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The Witness

Myrtle, alias Aunt Martha, dabbed at her crepe-papery cheeks with a towel. If they didn't come on, she'd have to redo her makeup - it was that hot.

She tried to fan the steamed-up bathroom with the door, but with each swing back it stuck on a warped board. The peephole of a window over the bathtub wouldn't open, and the pink drape, trimmed from the plastic shower curtain, was wet with sweat.

Above the lavatory, the nicked mirror was fogged as in illusive immunity to her heart face nesting in a fringe of sheer orange curls. One thin black eyebrow arched and the other plunged in a brief gray line. She picked out an eyebrow pencil from the cosmetics dumped in the basin and leaned into the mirror, elbow braced on the slaving wall, to touch up her brows to match. Contrasted with her see-through hair - henna over gray - the

eyebrows were too stark, and though she didn't like them that way, they did accent the blue of her recessed eyes. She looked washed out without the brows.

Squatting, she picked up the can of beer Solder had brought over from the juke with the message that a couple getting married in Statenville needed a witness. Kids, no doubt. Well, she'd done it before, and worse - anything for five bucks. Stuck in this dump in the woods with a man like Solder, right on the Georgia/Florida line, would drive any woman to do her worst. She needed to get out.

She fired a cigarette and stroked on a tad more mascara to bring out her eyes, knowing she'd only cry it off during her act. She was a good actress but seldom got the chance. Last month she'd hitch-hiked eight miles into Jasper, Florida, to try out for the community theatre and they had black-balled her for over-acting. She'd have them know, while in Houston, she'd played lead in THE GLASS MENAGERIE. She felt weak with the weight of the lie.

She used a tiny brush to unclump her lashes and poked herself in the eye. She blinked-blinked, lifting her face till her neck pulled, to prevent the tears from damaging her rouge. Face thrust to the ceiling, she felt a burning spot on her thigh, just as she whiffed the scorching of her good rayon dress.

Jerking back and slapping at the red pin-points, which spread to the size of the cigarette tip, she burned her palm and cursed herself for old scars in the turquoise folds.

"Shit!" she said, and kicked over the can of beer, which formed yellow runnels, that could go for urine, on the dingy white tiles.

A car horn outside halted her fumbling with the can. Down on all fours, mopping up beer, she pointed like one of Solder's bird dogs, listening to the goings and comings at the liquor store next door, out front, and tried to sort out automobiles stopping, passing, and pulling up. There was always a racket to beat all. She was still bored.

The horn blew again - out front, she decided.

Managing the cigarette between her lipstick-gummed lips, she dashed into the kitchen, grabbed her cloth shoulder bag from the table, then through the dim, cluttered living room and out the front door. Between the squeaking open and banging shut of the screen door, an old tabby cat slunk through in time for the door to trap its tail. It screeched, arched its back and curled wildly round, then jerked free.

"Shit!" Myrtle peered back through the screen as the cat spirited through the room, like a cloud passing over the sun.

Two jaunty beeps sounded again from the waiting burgundy Chevy, parked just off the highway.

"Just a sec," she called.

Country music blared from the cinderblock beer joint, south of the house, where the sunlit highway tapered off into Florida between deep flanks of yellow pines. To the north, Georgia side, the road went from white to black in a blink. On the tire-spun shoulder a sign read WELCOME TO GEORGIA; from the other direction

another read WELCOME TO FLORIDA. Gleaming white in the September sun, the road south appeared more forlorn, though promising, than the shady black-top running north. She could smell the melty asphalt, something keen on the still winey air. And the heat was so thick it seemed textured of the locusts' hum.

When she did leave, it would be to the south - Florida - and it would be with someone less and more than Solder, who was sulky and rough, flat-faced, belly bloated with beer. He was surly and set in his ways - really too old for her. She would be on the lookout for someone less ancient in attitude. Despite her fifty-five years, she'd been told she looked not a day over thirty.

Dashing off the rotting door steps, where grass grew through the cracks, she turned her ankle. A shock streaked from ankle to calf and stopped at her knee. "Shit!" she said, hobbling on across the sand and gravel yard, to the car.

She could hear them giggling. "Kids!" she said. "Well, if they fool enough..."

"How-do, Ma'm?" said the boy, reaching across the girl to open the door, his waxy face brightened by the sun on the hood.

The girl glanced somberly at Myrtle and slid closer to the boy, appearing already to have grown from his side.

"How y'all?" said Myrtle, scooting in, mesmerized by the girl's long golden legs.

She wore white short-shorts, and from a cropped top up, her body appeared too short for those legs. Her hair was naturally gold, blunt and full. Chewing gum, she held when her slow eyes

Came to rest on the boy, on Myrtle, on the dash where a ~~Deke~~

pack of Dentine lay. Myrtle watched her, thinking how usually the girls popped gum while their eyes cut uneasily. (Myrtle could no more help making comparisons than lying.)

The boy pulled up and turned around at the beer joint, then headed back to Georgia. "Looks like we got us a witness."

"That's me." Myrtle tittered and looked for an ashtray without gum wrappers to stub out her cigarette. Finding none, she flipped it out the open window. "I'm your Aunt Martha," she said, leaned toward the girl and laughed.

The girl squinted her clear green eyes and placed her hand on the boy's knee. Her hard little nose brought to mind that of a molded rubber doll - hardly any nostril. Not a day over fifteen, Myrtle thought, enviously inspecting her long seamless neck, her tender throat, the strong blonde hair on her arms.

"Name's Pete," said the boy, driving with one hand. With the other, he jostled the shoulder of the girl, periodically squeezing. Proudly, he looked down at her head. "This here's my little wife-to-be, Nanette."

"Nice to meet you," Myrtle said and rolled up the window to keep from ruining her hair. "Ain't it hot?"

"I tell you!" The boy peered at the road which opened into gaps of sun and shade. Again, he looked down at the girl, the crown of his head showing a vulgar bald spot in his pinkish-blond hair.

They'd have some pretty babies, thought Myrtle. "So y'all taking the big step, huh?"

"Mighty right," he said, still adoring the girl, who absently fondled his knee while listening to the radio croon "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes." He clenched his teeth and nosed her hair dreamily. She lifted her eyes to his, maintaining the same veiled expression, yet emanating a hot earnest yearning, as of adventure or coming to terms with something yet untapped.

"Love birds," teased Myrtle, unable to think of anything else to say. And didn't she always say that while thinking the match wouldn't last? Myrtle, herself - something of an expert - had been in and out of love dozens of times, in dozens of states, and when the last one in Tennessee hadn't worked out, she'd decided to quit with marriage and go on with romance. Though now, she didn't bother to call it love.

"Where bouts y'all from?" she asked.

"Jacksonville," the boy said.

"No kidding!" said Myrtle - they all were. "Why, that's MY old stomping ground!" In a way, it was: she'd met a sailor in Mississippi and shacked up with him for six months. Jacksonville, Florida; Jackson, Mississippi: close enough.

The girl shuddered, buried her face in the boy's shoulder.

"It's okay, sugar." He laughed. "Aunt Martha's used to keeping secrets. Ain't you, Aunt Martha?"

"Son, I can't count 'em!" Myrtle flicked her thick red finger nails - PCK,PCK,PCK - as if tallying up.

The girl glanced sideways at Myrtle's hands and grimaced.

"You ain't got to worry about me," Myrtle said, reached over and patted the girl's slick knee.

The girl rocked her leg.

"You must be running away from your old man?" inquired Myrtle.

The girl shied away.

"I want to let you in on a little secret, sugar." Myrtle spoke over the scold of the engine, wind tearing at her hairdo. "I run off from home when I was just about your age. Don't worry, look at me. Here I am, thirty-two, and ain't been caught yet." Myrtle cackled. None of it was true: she'd been kicked out of the house at fourteen for stealing - she couldn't even remember what, money probably - but she'd always come back and her Mama always took her back. Later, her step-father sent her to a reform school. So in a way what she said was true: she HAD run away from the school.

The girl calibrated Myrtle with eyes that seemed to squeeze out green light. Gradually dimming, her eyes closed. She had short dark doll lashes, Myrtle observed. The boy kissed her hair, which fanned and webbed in the wind. Myrtle could smell youth in the car, above the Dentine, like a memory evoked by scent, though incomprehensible, a faded prom corsage pressed in a book.

"Well, here we are," she said, looking out at the new brick courthouse in full evening sun. Quartered off by the intersection, where a traffic light blinked on red, was the courthouse, the post office, a store, and a filling station - eighteen miles from the nearest big town.

Myrtle did find it all so dreary. On a Saturday night you could cook Sunday dinner, watch television or do as Myrtle did: sit around a beer joint on the line - the only woman - and witness the games of billiard and pinball, the good ole boys passing through for a six-pack, at best a nasty scrap when some of them got tanked-up and boisterous...listening to the same old tunes on the jukebox. Sometimes she did her nails.

"I reckon you got the papers," she said, checking her face in her compact mirror, powdering her oily sharp nose. "Shit!" One eyebrow was painted higher than the other. "Give me a minute."

She dug around in her stuffed shoulder bag and came up with an eyebrow pencil, licked the point, and adroitly raised the lower brow. She held the mirror away and inspected her face, jerked her head and fluffed her curls. Folding lips as red as fake wax, she snapped the compact shut and dropped it into her bag. "Let's go," she said, disgusted with her hair - she couldn't keep Hair Net.

The boy opened the door and slid out, with the girl sliding after him. Her legs, nervously clasped, appeared as one. He laced her hand through the crook of his arm, locked fingers.

Myrtle stood and smoothed her dress over the slight swell of stomach, sucked in, and sauntered off behind them - at least she'd kept her figure. She walked faster, catching up and easing alongside the girl as they entered the dim corridor, a cool green, where on both sides separate offices squared off against each other.

At the office of the Justice of the Peace, the boy stopped, cleared his throat and pecked the girl on the crown. He didn't appear nervous, just vulnerable, young - vulnerably young.

The girl was taller than Myrtle had calculated, almost as tall as Myrtle, who had always carried herself well. Her mother had been short and dumpy, nervous and carping, always preaching to Myrtle about going to business school - learn to type and you've got it made. Myrtle had racked up skills through experience; waitressing as a car-hop on roller skates, gift-wrapping at Belks - she couldn't make a bow and couldn't even make the stick-on bows stick, and tucking flyers under windshield wipers in a windy parking lot for a traveling circus - they wouldn't let her even TRY the trapeze. She knew a lot about plays; movies, she could name off the top of her head.

The boy opened the door, stepped inside, tugging the girl with him. "We come to get married," he announced to the square back of the man, who perched on the edge of the desk and idly gazed out the window at the dead-on-Saturday post office.

Ponderously, the man stood and stuck out his hand across the heavy shellacked desk. "Name's Crosby, Judge Crosby." He had bristly black hair, with only a sprinkling of gray. One leg was shorter than the other, as though he stood in a dip on the painted concrete floor.

The boy shook his hand enthusiastically, while the girl hung back and smiled, her cagey eyes fixed on the face of the judge.

"I'm Pete Colson, and this is my wife-to-be, Nanette," the boy said. "We come to get married." He said it again, as if to leave no doubt that it was to be a hurried affair with little ceremony.

The girl, hugging his elbow to her breasts, was swaying, chewing, looking down.

"I'm her Aunt Martha," said Myrtle, sidled up to the girl and placed an arm around her shoulder.

"I know who YOU are, Myrtle Myrts," the judge said sternly. Her name sounded so fake when he said it, and yet was one of the few real things about her. Flapping his hardened square hand at her and sitting, he pilfered in a desk drawer. His pallid face was brightened by a red rash above his forest of black brows.

Myrtle felt the girl tense. "Y'all don't pay him no mind."

"Let's get started," said the judge. "Papers, please." Saying it to the boy, he glared at Myrtle as though he still did not believe her name was real but was convinced her breasts were false. They were.

The boy released the girl's hand and pulled the folded white sheet from his blue shirt pocket.

The judge took the paper by one corner and flipped it open, spread it on the desk and mumbled to himself. Still pilfering in the drawer, he located his black-framed bifocals and positioned them on his nose, his ears, still reading. He grunted.

The girl had grown pale, panting. Myrtle could smell the stench of ink and sweat and regret in the room.

"All looks like it's in order." The judge rose and tucked his white shirt in his pants. "Myrtle, you go right over there and see if you can't behave yourself." He nodded to the blank wall where two chairs sat like witnesses.

Myrtle shrugged and started to walk away, but the girl grabbed her hand. Myrtle searched her face: her eyes were closed in an old-fashioned swoon. "Honey, you ain't got a thing in the world to worry about." She hugged the girl, who felt stiff and passionless, despite the gesture of hand-clutching. "It won't take a minute." It sounded to Myrtle so silly, saying it like that, like getting a shot.

Myrtle hadn't counted on this - usually couples were so eager to get married they just ignored her while she sat against the oblivious white wall for five dollars, sobbing softly, but realistically, on the verge of ticking off the judge, who despised her for no good reason except that she earned a decent dollar as a professional witness. Neither did he appreciate her acting.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here....," he began.

Myrtle wept, a soft moan working from her throat.

Opening his eyes, black and chilled, he glowered. "See if you can't go over yonder and set down!"

Myrtle tried to pull away, but the girl tightened her grip on Myrtle's hand. "No," she said, "I want Aunt Martha to stand here."

Myrtle felt a hot rush, like panic, working from her head down, as she inched back to the girl's side.

"Ha!" said the judge, staring. "This ain't her first time in here."

"I'll just stand here," said Myrtle, woozy from the light rasp of the off-center voice of the girl, the tight clasp of her moist, boneless fingers.

"Dearly beloved...", he began again, roughly reading from a sheet placed in the open Holy Bible.

At the last ceremony, the girl had seemed older, more giddy and critical of Myrtle's acting. This one bothered Myrtle. Though warmed by this make-believe niece, clinging like a cat, she resented her, felt like untwining the skinny fingers. Instead, she stood, feet aching in the pointy-toe heels, one eyelash gouging till it smarted.

Tears oozed and trickled down her cheek; she sniffed. The judge stopped, peered over his glasses, and went on reading. With her shoulder, Myrtle wiped the tears dripping from her cheek; a terrible tickling sensation was causing the other eye to tear and a lump to form in her throat. She was REALLY crying. It shocked her.

She wondered how she looked. Through a blur of tears, she watched the boy rock nervously, attention divided between Myrtle and the judge. Seeming desperate to get on with it, the judge continued - he was down to the part about love and obey. The girl's eyes were riveted on Myrtle, who was at that stage mewling and gulping.

Myrtle didn't know why she was crying so - though it WAS generally part of her job, her act, chipped in for free. She felt light and warm all over, crying through her face now: mouth closed and eyes squinched, hot tears seeping as through her skin. Probably, she thought, it was like Solder always said, Pay a woman a little attention and she'll show herself. And when the girl did, Myrtle had. She cried harder, shoulders jerking, coughed into her fist. She drew a handkerchief from her bosom and blew her nose, a loud honking that seemed to purge the room of all sound. She shuddered and wiped her eyes, sniffing. The judge went on in a gravelly monotonous drone - he was now down to the part about sickness and health.

When her eyes had cleared enough to see, Myrtle found the judge administering the vows while watching her; every other word he monitored with a queer frowning of the brow. She didn't care if he was ticked off. She was caught up in a magical release, still sniffing.

The girl began sniffing with her. Myrtle wouldn't look, merely stood foolishly, helplessly sobbing, pretending to pretend. Her makeup was ruined. She could feel the girl's eyes, her very presence, witnessing Myrtle's outburst, which demonstrated itself in telling gulps of sobbing, starting up again from the sniffing, and soaring. It was so passionate and convincing she wished she WERE acting.

She chanced a glimpse at the girl, whose misty green eyes were fixed on Myrtle's face, between muttering vows; a slight sympathetic dent formed above one of her blonde eyebrows. Myrtle

began drying up, thinking how she must have done one hell of a job of acting for this naive creature to have latched on as she had. Why, she actually BELIEVED everything Myrtle had said and done, even down to the crying!

Myrtle heard the business about till death do you part, decided that she preferred the girl to believe she was acting - it had been that good. And now that the ceremony was over - the judge was pronouncing them man and wife - she felt as empty and dry as an old round of pancake makeup.

Snapping her eyes, Myrtle repelled the girl's offering of untried sympathy - could do without it - and thought about her own face, her young face flashing in her mind as in a mirror, portending traits in her clear blue eyes, around the eyes: a latent sham of innocence. She had been emotional, an early starter, with a flair for the dramatic. Myrtle wondered if traits like that - around the eyes - could forecast and prevent the way somebody would turn out. Her face was her fortune, she'd always believed, and the fortune as it turned out was only cut-glass.

"You can go on and kiss her now, boy," the judge said, grinning as he leaned across the desk. His stern black eyes roved from the couple, now kissing, to Myrtle. Clearing his throat, he ambled around and propped against the desk, arms crossed.

"Well, Miss Myrtle MYRTS," he said, "you shore put one on this time." He scratched his ear, shook his head and looked down. "I gotta hand it to you: you got your faults but you can NATURAL act."

The boy, a glowing red, laughed and dug in his pocket. He pulled out a dull metal bill clip and counted out ten bills for the judge, then turned to Myrtle and pressed a five dollar bill into her hand. "Boy, you're something else, Aunt Martha!"

She stuffed the money in her bag, touched a compact and thought about her face. Suddenly, even flushed from the compliments, she felt as tired of her own face as she was that of Solder's.

the end