

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF

MOON COUNTY



THE STORY OF RACHEL

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THE STORY OF RACHEL

I refuse to dance with a peckerhead, and that Frazier boy ain't nothing but a peckerhead. Mrs. Beckham had been singing his praises ever since he built that gazebo in her backyard, but he doesn't know what I know about Mrs. Beckham. She tried to cheat folks out of their pay. That Frazier boy let her do just that to him. I overheard Mrs. Beckham talking fancy to her friends about how she got that gazebo built for almost nothing. If that Frazier boy ain't smart enough to know when he was being cheated, then that ain't nobody's fault but his own. He came over to my house and asked me out to the dance hall, and I said no. He told Mrs. Beckham about it, and she asked me why I won't go to the dance hall with him. I told her right then and there that my daddy warned me about peckerheads a long time ago. I won't go anywhere with them, and I surely won't dance with them. Peckerheads were nothing but trouble. Mrs. Beckham said I tickled her with my sass, but she was not tickled one bit when I told her that I wouldn't be doing her laundry anymore.

The word got out real quick about our spat. Mrs. Beckham told a whole bunch of lies about me. Now ladies held up their hands and whispered when they saw me coming. Some turned up their noses at me. Sometimes, two or three of the younger ladies stopped me. They wanted to know if I was as terrible as their mommas said I was. I told them that I ain't a loose woman and that I don't pray to witches at night either. Sometimes, folks in Moon County made up lies about things they didn't even know about.

I quit Mrs. Beckham on a Tuesday. I remembered it like it was yesterday. I was standing in the kitchen ironing one of her blouses. My best girl, Sofia, usually came over to help me around eight in the morning. Sofia ain't much bigger than a line of wire, and she wore head scarves because she ain't much for fixing hair. Most times, she came through the door carrying Mrs. Murphy's baby on her hip. The baby's name was Pauline, but we called her Pollie for short. Mrs. Murphy loved putting Pollie in bonnets. I made Sofia take them off because it was just too hot in Georgia to have a child's head covered in the summer. If she didn't do anything else, Sofia sure kept good eyes on Pollie while she worked. Usually, I did the ironing and Sofia did the washing.

Most of the time, we did more talking than anything. Sofia never ran out of good things to say about the Murphys, mostly because all of their old stuff ended up being her new stuff. Mr. Murphy made loans at the Moon County Bank, and Mrs. Murphy didn't do anything at all. Anybody who listened to Sofia would have to wonder just what Mrs. Murphy

was doing four days out of the week that she couldn't keep Pollie. Sofia never asked her because she was just crazy about Pollie. She even showed me pictures of the Murphys holding Pollie in front of that vacation home they own over on Cherokee Island. In one picture, they were huddled together with Mr. Murphy holding Pollie in the middle. Mr. Murphy was in spectacles and shorts, and Mrs. Murphy was in pearls with a puffy hairdo. Both of them had these wide smiles. They looked like they were living high on the hog to me. I asked Sofia how it made her feel when she looked at that picture. Then Pollie started her yapping like it was the second coming of Christ. Sofia pulled her hands out of the washtub and wiped them on her dress. She walked over and grabbed Pollie off the pallet on the floor. Then Sofia turned around with a grin on her face and said the picture didn't make her feel anything except love for Pollie. I asked her if she ever felt like maybe Mrs. Murphy was getting more than her fair share of the pie without earning it, and all we got were the crumbs left in the pan and sometimes not even that. Sofia shrugged her shoulders and said her boyfriend Sugar told her that some folks just luckier than others.

When Sofia brought up Sugar's name, I wanted to scream because he was nothing but a peckerhead. Sofia worked like a dog all day while he sat around drinking homemade gin like it was water. He couldn't keep a job longer than three hours. Sofia took any piece of job she could get and kept singing Sugar's praises in the meantime. She let him sweet talk her into moving in with him. Sugar told her he was going to marry her and buy her a house on Cherokee Island. I told Sofia she better stop letting that peckerhead fill her mind with lies, but it was just a waste of words. After two years, Sofia was still shackled up with Sugar, and she was still making the rent. The only person I ever heard mentioning anything about a wedding dress was me. I told Sofia that Sugar was just using her and stringing her along on a bunch of empty dreams. She just stood over the washtub hiding her smile behind her hand like she always did when I got her backed into a corner about Sugar.

That morning, I told her to forget Sugar for a minute and think about herself. After all, we weren't getting any younger sitting around the kitchen doing other folks' laundry all day. We still had so much life to live. I told her we could even get ourselves a piece of that pie if we put our minds on it. Sofia just sat at the kitchen table gooning at Pollie and lifting her up in the air. Then she said Sugar told her I had more luck than most people because my daddy left me a house after he died. I noticed Sofia raised her voice a little when she said that. I can't say much back because

Pollie started yapping like it was the second coming of Christ, and she would not hush. Sofia passed her to me, and I tried to iron while I held her with one arm. She started fussing even more, and I passed her back to Sofia.

When I looked up from my ironing, I saw one of Sofia's arms stirring in the washtub while the other one was wrapped around Pollie. She started singing "Ring around the rosie" and Pollie just ate that song up. She was crazy about some "Ring around the rosie." I started complaining because the song sounded like fingernails moving across sand paper when Sofia sings it. Out of all the songs in the world, that be the one song that piped Pollie down. I loaded up the basket, and I walked out of the door with Mrs. Beckham's laundry and let Sofia have as much of Pollie as she could stand.

I can't get to Mrs. Beckham's house in one piece without some peckerheads coming after me. Joe John popped out of nowhere and scared me half to death. He took his hat off and bowed. Sweat dropped off his face like rain. I could tell he had been drinking too much of that homemade gin. I told him he needed to go find himself a good place to rest, but he said that his sister won't let him in her house when he was drinking. He asked me if I wanted any company on my trip to Mrs. Beckham's house. I told him no. Then he wanted to carry the basket, knowing he was too full of gin to walk a straight line. I ignored Joe John and I carried my own basket.

Just when I got a little farther down the road, another peckerhead was after me. This time it was Brady. Brady had done a little time in the Sparta State Prison. He walked up to me dressed in dirty overalls. Brady carried a big box on his right shoulder. He put the box down and took off his cap and kissed my hand. Brady was a tall hefty man, and his voice made me think somebody pounded the drum in my ear. I asked him what the cardboard box was for. Brady told me that he was going to sleep on it. I asked him how in the world he was going to sleep on a box. He said he cut out the seams and spread it out under a tree. He told me it was real useful if you didn't have any blankets around. Brady asked me if I needed any yard work done around my house. He said he won't charge me one penny. I told him that I did my own yard work. Then he told me how pretty I looked and that he had never seen a prettier woman in all of Moon County. I told him he was the biggest natural born liar I had ever seen in my life because I looked a mess. My hair was everywhere it wasn't supposed to be, and my dress was full of sweat spots.

When I walked around to the back door, I saw Mrs. Beckham sitting out in that gazebo talking. I couldn't tell who she was talking to. As I walked

closer to the gazebo, I saw exactly who Mrs. Beckham was laughing and having a grand time with. It was Mrs. Murphy in pearls with a puffy hairdo. I looked dead into Mrs. Murphy's eyes as she picked up a cookie from the tray. All I could think about was Sofia, Pollie and that washtub. Mrs. Beckham said hello to me like I'm the guest she was not expecting. I dropped Mrs. Beckham's laundry in front of her. She screamed for Grace, her maid. Grace came running out of the house like the gazebo was on fire. Mrs. Beckham told Grace to go get her purse. Grace turned around and headed back toward the house. Then Mrs. Beckham called her back and wanted her to come get the pot so she could bring back more tea. Grace got to the porch steps. Mrs. Murphy opened her mouth and had Grace come all the way back to the gazebo again to get the whole tray so she could bring more cookies. It took everything in me not to scream.

Finally, Grace brought back the purse and Mrs. Beckham paid me. I checked every penny real good. Mrs. Murphy told me to tell Sofia she was going to be picking Pollie up a little late that evening. My face got hot like metal when it had been sitting in the fire too long. The look I gave Mrs. Murphy would have cut her if she had moved an inch to the right. It took the spirit of Christ to keep me from rattling off a list of all the places Mrs. Murphy could go and how she could get there, but something else came out of my mouth that Tuesday. I knew I spoke out of spite more than pride. I told Mrs. Beckham that I quit, and I wouldn't be doing her laundry any more. You should have seen how she looked at me.

She asked me why. I told her it was time for me to get out of the laundry business and move on out into life. Mrs. Beckham covered her mouth with her hands. Mrs. Murphy just snickered. I wanted to slap her. She had a whole lot of nerve sitting up in that gazebo drinking tea and eating cookies while her own child was driving somebody else up the walls. She could make a fool out of Sofia if she wanted to, but not me. I'd drown myself in the Oconee River before I allowed that to happen.

I walked back home trying to figure out what I was going to do with myself. I ran into those two peckerheads on the way, and something made me think about them in a different way. It was like the heat was spinning my mind. It dawned on me that there ain't but a few things really wrong with them. They were still peckerheads, but nobody said they had to stay peckerheads forever. The right woman could get the wrong man on the right track if she put her mind on it.

When I ran into Brady, he was still messing around with that box. I asked him how long it had been since he had a bed to rest in. He said he can't remember. I told him to follow me. I locked my little

arm with his big arm, and his eyes almost popped out of his head. We came up on Joe John sitting under a tree with a gin jar, and he grunted and frowned. I told him that it ain't what he thought between me and Brady, and he goosed up a little. I asked him how long it had been since he had a home-cooked meal. He said his sister let him come to dinner at her house, but only if he kept sober. I told him to put down that gin jar and follow me. I grabbed Joe John's hand, and his smile showed all of his front teeth. I smiled, too, because I pictured a whole bunch of better days ahead.

I rented rooms in my house to both of them. We sat down at the kitchen table every night for home-cooked meals. After that, we all sat on the porch and drank lemonade. Sometimes, Joe John mixed his with a little gin, which was fine by me. He cut back long enough to get himself a job at Deacon Parker's gas station. Brady already had a few jobs lined up doing yard work. I eventually got both of them to clean themselves up real good, and they went up on Main Street and bought some new clothes. My daddy always said, if you want to make a man feel brand new, just give him some soap and water and a place to call home, and that was just what I did.

We got along real good. Joe John and Brady went to work each morning after breakfast, and I spent most of my day doing whatever I darn well pleased just like Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. Beckham. I even had the nerve to have afternoon tea and cookies. You ought to have seen how I lounged in the same kitchen where I used to crack my back over an ironing board. I still did laundry, but it was for Joe John, Brady and myself. It didn't seem like work at all to me. My daddy always said you got to work hard to give what you want to get back. Something about that saying made real good head sense to me.

A few folks in Moon County didn't agree. They started saying I ran a harlot house for convicts from the Sparta State Prison. The reverend condemned Joe John and Brady to hell, and I was the one leading the way. Sofia was the one person who I thought knew me well enough not to believe any of the lies put out against me. I thought, out of everybody, she was the one to agree there ain't much wrong with a woman shacking with two men. After all, she was shacking with one of the worst peckerheads that ever lived.

One day, Sofia came over carrying Pollie on her hip, and I told her about my plan. I told her that we never had to worry about doing laundry again. Sofia screamed at me like she never had before. "What *we*?" she asked. "You mean *you*," she said. She accused me of putting on airs in front of Mrs. Beckham and Mrs. Murphy. That ain't all. Sofia said that I invited two peckerheads I hardly knew to live

with me and I never invited her. She told me she wouldn't have moved in with Sugar before marriage if I had asked her to move in with me first, but Sofia never asked me anything. She said that if I was truly her friend, she shouldn't have had to ask me. I apologized, but she didn't accept it. Sofia said I didn't mean it.

She tore into me real good that day, and it left me feeling pretty down. I might not have had to take in laundry for a living anymore, but I forgot that Sofia still had to. She said she wasn't lucky enough to be a woman every man in Moon County would be willing to pay top dollar for. Sofia knew good and well I wasn't that kind of woman. The relationship I had with Joe John and Brady was strictly about business. Sofia said she never knew a relationship between a man and a woman to be strictly about business. I told her that maybe she would if she stopped listening to that peckerhead Sugar all the time. I didn't think she heard me because Pollie started yapping like it was the second coming of Christ, and Sofia started singing "Ring around the rosie" at the top of her lungs. Pollie piped down long enough for me to hear Sofia announce that she and Sugar were getting married. I told her how happy I was, and she rolled her eyes. I started talking about being her maid of honor and making the cake. She told me I wasn't invited to her wedding. She said Sugar thought it wasn't a good idea to have me in it. He said there was too much of a stir up in the county about the way I lived my life. I tried to tell Sofia that she shouldn't let some peckerhead come between us on the most important day of her life, but she just walked out of the door crying and holding Pollie's head against her chest. I stood in the kitchen wondering who came up with all the crazy rules on how to live life and why I had to follow them. Then all of a sudden, I felt lonely and scared inside the way a woman does when there ain't nothing left at the party but her and the punch bowl, and I cried. I cried because I felt happy for my best girl, but I was losing her all at the same time and it hurt worse than flames on the skin. I was too scared to close my eyes because I didn't want to see Sugar and Sofia in front of the reverend and Joe John and Brady in front of me. All I could hear in my head was Pollie yapping like it was the second coming of Christ and Sofia singing that song:

Ring around the rosie
A pocket full of posies
Ashes, ashes
We all fall down

I was sitting on the porch steps in tears when Joe John and Brady walked up to me. They asked me what was wrong. I gave them the long sad story and

before I could finish, Joe John interrupted. He said he wasn't going to rent a room any more. "Why?" I asked. He said it was because of all the lies folks put out about me and all the stares he got at the gas station. Some of the customers didn't want Joe John to service them. Joe John said his sister told him that Deacon Parker said he might fire him if he didn't change his ungodly ways. I didn't think that was right because I couldn't figure out for the life of me what God had to do with pumping crude. Joe John reached into his pocket and handed me his rent money. I checked every penny of it. He told me he was sorry and he needed his job more than he needed clean bed sheets and home-cooked meals. I told him I understood. Joe John shook Brady's hand and I watched him walk away.

I looked at Brady and the wide smile he had on his face. I asked him if he was going to leave. He said no and that he was going to stick things out with me even if he lost every job he got. I asked him if he believed any of the mean things folks had been saying about me. He said that even if all of those things were true, he still wouldn't believe them. I had to catch my breath because those just ain't the kind of words you expect to hear from a peckerhead. You heard words like that from a friend. I asked him what he thought about Sofia. After all, she was still my best girl. Brady pulled me closer with his big arm. He told me that all good things happen in due time and that Sofia would come around just as soon as all the noise about me quieted down.

So I waited. Me and Brady dressed up and went down to the dance hall. We fished in the Oconee River. We took long walks down back roads, and we sat on the porch at night and looked at the stars. We made love, too, and we laid in the bed and talked until sleep decided to come. Brady asked me if I thought there would come a day when I'd want to get married. I told him that I was in no rush to be a wife. I asked him why he never married and he said he was never in a rush to be a husband. I thought that was a real good answer because I didn't want him getting any ideas about making an honest woman out of me, especially when things were going along just fine the way they were.

But I did miss Sofia. Weeks passed by and I got tired of waiting for her to show up at my door, so I showed up at hers. I knocked and she told me to come in. Sofia was ironing. I looked around the kitchen. I saw Sugar's shoes in the corner and piles of laundry around the washtub. There was no trace of Pollie anywhere. Sofia said she started doing a lot of thinking about Mrs. Murphy after we had our spat. She stopped babysitting Pollie for Mrs. Murphy, and she stopped helping Mrs. Beckham with her laundry. Sofia told me that she got herself a new job working

as a maid for Mrs. Wick.

She told me something else that day, too. She didn't get married. I stared at her like she was speaking in tongues. She said Sugar didn't ask her to marry him at all, but he was going to just as soon as he won the prize money in the caboose race. She said that she lied to me out of spite more than pride. For a while, I didn't know what to say to her. I just looked at Sofia. I tried my best to hold back my tears. I thought to myself that maybe it was best I didn't say anything at all. I took a deep breath and stared at Mrs. Wick's bed sheets soaking in the washtub. It would take Sofia all day to finish them. I stood there in front of her, feeling like the only canary to make it out of the coal mine. I pulled a chair over to the washtub and started washing the sheets. Sofia looked at me. She hid her smile behind her hand. She'll be hiding that smile for the rest of her life, I thought, and the tears started rolling down my face.

Questions for Discussion and Writing

1. What are the social, economic and political restrictions that Rachel faces?
2. Why is Rachel's behavior considered unconventional in her community? Would she be viewed in a similar way today?
3. How is Rachel's transformation a challenge to Sofia, and why do you think Rachel cries at the end of the story?
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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