

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF

# MOON COUNTY



THE STORY OF GRACE

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## THE STORY OF GRACE

I found the love letter some woman named Lorraine wrote to my husband, Dipsey. He forgot to put the lock on his trunk before he left to go fishing in the Oconee River.

All day, I thought about her. Was she handsome? Tall? Stout? Clean?

How did she dress? How did she wear her hair? Was she church-going?

She said she liked it when Dipsey made love to her. I wondered if he made her feel something inside her heart. I wondered if she was like me and didn't feel anything at all most times.

Dipsey never seemed to care much about how I felt. He could be blind to what he didn't want to see. I knew he could never see that me and Lorraine were more alike than he thought.

Dipsey came one late fall and said he needed a wife to settle down with. He asked Momma if he could marry me. She handed me over to him with a few dresses in a potato sack.

Dipsey was older than me. I was fifteen, and I didn't menstruate. Momma said it would come later. I told Momma I didn't love him. She said love would come later.

After two months, Momma got sick and died and we buried her next to Daddy. The reverend let me read a poem at the funeral.

It was a death poem. I kept it in the Bible. I read it one day, then it was gone the next day. Dipsey said he took it, and I never saw it again.

I tried to put together what I remembered. The harder I tried, the less I remembered. I thought about the flower-print dress that I wore to the funeral. That dress was the only thing that felt right about life to me.

My flower-print dress was my only good dress. Momma made the dress for my wedding. I thought it was the prettiest dress I ever owned. It had so much of Momma in it. Sometimes when I wore it, I could feel her. Her touch was soft like a feather pillow.

Momma gave me a notebook for my wedding present. I filled it with poems and put it in the chifforobe under the nightdress that always smelled like talc. Most of the poems were about rain and clouds because that was how I felt around Dipsey. One day, I was rain; the next day, I was clouds. I went to get my notebook one morning. I searched under my nightdress. Dipsey said he took it, and I never saw it again. Thinking about Gertie Talbert was the one thing that helped me get murder

off my mind. She was the one who saved Dipsey.

I asked him to buy me a new dress because he said my flower-print dress was the ugliest dress he had ever seen and it wasn't proper for his daddy's funeral. He said he would rather rot than spend a dime of his money on a dress for me. He said my momma should have learned me how to make dresses.

I said I write poems. Dipsey frowned and said he didn't need a scribbling wife. He said he should have married Iris Baker because at least she knew how to make her own dresses. So I tried to be Iris.

Iris was the seamstress who slept with Mr. Peeler. She was smart and pretty. She lectured me on style and learned me how to walk with a book on my head. She altered my flower-print dress for free until I learned sewing proper.

One day, I read her a poem I wrote, and she handed me the page she tore out of a magazine about a poem contest with a hundred-dollar prize. I felt like there was something in the world for me to live for.

When I told Dipsey about the contest and the prize money, he frowned and asked me who was going to pay me a hundred dollars for scribbling. He pushed a piece of bacon in his mouth and turned the page of the newspaper. He never looked at the love poem on the table next to the fork and knife. I watched it soak up the little drops of coffee he spilled on it. The poem was dead before it ever had a chance to live.

I washed the dishes while he read the newspaper. I said a prayer and I thought about Iris. Iris shortened the sleeves on my dress for me. I wanted to try the dress on, but Dipsey honked the horn of the motorcar and I left Iris standing in her new house complaining about making new curtains and Gertie's husband, Harlem.

Going home, I got up the nerve to ask Dipsey to teach me how to drive the motorcar so I could go where I wanted to go. He said I'd run out all the gas driving back and forth to Iris's house. Besides church, Iris's house was the one place Dipsey let me go without making a fuss. The ladies at church said how good my flower-print dress looked with short sleeves.

One Sunday, Iris walked into church on the arm of Mr. Peeler. She wore a fur stole and a dress with feathers on it. Mr. Peeler bought the fur stole just for her. He had the money to buy the things that Dipsey thought were too wasteful. Iris and Mr. Peeler sat next to us.

Then Gertie walked in and sat down in front of us. She didn't say a word and she kept looking at the floor. I watched her, wondering what was moving through her mind.

Harlem was not with her.  
Dipsey told me to stop staring at Gertie.  
I stopped staring, but Gertie stayed in my mind. I wondered why she started wearing those big hats. I wondered why I never noticed her before Iris mentioned her. Why was she always sitting by herself? Why couldn't I hold back my thoughts on her? I saw tears roll down her face. Tears came down my face, too.

I told Dipsey that I wanted to write a poem about Gertie for the poem contest. He frowned, then he shook his head.

When I went to Iris's house, I told her what I told Dipsey. She said, "Pay no attention to Dipsey, Grace. You can write a poem about anything that suits you. If you want to write a poem about Gertie Talbert, then you write one."

"Why can't Dipsey be nice to me for a change?"

"Honey, folks would be breaking down my front door if I had the answer to that question. At least you ain't got it as bad as Gertie."

"What's wrong with Gertie?"

"Harlem is driving her crazy with his ways. Who do you think is the daddy of Hazel Rogers' newborn child?"

"Him?"

"Umm hum. Now imagine how Gertie must feel about that. You know how folks talk around Moon County."

"Why can't the men be more like Mr. Peeler?"

"Honey, Peeler ain't much better. You know he asked me to marry him."

"What did you say?"

"What do you think I said? No!"

"You don't like Mr. Peeler?"

"I like him. I just don't want to marry him. I'd only end up sharing him with some woman he got up in Atlanta, and God knows where else. You know he wanted to buy the old Wilson house, fix it up and resell it for a higher price."

"Mr. Peeler is a smart one, huh?"

"No, he's just a traveling businessman who loves women too much. I don't care how many times men like him tell you they love you, they are always the ones you end up sharing with another woman. I had enough of that with George."

"You mean George cheated on you?"

"Honey, he's got two grown boys by some woman over in Sparta County. They are every spit of George. They all came to his funeral."

"You never mentioned anything about them."

"Honey, it ain't the type of thing a woman wants to scream to the world, especially when her

own barrel has been empty all these years. George always did want sons."

"No woman would ever want Dipsey. I don't even want him. Hair grows on his toes."

"Honey, you'd be surprised. Look around you. All you see are women and children in Moon County. The rooster has his pick of the hens these days. It's a pretty terrible thing when you think about it. But then again, the world is a pretty terrible place. Ain't nothing guaranteed. Thank God for insurance. Dipsey has good insurance?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"I don't know. Dipsey said that is a man's business."

"Honey, these are the things a wife ought to know. You young wives never ask the right questions."

"Dipsey gets mad when I ask too many questions. I haven't been married to him one whole year and already it seems like forever."

"Honey, one day you will look in the mirror and start thinking marriage is longer than forever. Now step up on this stool and let me pin a higher hem."

Iris said I'd be able to show my legs more with a higher hem. Dipsey said I had legs like a chicken. They didn't stay that way. My body filled out more after Dipsey Jr. was born. The labor lasted four hours. Sweet Flora, the midwife, said she didn't think the baby was ready to come. But Iris didn't believe her. She didn't let go of my hand until Dipsey Jr. was born to the world.

Iris said the baby looked like Dipsey, but I said he was more like a poem. He was my pride and joy, and the same for Dipsey, too. Dipsey sometimes beat me to the cradle when Dipsey Jr. cried. Sometimes, he called him *his* son, like he owned more of the child than I did.

Dipsey Jr. grew up real fast. There were days when I could still feel him sleeping in my arms. There were days when I cried because I knew he was not my first child. I will never know what would have become of that child. Dipsey Jr. became a lawyer and he spoke all his words proper. He made me and Dipsey feel backwards when we talked. We were too ashamed to say much when we went up on the bus to visit. We didn't talk Chicago. He moved there and married a handsome woman who looked like she was fit for picture shows. They were raising twins. One boy. One girl.

Every time Dipsey Jr. sent me letters, Dipsey wanted to know all about the children and the cases that he won. I wondered if Lorraine had any children and whether any of them belonged to Dipsey. She



never mentioned children in her letter. If she had any, I hoped they made her as proud as Dipsey Jr. made me.

I found it hard to believe that Dipsey and Lorraine were together around the time Dipsey Jr. was born. Something told me he wasn't with her then. After Dipsey Jr. was born, I noticed sparks of love in Dipsey toward me. He didn't hate me as much for not being that woman he dreamed up in his head.

He came home from work and lifted the baby out of my arms, and he wanted to know about my day. He brought me candy and flowers like Lorraine said he did for her. Then one day, the flowers and the candy stopped coming. I asked why. He said it was too wasteful. I asked him about his insurance papers. He told me not to meddle in things that didn't concern me.

After I cooked Dipsey's breakfast and got him off to work, I searched every corner of the old shack house we rented for more money than it was worth. I searched underneath the bed; I searched the chifforobe. I searched the trunk. It was full of clothes and shoes. I found his insurance papers. I also found glossy postcards that said Alabama on the front. All the postage on them had marks, but there was no writing on the back. Then Dipsey beat me, and I wished I'd never found those postcards at all.

Iris asked, "Grace, what in the sweet name of Jesus did Dipsey beat you for?"

"He said I was meddling in his business too much."

"Honey, you poor thing. Look at your eye and those bruises around your neck. Why would you want the collar taken off this dress?"

"I don't like the way it rubs against my neck when I turn my head."

"Honey, when Dipsey gets finished with you, you won't have a head. Things like this get worse long before they get better. Just look at Gertie."

"When did you see her?"

"I saw her in the five-n-dime. She had on one of those big hats again. But even that hat couldn't hide the two swollen eyes she had. The poor thing has more trouble on her shoulders than she can stand. We got to pray for her. Elma Bailey told me she heard Gertie might be pregnant."

"Then I'll write a baby poem and send it to her."

"Honey, who in the sweet name of Jesus has time to write a poem for Gertie Talbert? This ain't the kind of thing you write a poem about. You've got to get on your knees and pray to God. Don't you know that Gladys Scout is going around talking about the stork and Harlem in the same breath without any

shame on her face? Now, you can't get more terrible than that."

"Why don't Gertie divorce Harlem? I want me a divorce from Dipsey."

"Honey, where are you going to get money for a divorce?"

"I've got to win that poem contest, that's all. Then I can get myself a divorce and leave that old shack house for good."

"Honey, you shouldn't put all of your hope in that contest. Nobody around these parts ever seems to win things like that."

"I can win with help from God."

"Then you better start praying because it's starting to look like you got two choices with Dipsey. You either kill him or leave him. Since you young and don't have long roots, I think you should leave."

"Why?"

"Honey, no offense, but you are not a bird with very bright feathers. I just can't see you pulling off a clean murder."

"I can, too, pull off a clean murder and take every bit of that insurance money!"

"Insurance or not, I suggest you stick to poems and leave murder alone. Ain't nothing more terrible than seeing a woman in one of those jailhouse dresses. You know they make all the women do the jailhouse laundry. That will wear your fingers down to fat nubs."

"That won't be me. I'll be sitting somewhere with the hundred dollars I'll win from that contest."

"Young wives are always full of cloudy dreams. It's a shame there's no such thing as insurance for dreams."

"I found some postcards from Alabama in Dipsey's trunk. The postage got marks, but there is no writing on the back."

"Honey, that's one of the main signs!"

"Signs of what?"

"That Dipsey has another woman somewhere over in Alabama. It won't be long before Dipsey is having babies with her, if he ain't doing it already."

"He ain't."

"How do you know, being locked up in that house scribbling about God knows what all day? I spent so much time sitting in the house sewing, half of the time I didn't know where George was or what he was up to. You see the price I paid."

"Dipsey won't do that to me."

"Honey, you shouldn't put all of your hope in that. Do you love Dipsey?"

"No, I hate him with a passion."

"Passion sure is a tricky thing these days."

I've got a passion for Peeler, but I don't love him. Sweet Jesus knows I'd never marry the rascal."

"I don't love Dipsey. I never have. My momma told me to marry him."

"Well, you got two choices: Kill Dipsey or leave him."

"I can't kill him. That will be a sin on me."

"Honey, just a minute ago, you told me you could! Make up your mind."

"Did you kill George?"

"You know I told you that George died of a heart attack."

"Why should I believe you?"

"Honey, I loved George. How was I supposed to know I married a man with a bad heart?"

"I can't kill Dipsey."

"Well, if you don't kill him, he will kill you. Remember, Dipsey probably has your name somewhere on those insurance papers, too."

"Dipsey won't do anything like that. He promised my momma he would take care of me."

"Honey, it's what he ain't doing that will kill you. Let me show you how to get rid of that lace collar."

Iris told me not to leave the house in my dress until my bruises left. I stayed in for two weeks. I had plenty to do. I read the insurance papers, but I didn't understand all the words. I cooked the food. I washed the dishes. I scrubbed the floors. I washed and ironed the clothes, and I wrote poems about Gertie.

I sat at the kitchen table thinking about the poems in the chifforobe. I had to pick one for the contest. I couldn't. I loved them all so much. I decided to take them with me to Iris's house to let her help me decide.

When I got to the chifforobe and looked under my nightdress, my notebook was gone. I searched everywhere except Dipsey's trunk. He had a lock on it.

I ran to Iris's house in tears. She said the date for the contest was a week away and I still had time to write another one. But I couldn't. Dipsey took something away from me that I didn't think I could get back.

I came home and I waited at the kitchen table. I watched the clock on the wall. I stared at the sunlight on the curtains. I wondered why the days seemed so long one day and so short the next. I wondered how much more time it would take before I could breathe again around Dipsey.

I put the blank paper on the table between the pencil and the knife that I used to try to get into the trunk. I waited and worried. I thought of words to write, but I didn't write them. I didn't know what they would mean on the paper. I prayed. The more I

prayed, the more the notion of murder rubbed against my skin.

I heard Dipsey at the door. My hands shook. Dipsey walked into the kitchen. He stared at me like there was something different about my face. He asked me why his dinner wasn't ready.

I didn't say anything.

He asked me again.

I didn't say anything.

I felt the slap come down hard on my face. My mind dizzied and blood came out of my nose and spotted my paper. I looked up and saw Dipsey with my eyes. But in my mind, I saw Gertie standing in the sunshine.

I grabbed the pencil instead of the knife.

I wrote the first line of Gertie's poem.

It said I do not love you anymore.

I sat there staring at those words while tears rolled down my face.

I never finished the poem because there were so many other things I had to do. Dipsey cut his hand on one of the machines at the cotton mill where he worked. He got only half pay while on leave. We didn't have enough money to pay the rent. There was no time left for scribbling. I had to work.

Iris said, "Grace, working will be good for you. At least you will be able to buy yourself a decent dress now. Plus, you will get a chance to get out of the house and do something with yourself."

"But I write poems."

"Honey, who is going to give you pay for scribbling? Peeler said Mrs. Beckham's maid quit and she is looking for a clean girl to take her place. I think you should go see her. Peeler can put in a good word for you."

"I don't want to clean up after some old woman. I do that for Dipsey."

"Dipsey ain't paying you. The stork is bringing you an extra mouth to feed and if you think things are hard for you now, just wait."

"I don't know if I want this child."

"Honey, what do you mean you don't know! It's your first child. It ain't like you got much of a choice."

"I do. Sweet Flora said she knows a doctor over in Sparta County who can get rid of it. His name is Dr. Pike."

"Honey, Sweet Flora is so old she can barely think straight. A child ain't something you can just get rid of without taking some time to think about it. You are young. Imagine how you might feel years from now. One thing you don't want to do in life is look back with regret."

"A few months ago, you told me to kill Dipsey. That ain't much different from killing a child. It's easier for me to kill this child inside of me

than Dipsey. I know Dipsey.”

“Honey, you need to feel it growing inside of you. Give yourself time is all I’m telling you. Think of the child. Your mind will change.”

“No, it won’t. My mind is made already.”

“Well, have you told Dipsey about this?”

“No, he doesn’t know about it. He’ll just complain about having another mouth to feed.”

“It would be a shame if you didn’t tell him. I bet his mind would change if you told him the stork was coming. I bet he’ll stop beating on you, too. Folks are like dress patterns. They change.

“I don’t believe that.”

“Where are you going to get the money to pay this doctor over in Sparta County?”

“I thought you’d loan it to me. You said George left you all of that insurance money when he died. I’ll pay you back every dime.”

“It’s never good to owe a debt you can’t pay.”

“I’ll go to Mrs. Beckham’s house tomorrow. I’ll dig ditches for her if I have to.”

“Honey, I can’t help you and you know I would if I could.”

“Why can’t you?”

“Honey, that insurance money is gone. After I buried George and put the down payment on this house, there wasn’t much left. I thought I could afford this house. Then my sewing business got slow and I couldn’t make the notes. Peeler had to take over. This is Peeler’s house now.”

“Then I’ll ask Peeler for the money.”

“Honey, I don’t think Peeler would ever give you the money for something like that. He loves children to death. He has two and neither one of them are by his ex-wife.”

“Well, I’ll ask him. If he says no, then I’ll work. I’ll work myself to death before I have this child.”

“Honey, talk to God. Just get down on your knees and talk to him. Ask him to guide your heart on the matter. He’ll tell you what to do. You don’t want to end up like me and Gertie and have to pay a price you are not strong enough to pay.”

“What happened to Gertie?”

“Honey, nobody told you! Gertie killed Harlem last night. She stabbed him with an ice pick. It’s a good thing she isn’t pregnant because she’ll be locked up until the day she dies.”

“I don’t want to be like Gertie.”

“Honey, it’s so easy to say that.”

“But I don’t!”

“Honey, you are not a bird with strong wings. You can step down off that stool now; your dress looks just fine to me. I don’t think there’s much else we can do to change it without the whole

thing falling apart from exhaustion.”

For luck, I wore my flower-print dress when I went to Mrs. Beckham’s house to ask her about the job. Mrs. Beckham said Mr. Peeler told her all about me. She looked me over real good before she hired me.

Then I went to work. I cooked her food. I washed her dishes. I scrubbed her floors. It was just my luck she paid somebody else to do the laundry or I’d have to do that, too.

My day off was on Tuesdays because Mrs. Beckham needed me to work on Sundays after church. I didn’t mind because I was so thankful for the job. I had to help Dipsey make the rent, and I had to pay back the money Mr. Peeler gave me.

Mr. Peeler offered to drive me and Sweet Flora to Sparta County to see Dr. Pike. He waited and drove us home, too. Sweet Flora told him I wouldn’t be in any condition to walk. I promised him I’d pay him every dime of his money. He told me to get some rest.

Rest was a word that Mrs. Beckham wouldn’t let me know. She had picky ways about her. After a few days, I got used to the way Mrs. Beckham liked things done, and the bleeding finally stopped just like Sweet Flora said it would.

In those days, Dipsey wasn’t at home enough to notice me much. His hand got better and he went back to work. He stopped coming home for dinner. If he came home at all, he came in late at night and he left early in the morning without eating breakfast.

There would be nights when I could smell a woman’s perfume on him. I told Iris that whoever the woman was, I hoped she was all Dipsey wanted her to be. Iris said I shouldn’t worry myself over things like that. But I did.

Maybe, that was Lorraine’s perfume on Dipsey. Maybe, those were the years the two of them were together. Maybe, she let him make love to her because he complained so much when I wouldn’t. Maybe, Dipsey was like a poem to her. Maybe, he was the one thing that made her feel like there was something in the world for her to live for. Maybe, they were in love.

When I read the letter again, I thought about how Lorraine probably had Dipsey when I needed him the most. I told him I didn’t like walking home from work in the dark. He didn’t make a fuss. He told me I would be fine because no man in Moon County would want me anyway.

I believed him. Then one night I didn’t believe him anymore.

Mr. Peeler drove by and saw me walking by myself in the dark.

He offered me a ride home.  
I told him I didn't want to go home.  
He asked me where I wanted to go.  
I told him he could take me anywhere  
besides home.

So he drove me out to the Oconee River.  
Mr. Peeler parked the car by the trees. He  
held my hand. He kissed me. He told me my lips were  
sweeter than Iris's lips, and I fell in love.

For the first time in my life, I felt something in  
my heart for somebody and that was the night I got  
pregnant with Dipsey Jr. I wanted to have Mr. Peeler's  
child. The child felt like the poem inside me that I never  
finished. I thought a child would make Mr. Peeler love  
me because Iris said he loved children. But he didn't  
love me at all.

After I told Mr. Peeler everything, he said  
that he'd take me to Dr. Pike to get rid of the child.  
But I wouldn't go. He tried to make me go. But I  
wouldn't go. Mr. Peeler moved back to Atlanta and he  
took Iris with him. After that, I made myself forget  
about love.

Mr. Peeler put the house up for sale for  
much less than Iris said it was worth. Iris complained  
about having to move so far from home. Dipsey said  
we would be fools if we didn't buy Iris's house. I told  
him I liked living in our old shack house.

But Dipsey didn't listen to me.

I didn't think I could live a happy life in  
Iris's house. I didn't think my mind would let me know  
any peace. I thought that one day Dipsey would find out  
the truth and take Dipsey Jr. away like he took away  
my poems. I lived haunted for years.

I tried to write poems. But that didn't keep me  
from worrying.

Then one day I was sitting at the kitchen table  
sewing buttons on one of Dipsey's shirts and I thought  
about my old flower-print dress all folded and boxed  
somewhere in the attic. None of the dresses I bought  
from the store fit good. So I started making my own. I  
made so many dresses Dipsey asked me if I planned to  
sell some.

I told him they were not for sale and they  
were not all for me. I told him some of them were for  
Gertie. He told me that if I wanted to spend all day  
making dresses for a woman who could never wear  
them sitting in prison, then that was fine with him.  
Dipsey didn't understand sewing was how I was  
saving my life along with somebody else's. Then  
again, maybe he did understand.

He kissed me on my forehead. I smiled. I've  
seen him walk out of the door with his fishing pole a  
thousand times. It was hard for me to hate somebody I  
knew so much about. So much time had passed. Why  
go back to living as rain one day and clouds the next  
when I didn't have to?

Like always, Dipsey asked me where I last  
saw his lucky hat just before he went fishing in the  
Oconee River. I laughed whenever he asked me that.  
It was sitting on the chair by the door, like always.  
Dipsey just liked hearing me say those words. I  
laughed because there used to be a time when Dipsey  
wouldn't care about my words at all. Time still had  
lessons for me and Dipsey to learn together. Now it  
was teaching us how to be the insurance for each  
other. Why should I let a letter change all that?

Dipsey came home from work one day and  
told me Gertie had died. He said folks were meeting  
over at Madame's Café that evening to remember  
her. I told Dipsey that instead of going to the café, I  
was going to make Gertie a flower-print dress like  
the one Momma made me. While I sewed, he sat  
across the kitchen table nodding and reading the  
newspaper. He looked up and told me that I was  
doing a good thing for Gertie. He told me that Gertie  
was finally free. I smiled because he was right. I saw  
Gertie dancing in my dreams sometimes.

Dipsey let me drive home from the funeral  
because his eyes had gotten so bad. He told me that  
Gertie's dress was the prettiest dress he'd ever seen.  
I cried because when he said that I felt something in  
my heart for him, and I realized it was what love was  
supposed to feel like. Right then, I understood what  
Momma said so many years before.

My love for Dipsey did come later. It was  
not proud love. It was earned love. Maybe, that was  
the reason I decided to forgive him.

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### Questions for Discussion and Writing

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1. How does power influence the relationships between the men and women in the story?
2. How is Grace's dress a metaphor for her life?
3. Why is Grace's view of love at the beginning of the story so different from how it is at the end?
4. In the end, Grace forgives Dipsey, but would you? Can you recall a time when you had to forgive someone but you found yourself struggling to do so?
5. 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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