of herself with her own hand. I believed in Dr. Pike. I believed in chances and whispers and open doors. Why bother with memories that were precious yet unwanted? Maybe, they mattered so much to me because they didn't matter at all to anyone else. Maybe, the words Dr. Pike whispered in my ear just before he closed the door on me forever were too hard and too true for any woman to live by. People die, he said, regardless.

"Baby Ramus, you should be ashamed of yourself for doing that! Take every last one of those crickets off Miss Mattie's forehead and put them back in that jar. Right this instant!"

"They're dead."

"Why aren't you being a good little boy?"

"Because you're a liar. You're not going to take a picture of me and you know it!"

"You take back those words or else I'm going to make your daddy send you to the reformatory. You take back those words right now, Baby Ramus!"

"No! You lied to me."

"Put those crickets in that jar. Right this instant! Here comes your daddy. He's going to get you good for being such a bad little boy."

"No, he's not!"

"You just wait and see. Your daddy's coming in there to get you good for being such a bad little boy and talking back to your momma."

"No, he's not, because Grandma Mattie is dead."

"Hush, Baby Ramus! Bad little boys like you can't play doctor. Get that cricket off Miss Mattie's nose! She's not dead, so stop that playing and let her be."

"Well, how come I don't feel air and I don't want to have my picture taken or be a doctor anymore?"

Questions for Discussion and Writing

1. How is Mattie's being on her deathbed relevant to the advice she wants to give to Laura?
2. What role does regret play in helping to establish Mattie's character, and how do you think that affects her relationship with her son?
3. What makes a person a successful parent? How do Porter's parents fit that description?
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?

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