

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF

MOON COUNTY



THE STORY OF BILLY

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Since I couldn't get a job driving the ice truck, I went and got myself a job washing dishes at this new place that opened up in Moon County, Georgia, called Madame's Café. Miss DuMont came up from New Orleans and said Moon County was the plainest place she'd ever seen and it needed some flavor. I walked up to the big sweaty woman and told her I needed a job. Buddy, who had worked before as a cook, persuaded her to go ahead and give me a chance, and she did. Buddy put me on the dishes, floors and windows while he cooked, and Miss DuMont sat at the table licking her fingers and separating dollars in piles. Madame's Café never made a whole lot of money, but my cut made me feel a whole lot richer than I was.

So I was cleaning windows the day Miss Shady Lady walked up Main Street carrying one of those little umbrellas. She had the most beautifulliest skin in the county. I gave her the name Miss Shady Lady because she carried that umbrella everywhere, rain or shine, and it cast a shadow over her head. She wore a lacy dress and one of those fancy hairstyles where the hair in the front waved off to the right. She had more fashion about herself than anybody I had ever seen. All the men tried to hold up traffic when they saw Miss Shady Lady coming. The womenfolk would slap their husbands because they couldn't help but to look. I thanked God I wasn't married; I could never have a woman slapping my face every time she found my eyes wandering off admiring sweet, pretty little things like Miss Shady Lady.

Miss Shady Lady came to Madame's Café one Wednesday. We weren't busy at all, but Miss DuMont was thumbing money as usual, and Buddy was cheating himself at some card game. There I was watching Miss Shady Lady sitting up there looking good in a lacy dress. She smelled like roses. I'm not talking about a little I'm-too-ashamed-to-open-up rose either. I'm talking about a fully-bloomed rose the color of blood and love. It smelled so good it made me forget it was a rose and made me think it was a woman with legs that stretched out for miles.

Miss Shady Lady had a book hiding that pretty face of hers, so I asked Miss DuMont could I take her a slice of cake and coffee. Miss DuMont went on and on about how I wasn't a waiter and that my place was in the back and my job was to tear down that stack of pots and pans that Buddy was always piling up like he was crazy. My hands wrinkled from so much dishwashing. Miss Shady Lady looked about in her prime thirties, and I didn't want age building any walls for me to climb over. So I cleared my throat and talked deep.

"Here is your order, Miss." She didn't even put that darn book down to take notice of me and how I was trying to do my best to make her feel at home like Miss DuMont said to.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. Anything else I can get for you—like another piece of cake or something—you just let me know, okay."

"I will."

"You like to read an awful lot?"

"Yes, I do," she said.

"It sure is a crime, the way you always allow that book there to hide that pretty face of yours," I told her.

"No, I don't," she said.

"If you need anything, don't be scared to holler."

"I got everything I need."

"You know, if you move over in that chair you won't have to worry about having the sun on your pretty skin. I see the way you hide under that umbrella you carry on your shoulders."

"It's a parasol."

"Ooooooh, you know I thought that was what they called it. Let me tell you, right here this day, that I think that is the most beautifulliest parasol that I have ever seen."

Suddenly, Miss DuMont interrupted like only she could.

"Now, Billy, you don't get paid for socializing. Get back there and clean those dishes before I dock you one day's pay."

"I'm tired of washing dishes, Miss DuMont," I said, excusing myself from Miss Shady Lady. "Train me how to cook or something."

Buddy stood behind the counter laughing. Miss DuMont kept shuffling those one dollar bills like they were going to have babies or something.

"Billy, I can't have you around here burning up food and driving my customers away. Hell, I counted a loss here three times in a row, and we can't keep on having that."

"But still." I rubbed her shoulder to try to get her to see some of the light I was shining on the matter.

"I got an idea," said Buddy, throwing down the cards. "Let's run a special on chicken. Everybody in Moon County wants good fried chicken."

"That doesn't sound like a good idea to me. You stick with the cooking side and let me stick with the business side."

"What am I going to stick with?" I asked.

"This floor we're standing on. What do you think I hired you for?"

Miss Shady Lady moved on out the door

like she didn't want to disturb all the fussing. When she got outside, she flipped that little umbrella up and off she went, leaving that rose smell behind her.

I watched her walk away. Miss DuMont got up with the money gripped in her hand. She folded it over and stuffed it in the apron she was wearing. She didn't like using cash registers. She said machines and banks just couldn't be trusted after the stock market crashed.

"But still," I said.

"Look, Billy, you just clean those windows, keep the floor clean and shiny, and wash the pots and the pans. You heard me?"

"I heard you."

"I still think we should run a special," said Buddy.

"Who is going to clean chickens all day? It won't be me, no indeed. Like I told you before, chickens only bring a person bad luck," said Miss DuMont.

"Buddy and me have been talking, and we think we've got good heads for business, Miss DuMont. I think I could even be a pretty good cook if somebody learned me how."

"Billy, this ain't no school. Come on back here with me and let me get you started on those pots and pans."

Buddy started a new game with himself because nobody was in the café.

I walked on back to the kitchen, where Miss DuMont stood by the sink thinking hard about something. I stood beside her lifting pots and pans. She looked over at me, and I half looked at her staring. She could be a real strange lady, especially when she went around mumbling and singing in that French talk and dropping stuff in the pots that Buddy had cooking on the stove.

"Billy?"

"What?"

"Do you like that young lady who was just in here a minute ago?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Are you having a hard time getting her to like you back?"

"About as hard a time as they come, Miss DuMont."

"I have the secret on how you can make her yours for the rest of your life."

"What kind of secret?"

"There are some things you've got to do first."

"What things?"

"First, you've got to get yourself some garlic and a few hot peppers. Then you have to kill a chicken and cut off the feet, and you make yourself a necklace and tie it around your neck. Let me take

care of the rest. You heard me?"

"Yeah, but what is all that going to do, Miss DuMont?" I asked her.

"Let me worry about that. Do like I told you and I guarantee she'll be yours in due time."

"All right, but I thought you said killing chickens gave a person bad luck."

"It depends on the man doing the killing, Billy. That's all."

She gave me the garlic and some hot peppers. I killed a chicken and cut off the feet. Miss DuMont told me to take a needle and thread and sew them all together and then tie them around my neck. Of course, I didn't know the first thing about sewing so I went right on over to Essie's house. Essie didn't have much fashion. She was just regular. She'd been cleaning house for Mrs. Beckham since we left school. But otherwise, Essie was just an at-home-kind-of-woman. She'd give me homemade caramel cakes on my birthdays, and she was the only person in Moon County who was happy I had found myself another job. She gave me a letter, and it said all kinds of nice things. Sometimes, she'd come to my house and cook, then we'd sit on the porch and smoke a cigar together.

"Hey, Essie, you didn't go to Mrs. Beckham's house today?"

"No, I quit because she cheated me out of my pay. What do you have in your hand that is smelling so God-awful-bad?"

"Stuff to get me a real lady." Essie's face lit up like the butt of a lightning bug. "I know you are good with a needle and thread and we have been knowing each other for a long time now. I was just wondering if you wouldn't mind helping me string together a necklace made out of garlic, peppers and chicken feet."

"What is all of that stuff going to do, Billy?"

"Get me a lady, like I told you!"

"Really?"

"Yeah!"

Essie grabbed the parts for the necklace and started sewing. Poor Essie's nose ran so bad from the hot peppers, but she kept sewing and didn't complain one time. When Essie finished the necklace and tried to put it on me, one of the nails on the chicken foot scratched me on my neck. She took a few steps back, then said the whole thing was crazy, but the necklace didn't look too bad from a distance. Between the garlic and the peppers, I just couldn't get myself to function right.

My legs took me on to Madame's Café. My head was spinning, and my eyes saw two of everything. I believed folks thought I was crazy the way I was shedding tears and reaching out for things like I was a blind man. When I made it to the café,

Buddy told me that Miss DuMont had to go off on business, and we had to run the place until she could get back. Buddy asked me about the garlic and the peppers and the necklace and why I was crying like a baby and sweating like a pig.

"This is how I'm going to get Miss Shady Lady when she struts in here looking so fine and pretty and smelling so good!"

"You'd better go back there and wash all of those pots and pans," said Buddy.

"You use an awful lot of pots and pans for this place to be so empty all the time. Those pots and pans will just have to wait. I'm waiting on Miss Shady Lady first."

"I need extra pots and pans because I'm trying out some new recipes. But Miss DuMont never lets me cook what I want to cook. It is always what she wants. I've been saving to start my own café some day."

The necklace was getting tight around my neck, but I believed that was only to let me know the whole thing was working. I could barely hold my head up, and Buddy had six heads as far as I could tell. He said my neck was much thicker than he could remember it being the day before. Miss Shady Lady would walk into the café any minute, crawl all over me and kiss me with her pretty self.

"Billy, it looks like your eyes are about to pop out of your head."

"I'm fine, Buddy. You just wait until you see me strutting around with Miss Shady Lady on my arm. We'll see who the lucky man is then."

"You don't know anything about that lady. How do you know all that pepper and chicken feet business is going to work?" asked Buddy.

"Miss DuMont told me to wear this necklace and Miss Shady Lady would be mine."

Buddy looked at me all quiet, and then he fell over the counter laughing. I could feel my head getting heavier and heavier and the necklace getting tighter and tighter around my neck. Before I could say anything to shut Buddy up from laughing, I fell on the floor. All I could see was two sets of shoes, one was a man's and the other was nobody but Miss Shady Lady's. Her little umbrella was beside those pretty little legs of hers.

"Billy, get up and stop playing opossum. We've got customers."

"Is he all right?" Miss Shady Lady asked. I tried to get up to see her face, but I couldn't move my neck.

"Yes, sir, what will you two be having today?" Buddy asked.

"Me and my wife would like your special."

"We don't have a special, sir."

Wife! What wife? I never saw a ring on

Miss Shady Lady's finger. What was this crazy man talking about? Why was he coming into Madame's Café talking about "me and my wife"? If I could have gotten up, I would have knocked his head off his shoulders, grabbed Miss Shady Lady and rushed her down Main Street and on over to the courthouse so we could be married before this man started dropping lies on me again.

"I don't think he is all right. His neck is all fat, and it looks like his head is about to explode," said that pretty voice.

"I think we better find us some other place to eat around here," said that lying man.

"Billy, you get up and stop playing opossum. He's just playing opossum, folks. He's not dying for real. Get up, Billy! Please stay, folks. What do you need? I can cook anything. Just name it. How about the best fried chicken you've ever tasted in your life?"

"No thank you."

I woke up in Essie's house. She was holding a cold rag on my head. I had a cold rag on my neck, too. It felt so good just laying there in bed feeling half asleep and half awake. Out of the cracks of my eyes, I could see Essie's face. She hummed.

"You feel any better, Billy? You've been sleeping for two whole days. You passed out down at the café, and Buddy carried you all the way here. I thought we were going to have to take you all the way to Sparta County to see Dr. Pike. Buddy said you let Miss DuMont voodoo you."

I nodded.

"You don't have to talk at all. I understand. I know that you, garlic, peppers and chicken feet don't get along. I told God I was not leaving your side until the old Billy came back. I prayed for you the whole time."

I grabbed Essie's hand. Those were the most beautiful words anybody had ever said to me. They sat in my head like a good dream. Essie didn't have as much fashion as Miss Shady Lady, and she didn't need to carry one of those little umbrellas around with her. She was just a good woman, plain and simple. I looked into those big eyes she had, and I could see all of our children, and me and her puffing on a cigar.

"I love you, Essie," I told her.

"That's just the fever got you talking like that, Billy."

"Will you marry me, Essie?"

Essie couldn't say one word. I saw the tears running down her face, then she hollered, "Yes!" She kissed me, and her lips tasted like sugar cane. I sat up in the bed and held her. She was soft like a feather pillow. Her body was warm, and I knew she

was warm inside, too, because she had the most kindest heart of any woman I had ever known. She prayed for God to bring me back to life when I was headed to the graveyard. I figured if she would do that for me, she wouldn't mind being my wife and living with me for the rest of her life. And that's why I married Essie.

But that ain't the end of the story.

Miss DuMont came walking into the café after being gone for weeks. She said she had some bad news for us. She looked around to find something to complain about. When she couldn't find anything, she asked me for all the money we made while she was gone. I told her that it was the same amount she left us with before she went away. Then Buddy told her that I was a married man.

"See, didn't I tell you it would work, Billy! You listen to me. I will never lead you wrong."

"I'm not married to Miss Shady Lady. I married Essie."

"Who is that?"

"My new wife, that's who it is, and you ought to know what you're doing before you go around playing God."

"He was all stretched out on the floor, playing opossum. You should have seen him, Miss DuMont," said Buddy.

"Billy, you're what I call a bad chicken killer. But you're married now and that's all that really matters. Do you love her?"

"I do."

"Then that's all that really matters, good chicken killer or not. I've got something to tell the both of you, so listen good."

"What is it?" I asked.

"I got to go back down to New Orleans and see about some business. The government claims that I owe some back taxes. This place has to close down," she said.

"Don't close it down! Let us run it. Buddy and me got good heads for business when we put them together. Plus, he has been trying out some new recipes. That's why I can never keep all the dishes clean."

"What?"

Buddy just stood with his mouth open. He couldn't believe I was speaking up for him.

"You put his mind up to this, Buddy?"

"No, Miss DuMont. That's Billy's own mind working."

"Give us a chance, Miss DuMont. You'll come back here and this will be a changed place."

She sat down and looked at the two of us. She tapped her heavy foot on the floor, then she took a minute to think.

"You'll need some extra help with me gone. We can't afford it right now."

"I can get Essie to help. She can take your place." Miss DuMont didn't do anything around the café anyway.

"Somebody will have to keep up with the money and the records. Buddy has the head for cooking. Who has the head for numbers?"

"Me! I've got a good head for numbers."

"Who's going to keep the place clean?"

"Me and Essie. We can clean and count at the same time."

"Buddy, what do you have to say about all this?"

"Give us a chance. That's all. If it doesn't work out, we can close the place down."

"All right, but I'll be back. If you two do anything crazy to my café, I'll have to put something on the two of you that will do worse than what was done to Billy."

"Everything will be just fine," said Buddy. We hugged and kissed Miss DuMont. We couldn't pick her up and put her on our shoulders because we would have dropped into hell. I figured she probably knew the devil anyway.

I liked having Essie working with me at the café. She was getting a little fat in the stomach, but Buddy was cooking some of the best food the folks in Moon County had ever tasted. We had folks coming in all the way from Sparta County, including Dr. Pike. I had to turn some folks away, especially Miss Shady Lady and her husband. Miss Shady Lady wasn't even pretty anymore, at least not as pretty as Essie. Some of the customers said she had a shine in her face. Dr. Pike said Essie was probably pregnant.

Months later, I got a ladder and took down the Madame's Café sign and put up the new sign that said "Café." Buddy drove up in his new motorcar. He said Miss DuMont would probably voodoo all of us if she ever came back to Moon County, but we hadn't heard anything from her. Essie was holding the baby, because I was a daddy. She said the sign was straight. We locked the doors to the café, and Buddy gave us a ride to our new house.

Questions for Discussion and Writing

1. What does Billy's worldview before and after his illness tell you about the power of transformation in the lives of humans?
2. How many depictions of love are operating in the story? Which do you feel is the better characterization?

3. Can you remember a time when you faced a lack of employment opportunities? If so, how did you cope and what lessons did you gain from the experience?

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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