

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF

MOON COUNTY



THE STORY OF ABEL

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THE STORY OF ABEL

"Come on in and catch your breath, Jeeter. Dr. Randolph knows he was supposed to wait before he made that turn onto Main Street. He almost ran you over."

"He saw me just as clear as day," Jeeter said. "That rascal tried to run me over on purpose."

"You know, that's a new motorcar he's driving. He told me he just got it last Saturday." I brushed the last of Dr. Randolph's hair out of the chair so Jeeter could sit down for his haircut.

"What did he want for free this time? You know he is always wanting something for nothing." Jeeter patted the sides of his head to let me know he just wanted his hair trimmed.

"He thought I should give him a free shave with his haircut. He's been coming to my barbershop for years. He knows a shave is going to cost him extra."

"Did he pay for it?" asked Jeeter.

"He takes out his wallet and tells me he doesn't have any extra cash."

"That's a lie. Dr. Randolph keeps money."

"Then he says he'll pay me extra the next time he comes in. The chances of that happening are about a million in one."

"Something just ain't right when a man can buy motorcars all day and won't pay for the cost of a shave."

"That's right! I have a notion to do like Elma says and charge him interest."

"How's Elma doing these days?"

"Not good. She cries about being a grandmamma. She thinks she's getting old."

Jeeter jumped like I poked him with the comb. "You never told me Dorthea had the stork coming."

"Dorthea adopted some child from overseas. She did it all through the mail. She has to send money every month. Just imagine how you would feel if that was the first thing you heard in the morning?"

"Abel, that's crazy! Who ever heard of somebody adopting a child through the mail? I don't even think that's legal."

"I'm telling you, Jeeter. Dorthea had all kinds of papers, and they looked legal to me. She even had a picture of the child."

"What did the child look like?"

"To tell the truth, the child looks just like Dorthea does now, with all of her hair chopped off. I mean, imagine what a little boy would look like standing next to a river; except he is really a little girl with sticks for arms and legs and a bubble belly."

"You mean the girl don't have any pigtailed?"

asked Jeeter.

"The only way that girl could get pigtailed is if somebody glued them on that picture."

"All girls should have pigtailed. I remember Dorthea used to have pigtailed when she was coming up. Why did she go and chop off all of that good hair she had and put on overalls? She looks peculiar now."

"I don't know what's gotten into Dorthea, but I do know that Elma's heart broke like glass when Dorthea walked through the door with all her hair gone, and she said she was finally free."

"What does hair have to do with freedom?" asked Jeeter.

"I don't know, Jeeter. But guess who Elma blames for the whole thing?"

"You?"

"Me!"

"Why she pin the blame on you?"

"I don't know. Sometimes, I think that Elma believes I'm the cause for everything Dorthea has done wrong with her life. She says I cursed the girl."

"You let Elma talk to you like that? I wish Lucille would talk to me like that."

"Elma pretty much says anything she wants to say. When she told me I cursed Dorthea, you know who that reminded me of?"

"Otis Butler!"

"Sure did, and that almost scared me to death! So I told Elma that Dorthea wasn't cursed and that I was just making sure the girl at least knew how to run this barbershop. Who else did Elma think was going to run this place when I died? Dr. Randolph is going to ship Junior off to some school in Atlanta to learn how to pull teeth and run his practice. I think hair is just as important as teeth. So why can't I do something like that for Dorthea before I die? Every man should leave some kind of legacy."

"There you go conjuring your own death again."

"I've been thinking about death since Elma told me that I cursed Dorthea. She thinks I put too many of my ways on her. She's too headstrong, Elma says. She says no man will ever want to marry a girl with a strong head."

"Elma might be right on that. Dorthea ain't like the other girls."

"You know what Dorthea did, don't you?"

"What?"

I stopped cutting and Jeeter turned around to look at me. "You mean I didn't tell you what Dorthea did?"

"No! You didn't tell me nothing. What'd she do?"

"Dorthea quit her job at the café and signed herself up for a night school class with that new

teacher from Atlanta that the school just hired. What's his name?"

"Mr. Laclede!" said Jeeter. "Real handsome fellow. Too thin, though."

"Yeah, that's him. Dorthea says she wants to relearn history."

"I bet Mr. Laclede can help her. I hear he is a good teacher."

"That's what Dorthea said, but I can't figure how she can say the man is a good teacher if she ain't ever been his student," I said.

"Oh, you can tell he's good. He asks all kinds of questions. His mind is sharp like a knife. The other day, I went into the café and had a cup of coffee with him. I told him about how Bo drowned in the Oconee River and how I've worked at the cotton mill for over twenty years. He thought that was the most interesting thing he ever heard."

"He did? What did he think was so interesting?"

"I guess all of it. I showed him my cut marks from the machines. Then he asked me some more questions about my job and whether I was happy working there."

"Well, that sounds pretty much like the way he acted when he came in to get his first haircut. He asked me all kinds of questions about the barbershop business. I told him that Dorthea signed up for his night school class. He thought that was the best news he'd ever heard. He said he wanted to get more folks in the community involved in learning."

"That was the same thing he said to me."

"Well, he told me I should sign up for that class. I thought about it, but what do I look like sitting up in the schoolhouse, as old as I am? I told him I once took a few of those correspondence courses. You should have seen how surprised he looked when I told him that."

"Does Dorthea's overseas child go to school?"

"Sure does. Dorthea says the child knows three languages. You'd never know that just by looking at that picture."

"I bet I would, if I saw what she looked like."

"How, Jeeter?"

"It's in the eyes. The eyes tell the story. What's her name?"

"Whose name?"

"The adopted child!"

"I don't know. I'm pretty sure Dorthea told me this morning. I'm sure I'd just mess it up if I could remember what it was."

"No, you won't. Just sound out the letters. Then again, you can always give her a good American name. I bet she looks like a Margaret."

Jeeter took his money out of his wallet. I could hear the door squeak as it opened. Ossie B walked in wearing dirty overalls with no shirt or shoes.

"Mr. Jeeter is rich! Mr. Jeeter, I bet you're the richest man in the whole world. I bet you just sit at home all day and think about how rich you are."

"Ossie B, get out of here with that song and dance show. You are too old for that kind of foolishness. And what did I tell you about spying on my customers? I've warned Rosetta about you a million times. One day, I'm going to have the sheriff come and lock you up in the jailhouse."

"My momma says I can go wherever I want. I'm a man."

"Does your momma know you are walking around here with no shoes on?" asked Jeeter.

"My momma says I don't have to wear shoes. I'm a man."

"You're not a man. Now get out of here with that foolishness before I have the sheriff come arrest you."

"My momma says a man can go wherever he wants! You're just mad because Mr. Jeeter is rich and you ain't. Everybody knows barbers ain't rich."

"Ossie B, what have I told you about the words you let out of that mouth of yours? Haven't I told you that real men don't go around behaving like that?" asked Jeeter.

"How do they behave then?"

"They behave like gentlemen. They don't go around being peckerheads and they don't back-talk their elders either," Jeeter said.

"Jeeter, what else do you expect to come out of that boy's mouth? No wonder everybody around here thinks he's cursed."

"What's *cursed*?"

"Something bad put on you," said Jeeter.

"Mr. Jeeter, will you give me some money? Please, Mr. Jeeter! Please!"

Jeeter reached into his pocket and pulled out his change. "You need to start acting better or the girls ain't going to like you none."

"I'm a man and I'm going to marry Dorthea!" Ossie B looked at me and smiled.

"That's a goddamn lie!" I yelled.

"I love Dorthea. My momma says a man is supposed to be in love."

"Abel, I'm surprised to hear you cuss. I can't even remember the last time I heard a cuss word come out of your mouth," said Jeeter.

"Dorthea is way too old for Ossie B. He ain't ever going to be fit for the future if you keep spoiling him with charity. I bet every penny he gets is wasted on ice cream cones over at that café."

“Abel, a little charity never hurt nobody. If Ossie B wasn’t peculiar, he’d be just like Bo. My spare change never hurt Bo none.”

“Well, I’d much rather Dorthea marry somebody like Bo than Ossie B. Just watch. He’ll be just like his mamma and never work a day in his life.” Jeeter shrugged and walked out the door. He looked up at the sky. Just before the door closed, Ossie B turned around and stuck out his tongue.

“My momma says she don’t have to work because my Grandpa Otis fought in the war and saved this country from all of the overseas people.”

2.

“Come on in, Mr. Laclede. Sit over there in a chair and make yourself at home. I’ll be finished with Scout in a minute.”

“Thank you, Mr. Bailey.” Mr. Laclede crossed his legs and unfolded his newspaper.

“I told you that you can just call me Abel. You don’t have to be so respectful all the time. Before you walked in, I was telling Scout here that one day I was going to get myself a new door for this old place. What do you think about that, Scout?”

“I think that would be nice, but it’s going to cost you a pretty penny. Gladys says inflation is going up again.”

“Mr. Laclede, are you ready for Monday? That’s when school starts, right?” I asked.

“Yes, and I’m almost ready. I went over to the school this morning to start preparing the classroom. All the teachers met yesterday. They all seemed like cordial citizens. In fact, I haven’t met an unpleasant being since I’ve been here.”

“Just wait a while. This is Moon County,” I said.

“Seriously, everybody is courteous here. One of the teachers even invited my wife and me over for dinner.”

“Who was it?” I asked.

“Mrs. Randolph.”

“Get out of this world, Mr. Laclede! You mean you’ve been over to Dr. Randolph’s house for a meal?” asked Scout.

“Yes, sir.”

“I don’t know anybody around here who has ever been over there for a meal. Do you, Abel?”

“Otis Butler said he went over there once.”

“Get out of this world! I don’t believe that and I don’t believe Mr. Laclede was over there either. He probably never even made it past their gate. They always keep that gate locked.”

“Well, the gate was opened for me,” said Mr. Laclede.

“Now, I know you’re lying. That gate is never opened. I’ve thrown newspapers over that gate

for years, and it’s always locked. How come you get to walk through the gate and none of us can?”

“Never mind Scout, Mr. Laclede.” I frowned at Scout, thinking he had lost his mind.

“Never mind, my foot! Them folks think they’re kings and queens, and this ain’t that kind of country. Ain’t I’m right, Mr. Laclede?”

“That’s what the history books say.”

“Well, who cares what the history books say? Dr. Randolph owes me for a shave. Can you imagine a man with money not wanting to pay to get a shave, Mr. Laclede?”

“No sir, I can’t say that I can.”

“What was it like over there?” Scout tapped his foot against the chair.

“What was what like?” asked Mr. Laclede.

“Dr. Randolph’s house. What’s it like?”

“It was nice. Pleasant.”

“I hear they got silk curtains on all the windows,” Scout said.

“I can’t say I really noticed the drapery.”

“What’d they feed you? Steak, I bet,” said Scout.

“We had chicken and green beans, and Mrs. Randolph made a delicious sweet potato pie.”

“Get out of this world! Mrs. Randolph can cook? Wait until I tell Gladys. Abel, I thought you said Dr. Randolph had a maid?”

“That’s what Dr. Randolph told me.”

“Did you see a maid, Mr. Laclede?” asked Scout.

“No, I didn’t see any servants.”

“Maybe she be in the back or something.

You know, not allowed to show up when the company’s over,” said Scout.

“Well, that’s hard to believe, knowing how Dr. Randolph likes to parade everything,” I told him.

“What did you all talk about?” asked Scout.

“Well, let’s see. We talked about Junior going off to dental school in Atlanta. We talked about the new night school program. My wife and I talked about buying a house and starting a family.”

“What’s your wife’s name?” asked Scout.

“Catherine.”

“That’s a pretty name,” said Scout. “Sounds like she’s from good stock.”

“How come we haven’t seen the two of you in church?” I asked him.

“My wife and I just haven’t found the right church home.”

“I bet you two Catholics, ain’t you?” asked Scout.

“Yes, we are.”

“I knew it,” said Scout. “You look like a Catholic.”

“Dr. Randolph suggested that we join his

church.”

“The church Dr. Randolph goes to is all the way in Sparta County, and it ain’t Catholic. We have a perfectly good Baptist church right here in Moon County,” I told him. “We take Catholics.”

“We sure do. Benny’s wife used to be one,” said Scout.

“Mr. Laclede, I’m inviting you to come visit our church. Services start tomorrow morning at eight o’clock sharp. You’ll get a chance to meet my wife, Elma. She’s dying to meet you. She’s going to be a grandmomma.”

“Congratulations.”

“It ain’t the way you think, Mr. Laclede. Dorthea went and adopted herself an overseas child through the mail. I’ve never heard of anything like that before. Have you ever heard of such a thing, Mr. Laclede?” asked Scout.

“Yes, my wife’s sister adopted a boy, but he didn’t come from overseas.”

“Where did he come from?” I asked.

“Shreveport, Louisiana. That’s where my wife’s sister lives.”

“What did the boy look like?” I asked. I didn’t look up, but I heard the door open and close.

“He was just an infant the last time I saw him. Now, I guess he might be the same age as that young man right there.” Mr. Laclede pointed to Ossie B standing in the doorway with a pipe in his mouth.

“Ossie B, where did you get that smoking pipe?” I asked him.

“It’s my Grandpa Otis’s pipe. My momma said I inherited all of his stuff. I’m a gentleman now.”

“Well, you look more like a peckerhead to me,” I told him.

“Miss Rosetta knows better than that,” Scout said. “Wait until I tell Gladys how she’s letting you run around with a pipe in your mouth. You’ll be wanting tobacco next.”

Ossie B strutted in front of us with his chest out and then he sat down in the chair next to Mr. Laclede and crossed his legs. “I know you.”

“Who am I, young man?” asked Mr. Laclede.

“I’m a gentleman.”

“Well, who am I, Mr. Gentleman?”

“Will you give me money if I guess right?”

“Ossie B, what have I told you about pestering my customers for money?”

“It’s okay, Mr. Abel. I don’t mind.”

“You’re that new school teacher, and everybody’s talking about you. Folks say you are real talented.”

“I bet you are really smart yourself.”

“My momma says I am. But I bet I’m not smarter than you. I bet you’re the smartest man in

the world. I bet all you do all day is sit around and be smart, don’t you?” Mr. Laclede reached into his pocket and pulled out his change.

“That Ossie B sure tries his best to have a silver tongue,” Scout said.

“Mr. Laclede, don’t you listen to Ossie B. He’ll take every cent you gave him and go spend it on ice cream cones,” I told him.

Ossie B stood by the door.

“Look at yourself in the mirror for a minute,” I told him. “You’re so busy trying to get to the café every day you can’t even make yourself look respectable. Your momma will have to take you to see Dr. Randolph if you keep eating ice cream cones.”

“I’m not going to the dentist. My momma says I’m going off to college one day.”

“Ossie B, you know you have to go to that special school out at the asylum,” Scout said.

“My momma says it’s a smart school because I’m smart. Go ask her.”

“Nobody has to go ask your momma nothing,” I told him.

“Then ask Dorthea. She gives me extra ice cream when I count all the way to one hundred for her. I’m going to marry Dorthea. My momma says a man is supposed to be in love.”

“That’s a goddamn lie! I told you once that Dorthea’s too old for you. Just because you can count doesn’t mean you’re smart,” I told him. I brushed the hairs off Scout’s face with the duster.

“Then ask me something smart. Just ask me.”

“Okay, I’ll ask you something smart,” said Mr. Laclede. “How do you spell *gentleman*?”

“Everybody knows how to spell that word, Mr. Laclede. It’s spelled g-i-n-t-a-m-i-n.” Ossie B stuck the pipe in his mouth and ran across the street to the café.

“Well, Mr. Laclede, there’s our future.

That’s what we all have to look forward to, a world full of peckerheads,” said Scout after he handed me his money.

“I wonder what Otis Butler would say if he was here to see what a mess Rosetta has made raising his only grandchild. You’re up next, Mr. Laclede. I’m done with Scout.”

“Are you okay, Mr. Laclede?” asked Scout. Mr. Laclede held his chin with his hand.

“I’m fine. I’m just thinking.”

“Don’t let Ossie B get you worked up none. That’s just how folks with slow minds act.”

“But Ossie B’s got potential. The right teacher could help him go a long way,” said Mr. Laclede.

“Who? Ossie B?” I asked. “Ain’t much help

for him, Mr. Laclède. He's basically unwanted, and he's going to be that way for the rest of his life."

"But ... I see all that potential in him. Can't you see it, Mr. Scout?"

"No, I can't say that I see it, but Gladys tells me that I need spectacles."

"Can you see it?" asked Mr. Laclède.

"No, all I see is trouble. One day, that boy is going to get himself into something that Rosetta can't sweet talk him out of."

"Mr. Laclède, Ossie B is the way he is because he was born under a curse. It's not his fault though. His Grandpa Otis should get the blame. Ossie B will have to adopt a child like Dorthea or he'll just pass that curse right on to the next generation of Butlers," said Scout.

"I don't believe that. That's just folklore," said Mr. Laclède.

"Mr. Laclède, I've been telling folks around here for years that Ossie B's not cursed. He is just crazy. Do you think people around here listen to me?" I asked him.

"Gladys says Rosetta should have paid another woman to have Ossie B. That's what's coming here in the future. Gladys knows all about it. She read about it in a magazine. She says they're already doing it overseas. Doesn't that kind of knowledge make you just want to get out of this world, Mr. Laclède?" asked Scout.

"No, I think the more we know the better. Knowledge is the key to understanding humanity."

I adjusted the chair after Mr. Laclède sat down, and I pinned the cape on him.

"Well, I wish Dorthea would have kept some of her knowledge about this adopted child to herself until me and Elma have had time to understand it. I don't think Elma can accept this new overseas grandchild. It's like everything is turned upside down and inside out. Some days, I try to figure out when everything changed."

"I know when everything changed," said Scout, while he checked himself in the mirror. "It was when Mr. Ike Magnolia died. He be the one who changed everything around here."

"Who is Mr. Magnolia?" asked Mr. Laclède.

"Get out of this world! You mean to tell me you ain't heard about Mr. Magnolia?" asked Scout.

"No, sir, I haven't heard anything."

"You mean you went over to Dr. Randolph's house for dinner and he didn't mention one word about the murder?" asked Scout.

"Scout, you know Dr. Randolph wouldn't say nothing to him about that."

"How did Mr. Magnolia die, sir?"

"Somebody shot him," I told him.

"You better watch yourself around here, Mr. Laclède. The folks in Moon County might be nice, but they will put a bullet in your back before you can say *Jesus wept*," said Scout as he closed the door behind him.

3.

"Come on in and sit down, Homer. I just started on Mr. Laclède. You can read that newspaper over there on the chair while you wait."

Homer picked up the newspaper and sat down. "Whose newspaper? I don't like messing with somebody else's belongings. That's how folks get shot. I swear. Things sure aren't the way they used to be around here. The war is right here at home now, and everything has been turned over to hardheaded young folks and thieves with guns."

"That's Mr. Laclède's newspaper. He doesn't mind if you read it while you wait—do you, Mr. Laclède?"

"No, help yourself and don't worry. I don't even know how to shoot a gun."

"What? You don't! Well, you just surprised the heck out of me. I ain't never met a man who didn't know how to shoot a gun. They didn't teach you how to shoot in the army?"

"No sir, I've never been in the army," said Mr. Laclède.

"Both my sons are in the army. God bless their souls. It's the best school in the world. The army is teaching them how to be decent men." Homer opened the newspaper, then he folded it to one side.

"The army drafted a lot of us around here for the first war. Most of us were even lucky enough to make it back home. Homer thinks everybody should go to the army."

"None of us knew a thing about the world until we went into the army. In there, I learned how to read and I got all of my rotten teeth pulled. Then they ran me and Otis Butler through training and right into battle. Otis got half his leg blown off," said Homer.

"I worked as a barber in the army. I didn't know the first thing about cutting hair until they taught me."

"What did the army do with Mr. Otis after he got hurt?" asked Mr. Laclède.

"Them doctors put him up in the hospital and fed him all the ice cream he could stand. Then they gave him a wooden leg and taught him how to work on motorcars. Otis was crazy about motorcars," Homer said.

"And he was crazy about gin, too. Otis and Homer were the best motorcar mechanics in Moon County. Then Otis started drinking every day. He

stopped speaking to Homer because he said he stole business from him, but a lot of folks still took their motorcars to Otis,” I told Mr. Laclede.

“Percy Randolph took all of his motorcars to Otis for fixing. Percy wouldn’t let anybody touch his motorcars except Otis. It was nothing to see Otis driving around in one,” said Homer.

“If you’d been in the army, Homer and Otis would fix your motorcar for free. They’d consider you family,” I told him. “Being a veteran used to mean something back then.”

“First, I’d have to buy a car. I like walking,” said Mr. Laclede.

“We had to stop the free service because we started to lose money. Then Mary left Otis and all he did was drink gin and fuss about being broke all the time,” Homer said.

Mr. Laclede asked, “Did Dr. Randolph fight in the war?”

“Heck no, Percy didn’t fight,” Homer said. “But he knows a lot about guns, though.”

“And what’s worse, he has the nerve to tell folks he didn’t have to go fight! He was probably hiding in some school somewhere learning how to pull out a wisdom tooth.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Mr. Laclede leaned his head to the right, and I moved it back towards me so I could get a better view.

Homer said, “All of us should have gone over to fight. What makes Percy any different from anybody else? And guess who else didn’t fight?”

“Who?” I asked.

“Ike Magnolia.”

“What? Mr. Magnolia sat right here in this barbershop and told me he was a veteran.”

“Well, he ain’t no veteran in my book. I worked on his brakes once and I asked him. He said he was glad he didn’t fight in the war,” said Homer. “He said he didn’t understand what we were fighting for because it was a problem overseas.”

“I can’t believe he said something like that, Homer.”

“Is this the same Mr. Magnolia who was shot?” asked Mr. Laclede.

“How do you know about Ike getting shot?” asked Homer.

“Scout brought it up right before you walked in,” I told Homer. “Scout can’t hold water.”

“I wouldn’t listen to Scout if I was you, Mr. Laclede. All he remembers is what Gladys tells him to remember,” said Homer. “Gladys wears the pants in that family.”

“Well, Mr. Magnolia sat right in my chair and told me he fought in the war. I never saw him as the type of man who told lies.”

“Everybody tells lies. Heck, that’s all folks

do around here. I believe it’s just the way human beings be made up,” said Homer.

“I don’t believe that,” said Mr. Laclede.

“People can be imaginative, but I don’t believe they all lie intentionally.”

“You mean you never told a lie before?” asked Homer.

“That’s not what I meant. I just always try to tell the truth. I don’t believe that all folks tell lies,” said Mr. Laclede.

“Well, they might not where you come from, but folks in Moon County tell lies all the time,” Homer told him.

“You got that right. Dr. Randolph is one of the biggest liars I’ve ever seen in my life. He expects me to believe that he’s going to pay me extra the next time he comes in. He is the biggest liar ever born.”

“Heck no, Ike gets the first place prize for that,” said Homer. “I always called him Ike, Mr. Laclede. It ain’t no disrespect, though.”

“What did he lie about?” I asked.

“Remember how he went around saying that a spelling bee would be good for the school children, and it ended up not being good at all?”

“Mrs. Randolph asked me if I’d be willing to serve on a committee to help bring back the spelling bee. She says it’s been a long time since the school had one,” said Mr. Laclede.

“I bet she didn’t tell you why the school got rid of it in the first place,” said Homer.

“Why did the school get rid of it?” asked Mr. Laclede.

“They didn’t have a choice, really,” I said.

“You see, the school hired Mr. Magnolia to improve the high school down here the way he did up in Washington, D.C. Mr. Magnolia came from good stock, you know. Folks who come from good stock think they know what’s best for everybody who don’t. The folks in Moon County thought it wasn’t right to have a man over the school who didn’t have a wife and children of his own. Mr. Magnolia always said he was married to his job. Imagine that.”

“Well, I say the man was peculiar. He had me believing a spelling bee was going to do some good around here, but neither one of my boys got called to be in it. The whole fuss made Hattie think our boys weren’t smart. I told her our boys be plenty smart. Just look at how good they’re doing in the army,” Homer said.

“When Elma found out that Dorthea was in that spelling bee, she bragged for days about it. You’d think it was Easter, the way she made us spruce up just to go and sit in the school gym. That was a big day for Elma.”

“I remember Otis came in drunk. He was the

main one fussing over a front seat,” said Homer. “The children lined up like soldiers. Then Ike called out the first word. You remember the first word, Abel?” asked Homer.

“No, all I remember is that Mr. Magnolia called it out and every child on that stage got the word wrong.”

“I wish you could have been there to see the shame for yourself, Mr. Laclede. Ike called another word and not one child on that stage could spell it right.”

“What did the people do?” asked Mr. Laclede.

“Well, Otis stood up and pitched the first fit. He said the whole thing was unfair because the words were too hard,” said Homer.

“Mr. Magnolia said he got those words from some national office in Washington, D.C.,” I said.

“Then Joe stood up and told Ike that he wasn’t in Washington, D.C., and that his boy needed Georgia words. Everybody started shouting and clapping like Joe had just preached a sermon. Then Benny got up and told everybody that Ike was shaming the children in front of us on purpose.”

I said to Mr. Laclede, “Otis called him a traitor and told him that they shot traitors in the army. Mr. Magnolia tried to explain that the spelling bee wasn’t over and there was bound to be a word on the list that one of those children could spell.”

“Then Otis called for Ike to get some Georgia words, and everybody started clapping and saying hallelujah. Ike said there was no such thing as Georgia words. Otis said Ike was trying to show off because he thought he was better than us.”

“I remember Mr. Magnolia left the stage, shaking his head. Then Dr. Randolph walked up on the stage and told everybody that all the children did a good job and he would clean their teeth for free if their mommas brought them to see him. Elma took Dorthea and Dr. Randolph found one problem after another. Dorthea’s rotten teeth cost me a year’s savings.”

“What happened to Mr. Magnolia?” asked Mr. Laclede.

“You see, Joe asked everybody to sign a piece of paper calling for Ike to step down as the principal until he came up with a list of Georgia words, but Ike wouldn’t step down for nothing. He said the whole thing was ridiculous. The school ended up firing him because folks threatened to stop sending their children to the schoolhouse. Then Otis Butler shot Ike, and his family has been cursed with bad luck ever since.”

“Don’t believe that, Mr. Laclede! Otis didn’t shoot Mr. Magnolia—Dr. Randolph did. I’ve been telling Homer that for years.”

“Abel, Percy is not the one who killed Ike and you know it! Look at all the good luck Percy has had. All Otis got was a wooden leg. What kind of god hands a golden goose to a cold-blooded killer?”

“Homer is like everybody else around here. Folks in Moon County don’t like to hear the truth.”

“I hear what you’re saying, Abel. I just don’t believe you because that ain’t the way I remember things happening back then. Ike had to leave Moon County or Otis was going to make him leave, but Ike was one of the stubbornest men I’d ever seen.”

“That still doesn’t mean Otis did it. Plus, the two of you weren’t even speaking to each other when all of this happened.”

“That didn’t matter none. I still stood up for Otis that Sunday the sheriff barged into our church service and asked us who did it. Otis said he did it and then Joe stood up and said he did it. Benny said he did it. Jeeter and Scout said they did it. When I saw the way things were going, I stood up and said that I did it, too. Percy was the last one out of all of us to stand up that day. The sheriff spat on the church floor then shook his head. He said God would surely curse whoever killed a good man trying to help his people. Folks still believe in that curse.”

“Did you say you killed Mr. Magnolia, Mr. Abel?” asked Mr. Laclede.

“Yes, I did.”

“Why?” Mr. Laclede looked confused. “Why lie?”

“I was a soldier, and I knew I had to live the rest of my life in Moon County with the rest of those crazy fools who stood up. In the end, I knew we needed to stick together.”

“Mr. Homer? Why did you do it?”

“I had to do it. I had to stand with the family. Good or bad, Otis was a veteran and that meant something. I wasn’t about to stand by and let him go rot over in the Sparta State Prison—not after what he did for this country in the war.”

“That sounds like an excuse to me,” said Mr. Laclede.

“You see, it ain’t about excuses. It’s about brotherhood. In those days, you didn’t turn on your brother,” said Homer. “We became brothers in the army.”

“I stopped believing Otis killed Mr. Magnolia a long time ago because Otis told me that he didn’t do it and I believed him.”

“Why would Dr. Randolph kill a man who was trying to do so much for the people in the community? It just doesn’t add up,” said Mr. Laclede.

“Because Dr. Randolph has always been able to do anything he damn well pleases in Moon

County!" I yelled. "Nobody ever said what he did was supposed to add up."

"Heck, Abel, you don't have to get mad at the man for asking a question. He only gets mad when he can't get other people to hate Dr. Randolph as much as he does, Mr. Laclede. It ain't no disrespect, though," said Homer. "It's just how Abel is. He can't let stuff go."

"That still sounds like a silly excuse to me. Nobody can just do anything he wants," said Mr. Laclede.

"Well, you're wrong because I'm telling you right now that Otis Butler sat in here and told me that Dr. Randolph killed Mr. Magnolia. It could have been any one of us around here, but Mr. Magnolia was the one he picked to kill."

"What do you mean?" asked Homer.

"Otis said Dr. Randolph brought his motorcar over to get the engine checked and asked Otis what it felt like to kill a man in battle."

"He was probably remembering things wrong. Otis forgot a lot of things when he was drinking," said Homer.

"I don't remember Otis drinking that day. He said when Dr. Randolph asked him what it felt like to kill a man in battle, he told him that, after a while, he didn't feel nothing. Otis told me that killing got boring, just like any other job. He said after a while, you don't even have to think about what you have to do. You just do it," I said. "You turn into somebody you can't even recognize in the mirror."

"Mr. Abel, are you expecting us to believe that Dr. Randolph killed an innocent man just because he wanted to know what it felt like to kill a human being?"

"No, Otis told me Dr. Randolph was jealous of Mr. Magnolia. Otis could never figure out why because both of them had money. Now, you don't have to believe that. I'm just telling you what Otis told me."

"I still say Otis killed Ike, and I'll take that to my grave," said Homer.

"Homer, Otis didn't do it! Otis said Dr. Randolph gave him a whole bunch of money and told him he was going to kill Mr. Magnolia in order to get into that Gentlemen's Society. It was supposed to be a joke, Otis said; a joke told over a bottle of gin. He said that he never took Dr. Randolph at his word."

"I don't believe that," said Homer. "Dr. Randolph knows we ain't allowed in the Gentlemen's Society. He gave Otis that money for nothing."

"No, Homer, he gave Otis that money for his gun, a closed mouth and Otis's connections to us. Otis said Dr. Randolph knew he couldn't kill Mr. Magnolia without us protecting him. He said there wasn't a thing wrong with Dr. Randolph's engine,

because that motorcar was brand new."

"Whatever happened to the gun?" asked Homer.

"Otis told me he threw that gun into the Oconee River after Dr. Randolph gave it back to him," I said.

Mr. Laclede shook his head. "Something must be missing from the story. None of this makes enough sense for me to believe Dr. Randolph killed a man out of jealousy." As Mr. Laclede was paying me, I could see Ossie B across the street. Ossie B was dressed in an old war uniform that was too big for him. He waited for a motorcar to pass before he crossed.

"I never said it was supposed to make sense. I'm just telling you how things really happened."

"Don't let Abel fester you none, Mr. Laclede," Homer said. "Here comes Ossie B right now. He's all the evidence I need. Just look at him dressed up in one of Otis's old army uniforms. Rosetta knows better than to let him put that on. That woman's got her hands full raising that boy. His daddy is probably glad he ran off."

"I bet she wished a thousand times she could lock Ossie B in the asylum or the jailhouse," I said as Ossie B ran through the door, breathing hard.

"Does your momma know you are in Otis's war uniform?" asked Homer.

"She said it belongs to me. I can be a soldier now! And I'm rich, too!"

"What do you mean you're rich?" I asked him.

"Dr. Randolph gave me two dollars." Ossie B waved the money at me.

"Goddamn it! You mean to tell me that Dr. Randolph is giving out two dollar bills to half-wits and he didn't even want to pay me for a shave! Give it to me! That's my money!" I walked over to Ossie B and snatched the money out of his hand and tucked it into my pocket. He grabbed my arm. Mr. Laclede pulled him off of me and held him.

"Give me back my money! You can't take my money. I'm a soldier. I worked for that money."

"That's my money! Dr. Randolph owes me for a shave, and I'm going to get every penny he owes me."

"It's my money. I worked." Mr. Laclede held Ossie B while tears ran down his face.

"You didn't work. Why would somebody like you be working for a man like Dr. Randolph? You're too stupid to even know what work is," I said.

"I know what work is. I'm not stupid. I'm a soldier. Go ask Dr. Randolph. He paid me for working."

"For God's sake, Abel, get a hold of yourself! You're an old man fighting over two

dollars. I've never seen you act like this before," said Homer. "What has gotten into you lately?"

Homer and Mr. Laclede stared at me. I felt a little embarrassed, so I threw one of the crumpled dollar bills on the floor. Mr. Laclede picked it up and handed it to Ossie B.

"Where's the other one at? Dr. Randolph gave me two dollars."

"Well, I'm keeping one for charity."

"That ain't fair. You can't take money I worked for. You can't do that!"

"Let it be, Ossie B. I'll give you another dollar. Let's go over to the café and get ice cream cones," said Mr. Laclede. He looked at me and shook his head.

"I don't want ice cream. I want my dollar back. I worked for that money." Ossie B stomped his feet on the floor.

"Well, if you worked for this money, then I want to know what you did before I give it back to you. That's only fair, ain't it, Homer?" I asked.

"That's right," said Homer. We watched the door almost close behind Ossie B, but Mr. Laclede turned around and caught it with his hand. Ossie B stood in front of him, wiping his eyes with his arms.

"All right, tell them what you did to earn that money, Ossie B," said Mr. Laclede as he cut his eyes at me.

"I stood on the corner and guarded Dr. Randolph's new motorcar while he ran into the five-n-dime. When he came out, he paid me two dollars. He told me that I was a good soldier and that all I needed was a war and a gun. Now give me back my dollar."

"No, I'm not giving you nothing. That's not real work; that's charity, and it's high time somebody put an end to all these handouts you've been getting."

"You're a liar!" Ossie B started crying and yelling. "Dr. Randolph paid me that money for being a soldier."

"Ossie B, Dr. Randolph doesn't know the first thing about being a soldier, so shut up and get out of my barbershop before I have the sheriff come and take you to the jailhouse where you belong."

"Come on, Ossie B. I better take you home. You don't want to end up in trouble over a dollar," said Mr. Laclede as he pulled Ossie B out of the barbershop by his arm.

4.

"Come on in, Rayford. You just missed Homer. He said he was going fishing when he left here."

"Well, it's a good thing you still here. I thought you'd be closed by now. Me and Etta Mae have to drive to Atlanta tonight."

"Sit on down," I told him. "What are you driving to Atlanta for?" I put the cape around his neck.

"We've got to go pick up Etta Mae's momma. She's coming to stay two weeks with us. I sure do hate it."

"I bet you do. There ain't nothing worse than having your mother-in-law staying under the same roof with you. It gives me a headache just to think about Elma's momma and she's dead. That woman never gave me a moment's peace when she was around."

"That's how Etta Mae's momma is with me. It's always something. My hair needs cutting. My fingernails too dirty. I work too much at the cotton mill. I'm too quiet. I eat like a bird. It's always something to take me down a peg."

"Well, you have my sympathies. If things get too bad, you can always come hang out at the barbershop with me. I'm not doing too much of anything these days besides getting ready to die."

"You sick or something?" asked Rayford.

"No, I'm not sick. It's just something Elma said to me. It made me think death is coming right around the corner."

"What did she say?"

"Elma said I cursed Dortha."

"What got into Elma to make her say something like that?"

"I'm not sure, but I think it has something to do with Dortha chopping off all of her hair and adopting some child from overseas."

"A who from where?" Rayford asked.

"Oh, you haven't heard. Dortha went and adopted some child from overseas, and she has to send the child money every month. I'm surprised Elma hasn't told Etta Mae."

"Well, I'll be darned. I don't think I know what to say about something like that, Abel."

"Me either, Rayford. Elma thinks it's all my fault. She said I put too many of my ways into Dortha. I thought I was helping Dortha, but Elma makes me think maybe I've done more harm than good as her daddy."

"Well, maybe you should do like I do with Correen." I turned Rayford's head to the side a little so that I could cut behind his ear.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Let her be."

"But that's doing nothing at all. I thought you were going to tell me something special to do," I told him.

"That is special. You've got to realize that Dortha ain't a little girl no more. She is a grownup now, and grown folks do exactly what they want to do these days. When I realized that, I let Correen be."

So if she wants to drop out of school and become a loose woman, then that is her choice, not mine.”

“Well, get this, Rayford. Dorthea finished school years ago. And she’s going back and she’s taking Mr. Laclede’s night school class. That girl keeps me twisted upside down and inside out.”

“See, there you go again. You still think Dorthea’s a little girl. You’ve got to let that go. She ain’t your little girl no more. She is a grownup and grownups find their own way,” said Rayford. I stood there thinking. Then I moved Rayford’s head to the left to get a better view.

“When did you get so smart?” I asked.

“You just have to learn to think smart when it comes to things like that.”

“I hope one day I can be like you. I have to admit that I worry about folks going around saying that me and Elma didn’t raise Dorthea right.”

“It sounds like this whole fuss you making is more about you than Dorthea,” said Rayford.

“Now, that’s a goddamn lie, Rayford! All of this is about Dorthea.”

“No, it ain’t. You just too stubborn to fess up about it,” said Rayford. “You know I’ve always said you were too bullheaded.”

“Well, how would you feel if Correen chopped off all of her hair and started wearing overalls instead of dresses? How would you like it if she told you over breakfast one morning that she adopted some child from overseas, and you can barely remember the child’s name, much less claim it as your own blood kin? And if that’s not the whole cake with the icing, I have to watch that crazy Ossie B run in and out of here all day talking about wanting to marry my daughter. Dorthea deserves somebody a million times better than Ossie B.”

“You should stop letting that boy bother you so much,” said Rayford. “Look, here comes that new school teacher, Mr. Laclede.” I stopped trimming Rayford’s edges and turned toward the door. Mr. Laclede stood there with no expression on his face. Then he walked into the barbershop and shut the door behind him.

“You leave something here?” I asked.

“How you doing?” asked Rayford. Rayford waved to Mr. Laclede, but Mr. Laclede kept staring at me.

“I came to bring you something, Mr. Abel.” He reached into his pocket.

“What? You paid me just fine, remember? You don’t owe me nothing,” I told him.

“I’m giving you back the dollar you took from Ossie B.” Mr. Laclede held the dollar out to me. It had blood on it. I stared at him.

“What happened? Why does the dollar have blood on it?” I asked.

“Did somebody hurt you, Mr. Laclede?” asked Rayford.

“No. I’m just giving Mr. Abel his money. Miss Rosetta thought he should have it. Ossie B won’t be needing it anymore,” said Mr. Laclede.

“What happened to Ossie B?” Rayford asked.

“Why don’t you ask Mr. Abel? He knows a lot about the Butler family.”

“Stop beating around the bush! Did Ossie B hurt his momma?” asked Rayford.

“Ossie B didn’t hurt his mother. Ossie B is dead.”

“What?” asked Rayford.

“That’s not true! That can’t be true. Ossie B was just in here. He was standing right there where you’re standing,” I said. “I just saw him.”

“Well, don’t just stand there with a closed mouth, Mr. Laclede. Tell us what happened,” said Rayford.

“It’s a goddamn lie, Rayford. Mr. Laclede is not telling the truth. Ossie B was just here a minute ago.” I shook my head.

“It is true. I walked Ossie B home. Before I could settle down, I heard sirens. I went to the door and people were walking towards Miss Rosetta’s house. It turns out Ossie B was playing with a gun in the front yard, and the sheriff drove up and shot him. He is gone. Take the money, Mr. Abel. It doesn’t look like Ossie B will need money ever again,” said Mr. Laclede, holding out the dollar.

“Goddamn you, Mr. Laclede. Who do you think you are, coming into my barbershop and pinning that boy’s death on me? You think you can just walk in here and treat me like a murderer? Well, you can’t because all the fingers should be pointing at that sheriff. I’m innocent. The authorities will add everything up and not one finger will be pointing at me because I wasn’t even there.”

“Things will never add up for me,” said Mr. Laclede.

“Well, they will at the sheriff’s department, and that’s all that matters. Rosetta should have known better than to have a gun in the house with a half-wit. She should have never bought a gun in the first place,” I said.

“She didn’t buy a gun,” said Mr. Laclede. I stared at him for a while.

“Where did she get it?” asked Rayford.

“She told me that her daddy left it to her when he died,” said Mr. Laclede.

“That’s a goddamn lie. Otis Butler sat right here in this chair and told me he threw his gun into the Oconee River. Otis didn’t leave no gun to Rosetta and she knows it. Rosetta bought that gun.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter how she got it.

Ossie B is dead now, and I hope that taught Rosetta a good lesson,” said Rayford.

“She has more regrets now than any of us will ever know, Mr. Rayford. I’ve learned something, too. You want to know what I’ve learned, Mr. Abel?” Mr. Laclede walked over and dropped the dollar next to my foot.

“Don’t play school teacher with me. I’m a grown man, remember! I don’t care what you’ve learned, and I’m sure as hell not going to let you stand there and pin murder on me. I’m not a murderer.”

“Whatever people thought Ossie B was or wasn’t, he was always a human being. I believe he was probably the smartest man I’ve ever known.” Mr. Laclede dropped his head and grabbed the knob of the door. “And you know what else, Mr. Abel? First thing Monday morning, I’m going to tell all of my students what a smart man Ossie B was. I’m going to give him a great history if it’s the last thing I do in Moon County.”

“Well, you can tell the whole goddamn state of Georgia for all I care! Ossie B wasn’t smart and you know it! Nobody around here cares about half-wits. Not the law. Not anybody. Their lives just don’t matter. Ossie B was a goddamn fool who had no business anywhere near a gun. He’d be alive right now if he had been locked in the jailhouse. But nobody ever listens to me. I’m smarter than every last one of you, but nobody listens to me. Not even Elma. She blames me for everything. It ain’t my fault Dorthea turned into a man. It ain’t my fault Dr. Randolph became a murderer. And it ain’t my fault Ossie B is dead. I’m a lot of things, but I’m no murderer. I’ve always done everything I was supposed to do. And what do I have to show for it? What is my legacy, Mr. Laclede?”

Mr. Laclede shook his head and walked out of the door. I kicked the dollar away from me, wishing it would follow him. Everything was quiet like a graveyard. Rayford scratched his head and stared at the floor.

“Well, Abel, I guess it’s true what people say about those Butlers after all,” said Rayford. “They are cursed.”

“Shut up, Rayford! What do you know about a curse? You’re not that smart.”

Questions for Discussion and Writing

1. Does Ossie B’s social displacement and death tell us more about him or his community?
2. Can you identify the transformations at issue in the story? How are they similar? How are they different?
3. Why do you think legacies are important in the story, and what does this tell you about the role history plays in our communities?
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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