

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF

MOON COUNTY



THE STORY OF JASPER

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THE STORY OF JASPER

You can always find a girl like Mary Jean causing trouble in class and escaping punishment, just like something you'd see in a picture show. Everybody knew we would be getting a new girl in our class, and she showed up wrapped in a boa that she probably got from her Aunt Esther, who everybody knew was crazy anyway. When she introduced herself to the class, Mary Jean told everybody to call her by her first and middle names because her Aunt Esther said that was how the really big stars will do it in the future. Of course, our teacher, Miss Beetlewell, told her to take off that dumb boa, and Mary Jean just flat out refused. She told Miss Beetlewell her Aunt Esther said she didn't have to take off her boa because she was going to be a starlet when she grew up and starlets don't listen to teachers because they are all a bunch of liars.

Of course, I thought Miss Beetlewell should have hauled Mary Jean straight to the principal's office when she said that, but she didn't. I guessed she didn't want more trouble than what she already had with our class that day, which is understandable, seeing how we were a rowdy bunch. Miss Beetlewell was all wrinkles now with puffy hair that she lost pencils in all the time. She wore her glasses on the edge of her nose, and she shifted between three flowery dresses the whole school year. We figured she didn't quite know what to do with us except send us to the principal's office, and she usually had good reason to do so with Big Bernie throwing spitballs all day and putting us in the headlock. He was like a fat giant compared to the rest of us, and he had been put back so many times he barely fit the desks. One wrong word and Big Bernie got worked up and it was show time. He turned the place upside down, which was not good for Miss Beetlewell at all because it meant the principal ended up coming to her rescue like in the picture show, but he ain't always happy to find her in the same situation as the last. So every chance we got, we hooted and hollered and yelled a few your-daddy-so-poor jokes across the room just for show, and Miss Beetlewell would tell us to use our inside voices, which we seldom did, especially if Hector got worked up because somebody talked about his daddy driving that smoking fruit truck for a living. Hector was the new kid in class last year. He just showed up one day and the girls just fell in love. You couldn't tell him nothing. He didn't speak a word of English. Then one day I looked up and I saw Hector was all in some boy's face, talking about every member of his family in two languages. Enoch, who

couldn't see anything without his thick glasses, became Hector's best friend. They were as thick as thieves, and Hector protected him when the class got into a ruckus and everybody was fair game. Before Hector came, Enoch got beat up every week or somebody took his glasses, and he would have to feel his way around like a blind man, which we just couldn't get enough of. Enoch was the only one near average level in class and, of course, we used to beat him up for that, too. Miss Beetlewell always put little check minus marks next to his name on this huge progress chart she taped on the back wall. Of course, Enoch had more minuses than any of us, which made him a genius in our book. The rest of the class had mostly X's. Mary Jean was the only one in class with no check marks at all because she refused to have her name listed on some dumb chart. Of course, I complained to Miss Beetlewell how this wasn't fair. If our names had to go up on that chart on the back wall, then so should Mary Jean's name. So naturally, I threw spitballs at her when Miss Beetlewell wasn't looking. Because as far as I was concerned, she was fair game.

Of course, I ended up in the principal's office because Miss Beetlewell believed the lie that came out of Mary Jean's mouth. She said I took her spelling book, which was a natural born lie, for sure. Big Bernie took that book and passed it to Hector, who passed it to Enoch. My daddy didn't care who took what because he was going to take me to the woodshed regardless. He had to take off work from his job at the cotton mill to come up to the school, and I knew what that meant. We weren't out of the principal's office three seconds and he hit me upside my head, yelling at me about some time clock at the cotton mill and how I needed to leave Mary Jean alone and start taking my education seriously or I'd end up right next to him in that hell hole known as the cotton mill. Then I got it even worse when I got home because momma came in with her two cents, and it all turned into one big ruckus that was far worse than the one I experienced in Miss Beetlewell's class because momma started crying and worrying that I was beyond the reach of Jesus. Then daddy hit me with his belt and threatened to send me to the special school out at the asylum if I didn't straighten up and stop running with the bad crowd in school. Of course, I felt under attack, but everybody knew you couldn't fight your momma and daddy the way you could somebody like Big Bernie or Hector, or they would lay you flatter than an ironing board and throw you out of the house and into poverty. And you didn't want to get my daddy started on poverty because to let him tell it we were always one paycheck away from moving into Aunt Carol's attic.

Finally, I made amends and I promised to be good, study hard and not cause a ruckus in class ever again. Then I made it back to school and all of a sudden Big Bernie had Enoch in the headlock, telling him to hand over his lunch money or die. Hector jumped on his back, and Mary Jean stood on her desk doing Broadway leg kicks with that boa. Miss Beetlewell told everyone to knock off the racket and take their seats or else. It was a ruckus, and I sat in my desk trying to focus on my history lesson like my daddy told me. I held on to composure with cat claws because I knew everything in me wanted to jump into the rumble and show everybody who ran the business in the class. So it was a good thing the principal came and hauled off Big Bernie and Hector because I felt myself backsliding like they talk about in church sometimes. Of course, the principal didn't say one word to Mary Jean, who was sitting in her desk with a book held up to her face like all of a sudden she was Miss History. I raised my hand, and I asked Miss Beetlewell why the principal didn't haul off Mary Jean with Enoch, Hector and Big Bernie because she was causing a ruckus, too. Of course, Miss Beetlewell told me to mind my own business or else I'd be sitting in the principal's office myself. I knew it was just a matter of time before I would end up there anyway because there was no way I was letting Mary Jean get away with murder when she was no better than the rest of us when it came to starting a ruckus. And sure enough, film day came and the same characters stole the show.

"Okay class, it is film day. Who wants to run the projector?" All of our hands shot up, knowing that Miss Beetlewell picked the same person every time. Enoch. But Miss Beetlewell made a show of it, putting her finger on her chin and squinting her eyes like she was figuring long division in her head. She picked Enoch and everybody went ahhh, except me and Hector because we figured out the whole thing was a scam a long time ago.

"What are we watching today, Miss Beetlewell?" I asked. She was helping Enoch set up the projector and load the film. We had to show it on the back wall near that progress chart after Big Bernie broke the legs on the projector screen, and the principal refused to buy us a new one.

"Something about the life of birds," said Miss Beetlewell.

"The life of birds?" asked Mary Jean. "We saw that last week."

"Yeah, we saw that last week," said Big Bernie, popping his head up from his folded arms.

"I don't want to watch that. We saw that already and it was stupid," said Mary Jean. "Why can't we ever watch something with starlets?"

"Yeah, why can't we ever watch something

fun?" asked Hector.

"I hear Miss Caller's class always watches something fun on film day," Enoch said, which was really true. Everybody knew Miss Caller's class was different from ours, especially when she got a new projector and screen and we didn't.

"Well, we have to show something educational, and I think learning about birds is educational," said Miss Beetlewell. "Don't you, Enoch?"

"Yes, Miss Beetlewell." We all looked at Enoch playing the traitor while standing behind the projector. As soon as he turned it on and the light hit the wall, Hector made a duck with his hands and started quacking. Some of the kids in the front row made turkeys and rabbits with their hands.

"Well, I think it is stupid, and we should watch something with real movie stars and not some old dumb birds. What kind of class is this anyway?" asked Mary Jean, and she ran over and stood right in front of the projector and started doing Broadway with that boa right in front of Hector. Of course, Hector wasn't giving up the spotlight without a fight.

"Get out of my way. You saw me here first," he said.

"You don't tell me what to do. I'm a starlet," she said.

"I don't care what you are! I was here first, stupid." Hector pushed Mary Jean out of his way and made his duck again.

"Hector and Mary Jean, please take your seats," said Miss Beetlewell. Before he could, Mary Jean was choking him with her boa and talking about how he was messing up her audition. The class called him a sissy for getting beat up by a girl, and that made Hector angrier than a wet hen. He swung at Mary Jean and missed. The class got all rowdy with cheers for Mary Jean, and she just loved every minute of it.

"Hey, you can't fight a girl," Big Bernie screamed, and he ran over and threw a punch right at Hector's head and missed. Of course, I ran over right after Big Bernie threw his hat into the ring. Mary Jean swung at Hector and hit me, and the class roared and cheered for her and she loved every minute. I grabbed at her and caught a few feathers from that boa instead. Then I realized that we were all standing in front of that projector light casting shadows, and it looked just like something you saw at the picture show except we were the characters, but it was more entertaining than anything some stupid bird could ever do in a million years.

"All right! If you all don't take a seat right this instant, I'm going to have to send each and every one of you to the principal's office," said Miss Beetlewell. "And you know what that means!" Of

course, that might have done the trick for me if Big Bernie hadn't grabbed me off Mary Jean and put me in the headlock, saying I had one coming from him from days gone by. And I screamed for mercy so loud that Miss Caller came over from next door and blew her whistle to break up the ruckus. Miss Beetlewell told Enoch to stand at the blackboard and take names while she and Miss Caller marched us straight to the principal's office. The principal didn't even want to hear how Mary Jean started the whole thing and should have been sitting right there with me, Big Bernie and Hector. He didn't even lecture us or threaten us with beating erasers after school. He just wanted us out of his school forever, which probably wasn't long enough in his book.

Big Bernie's momma showed up with a baby, then dragged him out by the ear. Hector's daddy drove up in that smoking fruit truck with his uncle, and he rattled off something nobody understood. We figured it was something terrible because Hector broke down in tears like somebody just died. All of a sudden, I was sitting in the principal's office alone, waiting for my daddy to show up to give me the business. He showed up and everything got still. I figured it was the calm before the storm, and I didn't move. Then I remembered that one time I got in trouble at school and daddy took me home, took off his belt and sat down on the bed next to me and said this was something he thought we should discuss. He explained how what he was about to do would hurt him more than it would hurt me, which I couldn't figure because he wasn't the one getting the licks. Then I remembered another time when I got in trouble and he came to the principal's office. I sat outside the office trying to figure out what they were saying behind closed doors. Finally, my daddy came out and told me that the principal thought I could maybe get into a higher class if I just worked on my reading and stayed out of trouble. Of course, he went upside my head when we got outside, and he just flat out told me there was nothing to discuss and I was going to get it worse when I got home.

He was right. I couldn't sit straight in my desk at school for two days. This time, he stood in the office doorway staring at me like this was the last straw and that made me figure I would feel the belt when I got home. He thanked the principal and told me it was time to go. We walked outside, and I expected him to go upside my head real good and tell me how I needed to leave Mary Jean alone and take my education more seriously, but he didn't. My daddy didn't say a word. Well, I figured that maybe he was waiting until we got out of sight in his old beat-up motorcar, and he would take off his belt and give me a few licks just to give me a taste of what the second act was going to be like when we got home. Nothing.

Then I noticed something. We were going a different way home. Usually, daddy took Main Street to get home from the school. I asked him where we were going. Of course, he didn't say one word. Then I saw the sign on the side of the road that pointed to the cotton mill. And all of a sudden, I was feeling sweaty because daddy never allowed me anywhere near the cotton mill. He always said it was nothing he ever wanted me to see. So I looked around, expecting momma to come out and tell daddy to hold his horses because he was about to break the law that he set and she didn't approve one bit. But she was nowhere in sight. We passed the cotton mill and I could hear the machines grinding and clanking as we passed. Then daddy stopped the motorcar and we walked down a little dirt pathway in the woods. Suddenly, the light faded away as we went down the pathway to a little camp with a shack house made of old wood, rusted sheets of tin and boxes. I looked at those four men sitting around the fire in beat-up hats and dirty overalls full of holes and patches. They never noticed that we were watching them. One of the men turned a rabbit over the fire and another played a harmonica while the other two talked like what was being said was a secret. They passed around a jug of something that made each and every last one of them frown and blow. I asked daddy who were these men because they looked like a bunch of shady crooks to me, and my daddy looked at me and he whispered to me that this was what was going to happen to me if I didn't straighten up in school and get my lesson.

We drove home. I did feel much better about everything, but I didn't let on none. I put on a show. I sniffed and made like the whole thing just upset me something terrible. I sat next to him in the motorcar with my head down and all, pretending like I just had my coming-to-Jesus moment. But I didn't. If those men were supposed to move me to doing good in school, it didn't exactly work because I could see me, Hector, Enoch and Big Bernie doing the same thing, except Enoch tended to the rabbit instead of the projector, Hector played the harmonica and Big Bernie hogged whatever was in that jug because I couldn't see him being the sharing type. Those men seemed to be making out all right as far as I was concerned. I figured having fun around a fire was just like camping. If that was good enough for them, then that would surely be just as good for us when we grew up. Of course, when we got home, my daddy sent me to my room. I guessed he figured I had suffered enough, but I didn't feel a thing. I fell asleep half proud and half worried because I wondered just how long it would take before daddy was back at that school because our film day turned into a ruckus. Of course, I returned to class and soon discovered I wasn't the only one who could put on a show.

"All right class, it is film day. Who wants to run the projector?" All of our hands shot up and Miss Beetlewell picked Enoch, as usual. He helped Miss Beetlewell set up the projector as the class sat quietly. Then Mary Jean raised her hand.

"Yes, Mary Jean," said Miss Beetlewell. "Please tell me we aren't watching a film about the life of birds again," she said, letting out a long sigh.

"Yeah, we saw that about a million times already," said Big Bernie, popping up from a nap.

"I like it," said Enoch, standing behind the projector.

"Shut up, stupid. Nobody was talking to you," said Big Bernie, making a fist.

"What are we watching?" asked Hector, and the other kids in class started to fidget.

"Today, class, we are watching a film about careers. I thought you might like that," said Miss Beetlewell.

"Will it say anything about being a starlet?" asked Mary Jean.

"I'm sure the film will probably mention something about actors and actresses," said Miss Beetlewell.

"What about baseball players? That's what I want to be when I grow up," said Big Bernie, wiping his eyes.

"What about astronauts? I want to be an astronaut when I grow up," said Hector.

"What about doctors?" asked Enoch, sounding like he already knew the answer to the question.

"I am sure the film will cover doctors, lawyers, astronauts and all kinds of professions," said Miss Beetlewell. Then the film started and the projector made a sound that was somewhere between a rattle and a tick. Enoch stood behind it like he was in control of the world, and I could see the words on the wall reflected in his eyeglasses. Then all of this high-pitched music came on just as the words "Careers Fit for You" popped on the wall, and a man in overalls introduced himself and then threw a pitchfork over his shoulder. Next, we saw this woman in a beauty parlor taking curlers out of some lady's hair, and she said hello and flashed this wide grin. Before we knew it, a man mopping this long hallway looked up and waved like the camera caught him by surprise. There was something about him that reminded me of those men my daddy showed me in the woods by the cotton mill. I looked over at Enoch, Big Bernie and Hector, and they were watching the wall like everything was fine and dandy with the world. But I figured early on that something had gone way wrong with that film because these folks didn't look like any doctors, lawyers or astronauts I'd ever imagined in life. Then Mary Jean

raised her hand, and it made a shadow over the face of the man putting mail in a mailbox.

"Where are all the starlets at? You said I'd see a starlet in this one. All I see are regular people!" she screamed.

"Yeah, Miss Beetlewell, something is wrong with this film," I said.

"Quiet down, Jasper, and mind your own business. This film is just fine. It's educational," said Miss Beetlewell.

"It ain't educational for me! I want to be a starlet when I grow up. I haven't seen a starlet yet ... and you said there would be starlets in this one," said Mary Jean.

"And where are the astronauts?" asked Hector. "I haven't seen any astronauts."

"Are the baseball players coming at the end, Miss Beetlewell?" asked Big Bernie.

"And the doctors?" asked Enoch. "You did say there would be doctors, too."

"Who cares about astronauts!" screamed Mary Jean. "I want to see starlets. You said there would be starlets in this one. You lied to us! Aunt Esther was right. All teachers are liars, just like she said."

"Mary Jean, stop being disrespectful. Teachers are not liars," said Miss Beetlewell.

"Enoch, turn that projector off and turn on the lights. Film day is over, seeing how the class can't appreciate the future. Take out your history books, everybody." Enoch snapped the off switch, and the sudden flash of light hurt my eyes. Once they adjusted, I was able to see everything around me much better. I took out my history book and raised my hand.

"What is it now, Jasper?" asked Miss Beetlewell.

"How come you told us we were going to see doctors and stuff and none of these people on the wall look like any doctor I've ever seen in my life?" I asked.

"Yeah ... none of them look anything like the doctor my momma goes to see every time she has a baby," said Big Bernie. "That doctor wears a shirt and tie like he is going to church, and none of the folks on the wall looked like they were going to church to me."

"Well, how is that not a lie, Miss Beetlewell?" I asked her. I looked over at Mary Jean, and she was nodding because I guessed for the first time ever the two of us were seeing things the same way. Then I looked down at the history book on my desk, and I wondered if it was anything like that film Miss Beetlewell showed. So I looked at the book real strange, and I was starting to get that same sweaty feeling I got that day my daddy took me to see those men out by the cotton mill.

“Take out your history books, everybody. Film day is over, and it will be a long time before we have another one.”

“Why?” I asked Miss Beetlewell. “We didn’t do nothing wrong this time. You said we were going to see doctors, lawyers, astronauts, actors and actresses. We didn’t see any of that stuff, Miss Beetlewell. I think this is something we need to discuss.” Miss Beetlewell took off her glasses and looked at me out of the corner of her eye. It felt like I had said something she never expected me to say in a million years. We stared at each other like the good guy and bad guy in a showdown.

Then Hector yelled, “I don’t want to do history! I want to learn something about astronauts.”

“Can’t you see, stupid? She’s been lying. All teachers say one thing and do something different, just like my Aunt Esther said.”

“Who are you calling stupid!” yelled Hector.

“You! Stupid!” Mary Jean stuck out her tongue. Hector ran over to her desk, and Mary Jean ran behind Miss Beetlewell. The class cheered them on as they ran around Miss Beetlewell like she was a pole. Of course, Big Bernie saw the ruckus as a prime opportunity to put Enoch in the headlock and force him to turn over his lunch money or die.

“This whole school is stupid, and I wish my real momma and daddy would come back for me like they said and take me away from here forever. I hate this dumb school and that dumb film,” said Mary Jean. Miss Beetlewell caught Hector’s arm and held him back. Mary Jean ran towards the door.

“Mary Jean, where are you going? You get back here right this minute and take your seat,” said Miss Beetlewell. Suddenly, everything got quiet, and I stopped searching the pages of my history book just to see what stopped the ruckus. Mary Jean stood in the doorway with that boa around her neck, throwing back some final words just like something she’d probably seen some actress do a hundred times.

“I don’t care what that dumb film says. I’m not regular. I’m a starlet.” She ran away and we never saw her again, not even in a picture show.

Questions for Discussion and Writing

1. Why do you think Miss Beetlewell’s film selection plays an important part in the story?
2. How does Jasper’s epiphany change the way he thinks about education and his future?
3. In what ways do you think school prepares us for our roles and positions in society? What role do you think school has played in your life?
4. Why is light an important symbol in the story?
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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