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Short story

The Witness

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

She fanned the steamy bathroom with the door - tried to - but with each swing back it stuck on a ~~popped-up~~ ^{WARPED} board. ~~Over~~ ^{Over the bath tub,} the peephole of a window ~~wouldn't~~ ^{gilled the bath tub,} open and the ~~pink~~ ^{pink} plastic drape she'd trimmed from the shower curtain was ~~dripping~~ ^{wet} with sweat.

~~Over~~ ^{Along} the lavatory she nicked mirror, fogged ~~with a coat~~ ^{as with} ~~an~~ ^{illusive immunity} ~~immune illusiveness~~, revealed her ~~nesting~~ ^{nesting in a fringe} heart face ~~fringed~~ ^{fringed} with sheer orange curls; one thin black eyebrow arched and the other ~~ragged~~ ^{plunged} in a brief gray smudge. She picked out ~~an~~ ^{an} eyebrow pencil from the ~~wreck~~ ^{wreck} of cosmetics ^{dumped} in the lavatory bowl and leaned close to the mirror, drawing the arch ^{to} match, with her elbow braced on the slobbering wall. Contrasted with her see-through ^{hair} henna-over-gray ~~hair~~, her eyebrows were too stark, and though she didn't quite approve of them that way, at least they accented her recessed blue eyes. She looked washed-out without it.

Squatting, she picked up and swigged from the can of beer Solder had brought over from the beer joint with the message

that a couple getting married in Statenville needed a witness.

She'd done it before and she'd do it again - anything for five bucks. She'd done worse. Holed up ~~here~~ in this dump-in-the-woods ^{with Solder,} ~~at the Georgia/Florida line,~~ ^{on the} ~~the Georgia/Florida line,~~ ^{the Georgia/Florida line,} would drive ANY woman to ~~her~~ ^{her} worst. She needed to get out.

She stood, firing a cigarette, and stroked on a tad more mascara to bring out her eyes, knowing she'd only cry it off ^{with her act,} ~~with her act,~~ ^{was a good actress but seldom got the chance.} She ~~liked acting, had tried it and failed.~~ ^{liked acting, had tried it and failed.} Last month, she'd hitch-hiked eight miles into Jasper, Florida to try-out ^{for} the community theatre and they'd politely kicked her out for over-doing it. ^{She'd acted in more plays than she could count. She felt weak from the weight of the lie.} ~~Hicks! Don't know acting when they see it.~~ ^{She'd have them know, while in Houston, she'd played the lead in the Glass Menagerie...}

Spitting on a tiny brush, fished from the drain of the lavatory, she used it as a pick to unclump her lashes, poking herself in the eye. She blinked-blinked, lifting her face till her neck pulled, to prevent the tears from damaging her face. With her face thrust to the ceiling, she felt a burning spot on her thigh, whiffed her ~~good turquoise rayon~~ ^{good turquoise rayon} dress scorching, ^{her good turquoise rayon.}

Jerking back and slapping at the pin-points of holes, ~~growing~~ ^{burned her palm} to the size of her cigarette tip, she ~~felt her palm~~ ^{burned her palm} ~~burn~~ and cursed herself for the ~~other scars~~ ^{old evidence} of black-rimmed ~~holes~~ ^{scars} on the hem. ^(turquoise skirt)

"Shit!" she said, kicking over the can of beer, routing ⁱⁿ yellow runnels, like urine, across the dingy white tiles.

A car horn outside disrupted her fumbling with the can.

Mopping up the beer, down on all fours, she pointed like a bird dog, listening to the goings and comings at the liquor store next door, out front, trying to sort out 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-stuck lips, she dashed through the kitchen, grabbing her cloth shoulder bag from the table, through the cluttered dismal livingroom and out the front door. Between the squeaking open and the banging shut of the screen door, a sway-back tabby cat slunk through in time for the door to trap his tail. Screeching, he arched his back and curled wildly round, jerking free.

"Shit!" Myrtle said, peering back at him through the screen door as he spirited through the livingroom like a cloud passing over the sun.

Two quick jaunty beeps sounded-off from the waiting 1962 burgundy Chevy parked just off the highway.

"Coming," she called.

Country music reverberated from the cinderblock beer joint south of the house, where the sunlit white highway ~~narrowed~~ ^{tapered} off into Florida between deep woods flush with slash pines. To the south, Georgia side, the road went from white to black in a blink. On the sandy shoulder a sign read WELCOME TO GEORGIA; from the other direction it read WELCOME TO FLORIDA. Gleaming white in the September sun, the road south looked more forlorn

but promising than the shady black-top running north. She could smell the melty asphalt, something sharp and keen on the still piney air.

With the heat like this, so thick, it seemed that the *density was contained in* the humming of the locusts, ~~created its density~~. When she left, it would be to the south: Florida. And it would be with someone less and more than Solder: sulky, thick-tongued, flat-faced, beer-bellied. She wasn't THAT old, despite her fifty-five years.

Rushing down the rotting door steps, with ~~grass~~ *tea weeds* growing through, her right heel wobbled, turning her ankle. A shock pulsed from her ankle to her calf. "Shit!" she said, hobbling on across the yard of sand laced with grass and gravel to the car, idling and alive with giggles.

"Kids!" she said. "Well, if they fool enough..."

"Howdy-do!" said the boy in a sparkling tone, as she opened the door, his clean defined features striking her eyes like the glare of the windshield.

The girl, next to him, glanced soberly at Myrtle and slid closer to the boy, already appearing to have grown ~~into~~ *from* his side.

"How yall?" said Myrtle, scooting in, mesmerized by the length and tone of the girl's golden legs. She was wearing white short-shorts, Myrtle observed, and from her cropped-top knit shirt up, her body appeared too short for her legs. Her

hair was golden - natural gold, Myrtle observed - and cropped, bouncy, full and free. Methodically, she chewed gum, stopping when her slow eyes came to rest on Myrtle, the boy, the dash, where a broken pack of dentine lay. Myrtle watched her, thinking how usually they popped gum while their eyes cut uneasily.

"You the one we s'posed to pick up to witness?" the boy said, swerving round and heading to Georgia.

"That's me," Myrtle said, trying to locate an ashtray to stub out her cigarette. Finding none, she flipped it out the open window. "I'm your Aunt Martha," she said to the girl, leaning toward her.

The girl gazed at her, squinting her narrow green eyes, and placed a hand on the boy's long slim leg, dazedly looking off. Her hard little nose brought to mind that of a molded rubber doll - hardly any nostril. Not a day over fifteen, Myrtle thought, eyeing her tender smooth throat.

"My name's Pete," said the boy, driving with one hand. The other hand jostled the shoulder of the girl, periodically squeezing. Proudly, he looked down at her head. "And this is my wife-to-be, Nanette."

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

"I tell you!" said the boy, peering into the road opening up before them in sun-streaked shadows. Again, he looked at the girl, his flat-top haircut showing a vulgar bald spot on top of his pinkish-blond hair.

They'd have some pretty babies, Myrtle thought. "So, yall taking the big step?" she said.

"Mighty right!" he said, still gazing at the girl who was absently fondling his knee while listening, as though with her eyes, to the radio crooning "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes." He clenched his teeth and nosed her forehead dreamily. She raised 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," said Myrtle, unable to think of anything else to say. And didn't she always say it while thinking it wouldn't last. Myrtle, herself - something of an expert - had been in and out of love at least a dozen times in at least 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. Though now, she didn't bother to call them love, just necessity.

"Where yall from?" she said.

"Jacksonville," the boy said.

"No kidding!" said Myrtle - they all were. "Why, that's MY old stomping ground!" In a way, it was: that's where she'd left home from at sixteen while her old man was stationed at the Mayport naval base.

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

"It's all right, sugar," he said, laughing. "Aunt Martha's used to keeping secrets. Ain't you, Aunt Martha?"

"Lord, honey, I can't count how many," said Myrtle, flicking her thick red fingernails in a PCK!PCK!PCK! sound, as though tallying them up.

The girl glanced sideways at Myrtle's hands; one corner of her tight luminous mouth twitched.

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

Forcibly, as against a natural urge to flinch, the girl rocked her knee.

"You must be running away from your old man?" Myrtle said, gazing at her.

The girl shied away like a young doe.

"I want to let you in on a little secret, sugar," Myrtle said, speaking low around the strong steady whirring of the engine, the wind racing around and 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, at my age, and ain't been caught yet." Myrtle cackled out.

The girl calibrated Myrtle with eyes that seemed to squeeze out light.

"I come from right where you are. Yeah!" Myrtle said, rubbing the girl's knee. "I been there."

The girl gradually closed her eyes. She had short dark doll lashes, Myrtle noticed. The boy kissed her on top of her hair, fanning and webbing in the breeze. Myrtle could smell

youth in the car, around the Dentine and deer tongue from the woods, like a memory evoked by smell but not quite clear, or warmed-over history.

"Well, here we are," she said, looking out at the new low brick courthouse in full evening sun. Quartered off by the intersection, where a traffic light blinked on red, were the usual singular 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 to speak of, Valdosta. Myrtle did find it so dreary, this place, Statenville. On a Saturday night you could cook for Sunday dinner, watch television or do as Myrtle did: sit around the beer joint on the line - the only woman - and witness the games of billard and pinball, the men passing through for a six-pack, at best a lively scrap when some of them got tanked-up and boistrous...listening to the music. Sometimes, she did her nails.

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

She dug around and extracted her eyebrow pencil from her stuffed shoulder bag, licked the point, and adroitly ~~arched~~ ^{RAISED} the ~~lower~~ ^{LOWER} brow. She held the mirror away and gazed into it, 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 spray.

The boy opened the door and slid out, with the girl sliding after him. Her legs were clamped tight, appearing 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. Crossing the concrete walk to the breezeway of the courthouse, Myrtle could smell the fragrance of cut grass like ripe watermelon. She stopped and lit a cigarette, took a long draw and felt her eyes pull, exhaling as she toddled off.

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

Myrtle walked faster, coming up 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 closed door signifying the Justice of the Peace in painted black letters, the boy stopped, cleared his throat AND pecked the girl on the head. He didn't appear nervous, (just vulnerable, young - vulnerably young. The girl was taller

than Myrtle had allowed for, almost as tall as Myrtle herself, who had always carried herself well. Her mother had been short and dumpy, nervous and bitchy, always harping on Myrtle about education. Myrtle had quit school in the ninth grade and had racked up education in experience. 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 announded to the intense, square man who sat on the edge of the desk, gazing out the window at the dead low-brick post office.

Sedentarily, the old 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, and 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 demurely, her cagey eyes fixed on the face of the judge.

"I'm Pete 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 quarter that it was to be a hurried affair with little ceremony.

The girl, hugging his elbow to her breast, 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," the judge said sternly, flapping his hardened square hand at her and sitting, pilfering in a drawer. His pallid face was brightened by a cerise rash above his forest

of black brows.

Myrtle felt the boy and the girl tense. "Y'all don't pay him no mind," she whispered in the girl's face, eyeing the boy, shaking her head. The unnaturally black hair of the judge, co-mingling with the artificial white light from above, intensified the four white walls, made it all seem to quiver ^{with} an artificial obliviousness. ^{(purposefullness) (purpose)}

"Let's get started," the judge said. "Papers, please."

Every sound, every utterance, came like a slap in the sound ringing void of the room. Myrtle had never noticed it before, noticed it now and felt it was filtered through the ears of the girl, rather than her own.

The boy released the girl's hand and pulled the folded white sheet from his blue shirt pocket. He handed it to the judge.

The judge took it by the corner and flapped 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, breathing in ^{rapid} short nervous pants. Myrtle could smell ink and sweat and regret in the room. Again, she ^{experienced} thought it ~~was~~ through the girl's nose and not her own and thought ~~again~~ how crazy she was becoming.

"All looks like it's in order," said the judge, solemnly rising and tucking his short-sleeved white shirt in the twisted

Waistband of his pants. "Myrtle, you go right over there and see if you can't behave yourself." He nodded to the ~~white~~ *black* wall where the two chairs sat like witnesses themselves.

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 her gesture. "It won't take a minute." It sounded to Myrtle so silly, saying it like that: like getting a shot for lockjaw.

Myrtle hadn't counted on this: usually they were so eager to get married that they just ignored her while she sat against the wall for five dollars, sobbing softly but realistically, while avoiding ticking-off the judge, who despised her for no good reason except that she earned a decent dollar as a professional witness ~~who~~ *and* lived with a man responsible for selling liquor to minors, and on a Sunday. Well, at least she was no hypocrite...

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here..." he began with his eyes reverently lowered. Myrtle wept. Opening his eyes, he glowered, black and chilled, at her. "See if you can't go over yonder and set down!" he snapped.

Myrtle turned away and gently tugged at the girl's hand. The girl tightened her grip. "No," she said. "She's my Aunt Martha."

Myrtle felt warm waves, like panic, wash over her as she inched back to the girl's side.

"Ha!" said the judge, staring at the girl, at Myrtle.
"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 it from the memorized words he'd written on a page inside a gray legal book.

The last girl had seemed older, more eager and willing to scorn Myrtle with the judge. 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 there, 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 at her over his glasses, and went on with the reading. With her shoulder, she wiped the tears dripping from her cheek, a terrible tickling sensation that caused the other eye to tear and a lump to form in her throat. She was REALLY crying. It shocked her.

The judge read on and the boy rocked nervously on the other side of the girl.

Myrtle didn't know why she was crying - though it WAS usually part of her job, her act, chipped in for free - but she knew it was for someone: a child never formed, or herself, never formed, someone in her formless fifty-five years for whom she should have made a difference but hadn't. *She felt as empty
and dry as a reamed out conch shell.*

She had birthed a child - male or female, she didn't know, never asked - who would be about the same age as this trumped-up neice. That was so long ago. This girl COULD be her, if the baby had been female, or HIM, if male. She searched the boy's inscrutable glowing face and decided he was too fair: she, herself, was naturally brunette and the father had been Mexican or something. Shifting her gaze to the girl, she thought she recognized something of herself in the eyes, around the eyes: a latent sham of innocence. Emotional too, an early-starter, impulsive, with a bent for the dramatic. Myrtle wondered if traits like that - around the eyes - could be inherited. She didn't know.

The judge glanced at Myrtle, as though checking, and continued on with the ceremony in a gravelly monotonous drone.

The girl sniffled with Myrtle; Myrtle wouldn't look at her, merely stood foolishly, innocuously sobbing, pretending to pretend. Her make-up was ruined. She could feel the girl's eyes, the girl's presence itself, witnessing her inner-burst of emotion, which manifested itself in telling gulps of sobbing. It was so passionate and sincere that she wished she WERE acting.

She chanced a glimpse at the girl, whose misty eyes were fixed on Myrtle's face, a slight sympathetic dent forming above the girl's blonde eyebrow.

With a snap of her eyes, Myrtle let her know that she didn't need her fresh untried sympathy. Like all the others, this girl would leave and learn and return, and nothing for Myrtle would have changed: same displaced whore in another hick-town,

making cigaret money where she could.

Those eyes boring holes in her might have been her own at another time, in another town, set gem-like in a new face. Witnessing and being witnessed blurred with time and circumstance; yesterday was now and tomorrow had backed up like sewage.

Suddenly, Myrtle was as tired of her own face as she was of Solder's.

The girl turned to kiss the boy and released Myrtle's hand.

"That'll be five bucks," Myrtle spat at the couple. And this time she had earned it.