

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF

MOON COUNTY



THE STORY OF CYRUS

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Almost every day, somebody walks into my store asking about a job. If I could ask one thing in return, I'd ask, "Are you a Christian?" It ain't like me to go and hire Tom, Dick or Harry at the drop of a dime. Since life hasn't always been easy for me or for half the folks I know here in Moon County, Georgia, I thought I should tell you that I built this little grocery store from the ground up, but don't let the small size of it fool you. My store might not be as big as old Potter's, but it has made me a pretty content man as far as money goes. I must have stacked over one million canned goods in my lifetime, and I expect to stack many more before it's all over for me. You have to remember to turn the cans so the labels face the front or the lazy folks will complain that it's hard to tell the beans from the peas.

I believe in knowing folks. I know about everybody here in Moon County, and I get a chance to talk to half the population every week. A job like mine requires you to talk a lot, but there are times when I don't say one word. I keep my mouth shut tighter than a rat trap. In fact, I think it's probably a good thing when folks don't say anything at all. A lot of folks come in on Fridays because that's payday at the cotton mill. You can't let them boss you, especially if it is one of those days when you've decided you're better off keeping quiet. If folks ask me why I'm not talking, I ignore them. I put their groceries in the bag and let them pick up one of those trash magazines that talks about love affairs and folks seeing Jesus in places like Omaha. Honestly, I don't understand how folks can move a pencil to write some of the mean things they write and then have the nerve to add the name of Jesus to it. I wonder why folks would want to do something mean to a good man's name.

Like I was saying, I don't hire any Tom, Dick or Harry at the drop of a dime. Tobias Cutter used to work here. He had to quit, though. Tobias was all muscle and he always looked like he was set on tearing up the world. He never said much of anything to anybody. I thought he was the quiet type. You might hear some folks say I fired him, but that's just a falsehood. If you don't believe anything else about me, I want you to believe that I give folks chances because I'm a good man at heart. Tobias is making havoc over in the jailhouse, and he might spend the rest of his life in the Sparta State Prison if he is convicted. I haven't found anybody to take his place. I need to because I'm in my bullfrog years and I can't do all the work around here myself. The canned goods in the back need to be stacked on the shelves. The apples and oranges need to be put on display. The floors need to be swept. When

folks see dirt on the floor, it makes them not want to spend their money. Everything else is what I call "learn-as-you-go."

I think everybody on this earth has the potential to do something good in life. I used to tell Tobias that all the time. I don't think he ever listened to me. That is exactly what is wrong with the folks in Moon County ... they won't pay you two cents' worth of attention if what you have to say doesn't line up with love affairs and folks seeing Jesus in places like Omaha.

Most folks around Moon County claim to be Christians, but the church I used to go to doesn't even exist anymore. Some folks still believe lightning struck and caused it to burn to the ground because of the stories reporters wrote about Jesus. Those magazines sold quicker than cheap diamonds. Folks came in, got a long-neck cola drink and stood in front of the store with their faces tucked between the pages. I bet not a single one of them ever read the Bible from cover to cover. Of course, it is a difficult piece of reading. I read every now and again when business is slow. I allow my employees to do e-d-u-c-a-t-i-o-n from time to time. If the judge decides not to send him to the Sparta State Prison, I'm hoping Tobias Cutter will walk through that door knowing the meaning of every word in the used dictionary I sent to the jailhouse just for him.

My wife's name is Myrtle, and she has a sister named Alice. Alice gave me that used dictionary for Christmas last year, and I kept it under the counter before I gave it to Tobias. Let me tell you something about Alice. The place in her head where they were supposed to use screws ... well, somebody used thumbtacks, and that is why Alice is crazy on Mondays and Saturdays. She comes in on one of her crazy days and does her best to put everything on credit like she does when she goes to old Potter's store. You've got to have a spine with her, seeing how she is a slow learner. You have to make a person like Alice understand that family ties don't always work and that you're not some Tom, Dick or Harry hired at the drop of a dime.

Let me be the first to tell you that q-u-a-l-i-t-y goes a long way with me. I tried to make Tobias look the word up, but I couldn't get that mean thing to open that dictionary for anything on this side of Moon County. He said there were more important things to do in life besides look up words in a dictionary, but it only takes about a minute. I guess he is regretting that now. Life will make you regret a lot of things. It seems that is just the way it works when people end up doing the wrong things. That's why you've got to do right the first time around or you'll be messed up until the day you die.

That's why I started going to church, before folks said lightning struck it and burned it down. I bet it might be hard for you to imagine lightning striking a church. It was hard for me, too. All I could do was watch those flames light up a dark rainy night. Nobody except Reverend James said one word. I have lived in Moon County all my life. I used to think folks here were the talking type like me, but that night it was so quiet I could hear the rain beating against my face. When most folks come to my store, one or two might ask me what I thought really happened that night, but I don't say one word. I keep my mouth closed tighter than a can of corn. It's hard to get a secret out of me when I'm playing the mule. The sad part of the whole story is that it's taking a long time to rebuild our church. I heard it was because we didn't have enough money. That wasn't hard for me to believe because Reverend James up and left with the insurance money.

The Reverend and I used to have little talks from time to time. He'd come in and stand right over by the register dressed in his suit and hat, as usual. The Reverend never liked to touch doorknobs or shake hands with us common folks. He used his handkerchief or wore gloves to protect what he called his holy hands. We'd make conversation, trying to see who could get the most words in the air. Reverend James has been divorced twice. His third wife is a young girl named Ruby, and he won't let Ruby out of his sight for anything on this side of Moon County. Every now and again, he brought her into the store with him. She never said more than two words, hello and goodbye. You couldn't get Tobias to work right when Ruby came into the store. The Reverend would give Tobias a list of groceries to get together while we talked. Every time he had to pass Ruby, Tobias tripped over his own feet like he had weak legs or something. One time, I thought I saw Tobias wink at Ruby. After that, the only time I ever saw Ruby again was in church on Sundays.

One day, Ed Lawson came into the store before Reverend James arrived. Ed bought a long-neck cola drink. There are a few things you ought to know about old Ed Lawson. I can tell you all about him and what he used to do when he came to church. Ed used to come to Sunday service and take his shoes off and sleep just like he was on a Florida vacation. He's the president of the Gentlemen's Society here in Moon County. It's a club for men who like to get drunk, tear up the county and chase loose women. Every now and again, they help society by giving ten dollars to the senior student who writes the best composition. Last year, Ed made himself one of the judges and everybody knew he could hardly spell his own first name. When Ed drinks too many cola drinks, he'll give you the whole pedigree of the

Gentlemen's Society and tell some of their secrets. The Gentlemen's Society has been around for years and if you must know, I wouldn't join for a million dollars.

By the looks of things, you'd never know Ed was in some kind of Gentlemen's Society. He mostly dressed in overalls, and you couldn't catch him without a toothpick in his mouth. He'd come in here and grab a long-neck cola drink out of the ice box and grab one of those trash magazines, fold it and put it under his arm. Then we'd go sit in front of the store and talk. He'd tell me all about the Gentlemen's Society because he has always tried to get me to join. You'd be pretty amazed at how they go about initiating new members. I heard that one of the things they do is get you drunk on homemade gin, then paddle your backside just to see if you are a man who is good enough to be voted in. But Ed said from his own mouth that I shouldn't believe that because it was just a falsehood. Ed told me they have to wear those cone hats with a tassel because of tradition. He told me that they go somewhere besides Moon County when they really wanted to have a good time, but if you wake up one morning and the mailbox is all busted up, you should not be surprised if it turns out that somebody in the Gentlemen's Society did it.

Ed told me none of the men in the Gentlemen's Society knew one thing about what happened to our church. Ed and his folks have been members of the church for as long as I can remember. Ed told me he was hurt folks would even think somebody in the Gentlemen's Society could do such a terrible thing. He said he was trying hard to repent so he wouldn't end up in hell when he died.

Then Ed opened up that trash magazine he had tucked under his arm, and we both agreed it was a shame the way those reporters disgraced the Son of God. But he read on. I used to believe Ed was a good man, so I asked him if he ever heard a voice whispering in his ear when nobody else was around. He told me that he did, but he didn't know who it was. I told Ed that I heard a voice whispering to me all the time and that I thought it was God. Ed said he never thought about it like that, but I was probably right. Then Ed asked me if I had ever read the Bible from cover to cover. I told him that I was trying to, but certain parts like Revelation just gave me the fits because I couldn't figure out the meaning. It shocked me to the core when Ed said that Revelation meant that the Savior was coming down from heaven to make this world a better place for everybody.

So Reverend James walked into the store just minutes after Ed left. I tell the Reverend exactly what took place between me and Ed, and he can't believe that I'm friendly with a backslider like Ed Lawson. Ed said the Gentlemen's Society and most of the

regular good folks claim they didn't know what happened to the church. Reverend James didn't believe me. He said that Ed knew the truth and he wasn't going to tell it because he was known to admit to doing real bad things when he drank too much gin. The Reverend also told me that if I didn't want to end up in the asylum, I had better stop telling folks that God whispered in my ear, even if Ed said I was probably right. Then he told me I needed to read the Bible more and stop talking to that devil, Ed Lawson. But I told him that Ed did more talking to me and that I was just a listener. But he said that was worse. So when he left that day, I felt awfully bad and took aims to keep my mouth shut and repent again. But you and I both know that repenting ain't as easy as some folks say it is.

Personally, I didn't see anything so terrible about telling folks that God whispered in my ear. It wasn't like I was going around claiming to be one of those disciples you read about in the Bible. I have my flaws, as Reverend James called them. I admit I don't much like stacking canned goods every week. I admit I take a sip of gin every other night. Sometimes, when I tell Myrtle that I'm going fishing, I go find myself a cool shady place out by the Oconee River and drink myself dizzy. I admit that I even cheated on Myrtle, but I only did it once and I later found out that she knew about it anyway. I told her about God whispering in my ear, and she said that if God whispered to me there was hope for me after all. I could become a born-again Christian.

It was Myrtle who made me go to church. I didn't want to pay tithes, but Myrtle said that I should because I had a lot of sins. So I went to church pretty regular in a suit and one of the ties that Myrtle bought me for Christmas. I paid my tithes. I said my prayers. I still had the gin hidden in the back of the coat closet so Myrtle couldn't find it and fuss at me. If she did, I'd just go out and fish in the Oconee River. Nobody bothered me when I went there. Sitting out there alone, I could hear God whispering in my ear all day long. Most times he said, "You're a good man, Cyrus." I figured that was the one thing he wanted me to remember because that's what he always told me. I understood simple words much better than the words in the Bible. But now that we don't have a church or a reverend, I don't read the Bible anymore. I read my dictionary instead. I guess you're probably thinking I'm i-n-c-o-r-r-i-g-i-b-l-e.

Maybe, you can't see that the church meant a lot to folks in Moon County. All that Bible stuff Reverend James talked about started to make sense to me after a while. But whenever I talked to him and I explained back to him what I read in the Bible, he'd say my meanings were all wrong and he'd change them around. Then he'd tell me I needed to study my

Bible more and stop taking God's name in vain. So I'd get mad and tell him he was going against my way of seeing things. Then he'd tell me that was no way to be talking to a man who always walked in the footsteps of Jesus.

Well, a few days later, folks were running down the road in the rain screaming and hollering about how our church was burning. I wouldn't have believed it if so many folks weren't out so late at night. And there it was, burning right there in front of me. That was the first time in my life I can remember not being able to say one word. All I could do was wonder what Jesus might have to say about the whole thing. I don't expect he'd say what Reverend James said to me that night. I stood right beside him and helped him pull himself together. He could throw fits worse than an old grandma at a funeral. Then everything got as quiet as a graveyard, and Reverend James leaned over, put his head on my shoulder and whispered, "Well, Cyrus, I guess everybody's hope is gone now."

After the church burned down, newspaper reporters started making tracks behind Ed Lawson and the Gentlemen's Society everywhere they went. Everybody in Moon County knows that reporters are worse than flies. That picture of Ed and the Gentlemen's Society has been in the newspaper for days because those reporters did what they called an exposé on the Gentlemen's Society, saying it did more harm to the community than anything else. Ed's poor wife, Louise, had a nervous breakdown after some folks had a big rally in front of their house, calling for Ed to step down as the president of the Gentlemen's Society or leave Moon County. Myrtle told me Louise told her those reporters are still around here in disguise, and not to be fooled the way she was because they're all a bunch of backstabbers. The whole Gentlemen's Society is sitting over there in the jailhouse with Tobias, waiting to see just who was going to have to do time for crime in the Sparta State Prison.

What I don't understand is how, after the church burned down, bits and pieces of the truth came out. First, a big rumor came out about how Tobias Cutter and Ruby were having some love affair like something you read in a trash magazine. Then folks started saying Ruby could never go anywhere by herself because Reverend James wouldn't let her. Nobody believed the story except the folks who didn't have anything else to believe in. Plus, I told Myrtle that Tobias worked right here in my store and I never saw any signs of love in him. He never said one word about a love affair. Sure, I asked him about it a million times. But he said all that talk was r-i-d-i-c-u-l-o-u-s. Then Myrtle said I didn't know folks as well as I thought I did.

But I don't care who you know or where you go, if there is a rumor out there somewhere, you can bet your last paycheck that you got a few folks here in Moon County playing detective. Sure enough, folks say Reverend James had to go to one of those church retreats he was always going to. Ruby usually went and Deacon Charlie Crawford got to play reverend for a day. Ruby claimed she was too sick to go. She was sick all right! The Reverend said he forgot his good Bible, so he had to turn around and come back, and guess who the Reverend saw climbing out of his window? Tobias Cutter! It turned out that Tobias was trying to get into The Gentlemen's Society. As a part of his initiation, Ed and the rest of the Gentlemen's Society told him he had to do something crazy, like have some love affair with a married woman. Tobias had to keep quiet about the whole thing or else they would never make him a member. So being young and foolish, Tobias picked Ruby out of all the women in Moon County.

A few days later, a big thunderstorm hit Moon County, our church went up in smoke and the sheriff said that Tobias and the men in the Gentlemen's Society swore on the Bible that Reverend James set the church on fire for revenge. At first, nobody wanted to believe a word they said, including me. Then, all of a sudden, Reverend James left with Ruby and the insurance money and speculation was turned loose.

After folks noticed that Reverend James was gone, things changed in Moon County. On Sundays, folks have a choice of either sleeping late or crowding up Deacon Charlie Crawford's living room to listen to him mess up Bible scriptures. But me, I just take a bucket of worms, a fishing pole and a dictionary and head to the Oconee River to talk to God one on one. Sometimes, Dipsey Jones will come over and fish beside me, but he likes to talk about loose women more than God and words. Myrtle bought me one of those pocket-sized dictionaries. She thought it might help lift my blues. I was surprised because I didn't know they made dictionaries so darn small. There is not a day that you'd catch me without it tucked away in one of my pockets.

Myrtle and I never had any children of our own, and I used to think of Tobias as the son I never had. But now I think it is best that I see him as a friend. I don't want you to think that friends are above firing in my store. I treat everybody like equals around here, but before I hire anybody to take Tobias's place, I want that person to look straight into my eyes so I can see if he's a Christian or not. If he is, I will have to watch him real close.

Questions for Discussion and Writing

1. Does Cyrus face a crisis because he loses his faith in religion or his community?
2. What are the differences and similarities in his relationship with Ed Lawson and Reverend James?
3. What does Cyrus's reliance on his dictionary suggest about the ways people see and interpret reality?
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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