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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} ~~ran~~ the steamy bathroom with the door ~~or tried~~ 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 lavatory and leaned into the mirror, elbow braced on the slavering wall, and touched 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 penciled-in brows.

Squatting, she picked up ~~and swigged from~~ the can of beer

Solder had brought over from the juke joint with the message that a couple getting married in Statenville needed a witness. Kids, no doubt. She'd done it before, and worse - anything for five bucks. Being 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 ~~gone to all the trouble to~~ 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 ~~the~~ lead in THE GLASS MENAGERIE... She felt weak with the weight of the lie.

Spitting on a tiny brush, she used it as a pick to unclump her lashes, ~~poking~~ ^{and poking} 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 of holes, ~~which spread~~ ^{spreading} to the size of her cigarette tip, she burned her palm and cursed herself for the ~~evidence of~~ old scars in the folds of turquoise.

"Shit!" she said, kicking over the can of beer, ~~routing~~ ^{which formed} ~~in~~ yellow runnels, ~~like urine,~~ ^{on} across the dingy white tiles.

A car horn outside halted her fumbling with the can. Down on all fours, mopping up ~~the~~ beer, she pointed like one of Solder's bird dogs, listening to the goings and comings at the liquor store next door, out front, ~~trying~~ ^{and tried} to sort out ~~the~~ ^{the} sounds of 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 ~~out~~ ^{by} through the ~~dismal~~ ^{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 his tail. ~~Screening,~~ ^{He screeched,} he arched his back and curled wildly round, ~~then~~ ^{then} jerking free.

"Shit!" Myrtle ~~said,~~ ^{the old son} peering back at ~~him~~ ^{the old son} through the screen ~~door~~ as ~~he~~ ^{the old son} spirited through the ~~living~~ ^{living} room, like a cloud passing over the sun.

Two jaunty beeps sounded ~~off~~ ^{off} again from the waiting Chevy, parked just off the highway. Being quick to pick up on such things, Myrtle quickly saw that the car was new, a 1962, by its ~~burgundy~~ ^{burgundy} shine and generous chrome.

^{"Hurry up a sec!"} ~~"Hold your horses!"~~ she called.

Country music blared from the cinderblock beer joint south of the house, where the sunlit ~~white~~ ^{white} highway tapered off

into Florida between deep ^{blanks} woods ~~flush~~ with tall yellow pines. To the north, Georgia side, the road went from white ~~concrete~~ to black ~~top~~ 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 yet promising than the shady black-top running north. She could smell the melting asphalt, something ~~sharp~~ and keen on the still winey air.

With the heat like this, so thick, it ~~seemed that~~ the texture ^{seemed made of the locusts} ~~was~~ ^{harnessed by the locusts} ~~in~~ ⁱⁿ mincing 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, ^{set in his ways} ~~set in his ways~~. She would be on the lookout for someone less ancient in attitude. Despite her fifty-five years, she'd been told ~~that~~ she looked not a day over thirty.

Dashing off the rotting door steps, where ^{grass} ~~the weeds~~ grew through the cracks, ^{she turned her right ankle} her right ~~right~~ ^{right} wheel wobbled and lay over, ^{turning her ankle} ~~turning her ankle~~. A shock streaked from her ankle to her calf and stopped at her knee. "Shit!" she said, hobbling on across the yard of sand laced with gravel to the car, ~~idling and alive~~ ^{with giggles}. ^{I be} ~~with giggles~~ ^{could hear them giggling} "Kids!" she said. "Well, if they fool enough..." "How ^{dear} you, m'am?" said the boy, ^{reaching across the car to} ~~in a sparkling tone~~ ^{FACE} as she opened the door, his ~~fair~~ waxy ^{FACE} brightened by the sun-sparked hood

of the car.

The girl, ~~next to him~~, 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 length and tone of the girl's golden legs. She was wearing white short-shorts, and from her cropped ~~top~~ shirt up, her body appeared too short for her legs. Her hair was ^{naturally} golden ~~5~~ ~~natural gold~~ cropped and full. ~~Methodically~~, she chewed gum, holding when her slow eyes came to rest on Myrtle, on the boy, on the dash, where a broken 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 she could lying.)

"Looks like we got us a witness," ~~the boy said~~, ^{The boy} pulling up and turning ^{her} around at the beer joint, heading back to Georgia.

"That's me," Myrtle ^{tittered & looked for} said, ~~trying to locate~~ 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, leaning ^{ed} toward the girl and ^{laughed} chortling.

The girl ~~gazed at her~~, squinting 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 delicate neck, her tender throat, the downy blonde hair on her arms.

"My name's Pete," said the boy, driving with one hand. With the ^{OTHER} hand, he jostled the shoulder of the girl, periodically

squeezing. Proudly, he looked down at her head. ~~And~~ ^{this here's} ~~is~~ my little wife-to-be, Nanette."

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

"I tell you!" ~~said~~ ^I the boy, ^{and} peering into the road ^{where} that opened into gaps of sun and shade. Again, he looked down at the girl, the crown of his ^{head} flat-top ~~hair~~ 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?" she said.

"Mighty right!" he said, still adoring the girl, who ~~was~~ absently fondling his knee while listening to the radio crooning "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} it while thinking ~~that~~ it wouldn't last? Myrtle, herself - something of an expert - had been in and out of love ^{dozens of times} at least a dozen times in no less than ^{dozens of states} a dozen ~~different~~ states, and when the last one in Tennessee hadn't worked out, she'd decided to quit with marriage and go on with ^{relationships} ~~relationships~~. Though now, she didn't bother to call them love.

"Where bouts y'all from?" she ^{said} said.

"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 up with a sailor in Mississippi and had shacked up with him for six months. Jacksonville, Florida; Jackson, Mississippi: close enough.

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

"It's okay, sugar," ~~he said,~~ ^{she said,} laughing. "Aunt Martha's used to keeping secrets. Ain't you, Aunt Martha?"

"Son, I can't count ~~them,~~ ^{them!}" ~~said~~ Myrtle, flicking her thick red finger nails in a PCK!PCK!PCK! sound, as if tallying them up.

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

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

~~Forceibly, as against a natural impulse to flinch,~~ the girl rocked her knee.

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

The girl shied away, ~~shrinking.~~

"I want to let you in on a little secret, sugar," Myrtle ~~said, speaking loudly around the strong steady whirring of the~~ ^{spoke over the cold of the engine} ~~engine, the wind tearing at her hairdo.~~ "I run off from home when I was just about your age. Don't worry, ~~look~~ ^{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 ^{had} ~~had~~ always come back and her mama ~~had~~ always ~~taken~~ 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 noticed. The boy kissed her hair, which ~~was~~ ^{ed} fanning and webbing in the wind. Myrtle could smell youth in the car, above the Dentine, like a memory evoked by scent but 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, were the usual accommodations of any small town: a post office, a store, a service station, spreading out to houses intermingled with mobile homes, a school, the negro quarters behind the school - eighteen miles from the nearest 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 boistrous...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 her 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. Working her red lips together, 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 leg.

Myrtle stood and smoothed her dress over the slight swell of her stomach, sucked in and sauntered off behind them - at least she'd kept her figure.

The boy had laced the girl's hand in his and locked her arm through the crook of his own.

Myrtle 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.

On a closed door THE JUSTICE OF THE PEACE was painted in black letters. The boy stopped before it, cleared his throat and pecked the girl on the crown of her head. 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 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.

Opening the door, the boy ~~stepped up and in, as over a~~ log, 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, idly gazing 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 said. 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, sidling up to the girl, placing her arm around her shoulder, and finding herself crossing arms with the boy.

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

Myrtle felt both the boy and the girl tense. "Y'all don't pay him no mind," she whispered to the girl.

"Let's get started," the judge said. "Papers, please." Saying it to the boy, he glared at Myrtle as though he still did not believe that her name was real but was convinced that 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 scanned it, mumbling 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," said the judge, rising and tucking his short-sleeved white shirt in the waistband of his pants. "Myrtle, you go right over there and see if you can't

behave yourself." He nodded to the blank wall where the two chairs sat like witnesses.

Myrtle shrugged and started to walk away, but the girl grabbed her hand, pulling her back. Myrtle searched her face: her eyes were closed as in a swoon. "Honey, you ain't got a thing in the world to worry about," Myrtle whispered, hugging her - the girl 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 the couples were so eager to get married that 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, with his eyes lowered. Myrtle wept, a soft moaning working from her throat. Opening his eyes, black and chilled, he glowered at her. "See if you can't go over yonder and set down!" he snapped.

Myrtle turned aside and gently pulled away. 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 rasping of the off-center voice of the girl, the tight clasp of her boneless, moist fingers.

"Dearly beloved....," he began again, roughly, mock-reading from the memorized words he'd written on a sheet inside a worn black Bible.

The girl at the last ceremony 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 her fingers, one by one. Instead, she stood, feet aching in the pointed-toe heels, one eyelash gouging her eye till it smarted.

Tears oozed from her eye and trickled down her cheek; she sniffed. The judge stopped, peered up over his glasses, and went on reading. With her shoulder, she 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 torn between her 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 usually part of her job, her act, chipped in for free. She felt

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, coughing 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 her with a quizzical furrowing 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 at her, 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 burst of emotion, 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 her vows, a slight sympathetic dent forming 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 to

her 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, thinking that she preferred the girl to believe she was acting - it had been that good. And now that it 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. She could do without it.

Myrtle 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 really forecast and forestall the way somebody would turn out. Her face was her fortune, she'd always believed, and the fortune as it turned out was 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 deeply, to Myrtle. Clearing his throat, he ambled around and paused, propping against the desk with his arms crossed.

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

The boy, still elatedly clutching the girl with one arm, laughed and dug in his pocket. He was glowing red. He pulled out a dull metal bill clip and, releasing the girl, counted out ten dollars in the judge's hand. Turning, he pressed a five dollar bill into Myrtle's hand.

"Boy! You're something else, Aunt Martha!" he said, still laughing.

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