

Black Widow

From her seat of honor on the front pew, Lavonia can see through her black veil without moving her head: winter rain sliding down the red-curtained windows each side of the crowded church, the grizzled corpse of her legal husband in the coffin below the pulpit; and behind the plywood lectern, singing in the choir, Eddie-the-corpse's common-law wife puffed up like a frog about to hop. Betty, who by rights should be sitting where Lavonia sits, dressed in new black shoes, dress, hat and gloves. Pocketbook perched on her lap like a bag of magic tricks.

Well, Betty can blame William Blaxton & Sons' Funeral Home for the messup. Not Lavonia's fault that she got listed as widow in the newspaper obituary last Monday. Twenty some-odd years ago, yes, but for twenty some-odd years now Lavonia has been on her own. Hadn't wanted nothing else to do with that man, who hadn't wanted nothing else to do with her either.

Lavonia is large, about three-hundred-pounds large (since she lost her back teeth she has had to eat mostly fat meat, greens and hoecake) and proud of it. She has a round face and smooth skin that looks like fresh fudge. No neck and not a wrinkle.

A nurse in a whispery white uniform stands on Lavonia's left, fanning the widow with a hand fan advertising William Blaxton & Sons' Funeral Home. The nurse's octagonal glasses look put on upside-down

and make for a good focal point for Lavonia who is genuinely tired of gazing at Betty and the corpse, one gazing back at her and the other as close-eyed in death as he ever was in life.

Lavonia snakes her right hand beneath the veil to scratch her nose and somebody behind her flaps a white handkerchief over her shoulder and she takes it and wipes her dry eyes and when she checks again Betty looks like a bottle of frozen pop about to blow. But keeps singing. Loud. Lavonia can say that much for her--she can sing loud.

When finally the choir sits and the preacher stands, blocking Betty in her orange suit from view, Lavonia presses her stiff spine to the pew and clutches her pocketbook with its precious can of snuff, glad to be rid of all that orange, those brassy eyes and that hair like a grass fire. Glad to be rid of those voices outsinging the rain on the tin roof.

The giant black preacher, with a tie red as Christ's blood, starts off low and slow, naming the beloved's next-of-kin and those gone on to heaven to await Eddie Earl Thomas, and winds himself into a circular chant about streets of gold and angels with harps and a cabin in gloryland that sets everybody to rocking and moaning and shouting amen. Pausing to catch his breath and mop sweat and shuck his black coat, he reflects on Eddie Earl Thomas, who in his last days would sit on his front porch over there by the store with a kind word for all who passed, and Lavonia cannot recall such a kind man or such a rocker, only a kitchen chair Eddie Earl Thomas once sailed over her head because she had gone out riding with a truckload of turpentine hands. All men. All night. To pay Eddie back for stepping out on her.

And suddenly it comes to Lavonia that the corpse before her is old, that she is old, that young Betty behind the preacher will likely outlive Lavonia too and will have her chance as honored widow some glad day, but Lavonia may never have the chance again. She sits high, crossing her feet at the ankles so that her pointy black shoes rest on their sides and relieve her pinched toes. The nurse fans harder, her hot nylon smell mixing with the hot nylon smell of the veil and maybe the plastic flowers banking the coffin. Church house rocking under the stamping feet of the preacher whose bull body lunges into the lecturn with each renewed writhing of the Holy Ghost.

Another song--young, loud Betty eyeballing the widow, and the widow eyeballing her back. Bulb eyes roving beneath the veil to see who is seeing, Lavonia thinks she recognizes a few people she used to know before she moved to town--Valdosta, 25 miles away. Fieldhands she used to work with in Withers, but old-looking with seamed faces and bowed backs. One old man looks like Abraham in the Bible. Ouija Board was the name he went by, Lavonia seems to remember, because he used a game board to tell people where to find their lost cows and dogs.

Two of the four Blaxston boys stride up the center aisle of the tiny frame church and take their places one on each end of the coffin, the brother at the head ratcheting a lever on the side so that Eddie-the-corpse rises almost to sitting position in his white suit and ruffled blue shirt. Then both Blaxtons strongarm the coffin and wheel it forward for the mourners passing by to view the body--a long line of men shuffling past, women sobbing and babies lifted up and lowered for good-bye kisses. Then the Blaxtons sidesling the coffin toward the front pew and park it before the widow's blunt

knees. All standing, all watching, as Lavonia gathers her pocketbook and stands too, two nurses now holding to Lavonia's elbows and stepping her forward. She stares down into the grizzled bear face of the man sleeping on a white satin pillow, then without moving her head, stares at the crowd, at young loud Betty, still singing.

Rain coming down harder, William Blaxton himself presents the flowers, booming out the names on the cards, and passes each arrangement along the assembly line of ushers in prissy tuxedos to the flower wagon parked outside the door where a white limousine sits waiting behind the hearse. Just for Lavonia. Like Cinderella's coach come to carry her to the ball.

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In the limo, with only her new shoes wet and smearing sand on the linty black carpet, and warm air chuffing from vents above facing brown leatherette seats, Lavonia thinks about the black umbrellas held over her head as she stepped from the church, about the people patting and hugging her, and the TV on her left that she can turn on if she wants to, and the bar next to the TV from which she can get herself a drink if she wants to. She has never been treated so special, so white. She has never been the center of attention. She feels like a queen.

As the stiff-looking driver with the stringy neck pulls away from the church behind the white hearse, Lavonia still doesn't move her head, but her eyes rove left and right, viewing the row shanties with smoke feathering from chimneys to the gray sky, the white hearse spiriting up the highway toward the graveyard in the woods. Not far, maybe ten more miles, and her queen-treatment will be over. She

reaches over without moving her head and touches the wood-grained cabinet on her left, starts to turn on the TV but doesn't. Just listens to the rain pecking on the roof and splatting on the windows and watches the starvling pines marching in rows each side of the narrow gravel road.

Suddenly, through the haze of rain, she spies a lopsided blue car on the right shoulder and a woman in orange standing next to it with a brown umbrella sheltering her flaming hair: Betty. Other cars and trucks are pulled over for the procession to pass, but Lavonia would bet that Betty's car is broke down. Tires spuming water, Lavonia's limo motors on past, and she turns around on the leatherette seat to watch Betty with her brown umbrella watch the funeral procession pass.

Now, Lavonia does turn on the TV--low, to keep the driver from hearing--and opens the tiny cabinet over the bar--easy, to keep the driver from seeing--and takes out a sample bottle of Jack Daniels and slips it into her purse with her snuff and the gift handkerchief. Sitting back with her ankles crossed and watching the midget people on "The Price is Right." Bob Barker, strange with his big mouth flapping but making no sound, the tiny screen tucked into the rainy light from the windows above. A muted jangle sounds from the front of the limo and Lavonia sits up with a start, trying to listen around the splatting rain to the driver talking on the telephone. He talks, listens, talks, then hangs up the phone, slows at the next ramp into the woods and turns the limo around, taking up the whole road and shoulders and almost backs into a ditch sluicing water to the Alapaha River.

They are going the other way now, back where they came from, and Lavonia sits high, watching through the windshield as the blue car comes closer. Alone now, but still with its lights on. The woman with the brown umbrella coming closer. The hearse stops in the middle of the road and the driver gets out and comes around and opens the back door and steps aside for Betty to get in.

She flounces onto the facing seat with her head hung, folding her umbrella and slinging water onto Lavonia's black carpet. She is wearing a snug orange suit with a brown paisley blouse, smells like pear blossoms in a hot room. Her rust-brown lips look like blisters. Enough to blind you. "Thank you," she says.

"Huh?" says Lavonia.

"I say thank you to you for making him come back after me."

"Huh!" says Lavonia. What the hell!

They both sit silent till after the driver has located another ramp where he can turn the long white limo and starts back toward the graveyard.

"Got a a real TV, I see?" says Betty.

"Don't look like no play-pretty to me," says Lavonia. Of all the people to break down, of all the people to hitch a ride, of all the Sundays to do it in.

"Eddie shore look like hisself, don't he?" says Betty.

"He look old," says Lavonia, "and daid." She watches the TV, fuming.

"Course you ain't seen him in how long?"

"Twenty some-odd year since I walk out."

"You mean, he did. He walk out."

"Ain't how I recollect it."

"He say he leave you. Say y'all divorce one another."

"Man be the biggest liar in the world." Lavonia smacks the seat beside her with a gloved hand. "I walk out and ain't laid eyes on him in two year."

"You mean twenty."

"Two," says Lavonia, watching a woman on TV jumping up and down cause she won a boat. "Seen him downtown Valdosta at a place where I work then."

"He say anything bout me?"

"Say something bout some Betty be take up with around Withers."

"Take up with?"

"How he put it." Lavonia is lying, lying and loving it and waiting to see where the next line will lead.

"He tell you we get married?"

"Ain't say nothing bout no marrying," Lavonia says.

For an answer, Betty reaches over and turns off the TV, then sits again on the facing seat with her arms crossed, her stockinged legs crossed, and those Lollipop-orange plastic high-heels jabbing into Lavonia's brown leatherette.

Lavonia switches the TV on again, this time with volume, and sees the stringy-necked driver staring in the rearview mirror.

Betty widens her brassy eyes, swivels her head around. "This where I belong, not you. I be the one keep up Eddie's life insurance when he low on cash. I help pay for all this."

"You ain't married to Eddie," says Lavonia. "I am."

"You ain't live with him in a coon age."

"Far as you know."

"Hey, driver," yells Betty. "Stop the car! Stop the car!"

He pulls off on the right shoulder and stops.

"Now get out," says Betty, flouncing up and opening the door herself.

"I ain't getting out," says Lavonia and laughs and bogs her soft wide rump into the leatherette seat. "You get out."

In a flash, Betty crosses from the door to Lavonia's seat and starts slapping at Lavonia, knocks her new black pocketbook to the floor, a blur of sharp orange fingernails gouging at Lavonia's eyes through the veil. She stands, grabs Betty's wrists and wrings them till she sinks to her knees on the black carpet--the Swanooshee County Director of Human Resources face to face with the fieldhand who used to load 200-pound sheets of tobacco onto the boss man's truck by herself. "I oughta make you walk," says Lavonia with her hat cockeyed, "but I ain't. For a fact, you be the real widow and for a fact I ain't see that low-down man since I walk off with just the clothes on my back."

Betty doesn't blink. "How come you making like you still his wife?" She cuts her brassy eyes back and around the limo, at the driver just sitting there.

"Ain't hurting nobody," says Lavonia, still gripping Betty's wrung wrists. "You got yo day coming. Now, get over there and set like somebody or get out in the rain and walk." Lavonia shoves her back by her wrists to the facing seat, watching her sprawl with her knees apart and her metal garter fasteners showing. One shoe on and one shoe off.

"Eddie ain't never love me and I ain't love him," says Lavonia to the window over the blabbing TV. "We just younguns when we hook up and marry some twenty-odd year ago. Beat me black and blue, half the time. Come in drunk and go to fussing." She looks at Betty. "So you ain't got no call begrudging me this one fine day he give me."

"Hey, driver, drive on," she says and straightens her hat and tugs the veil down over her eyes. The car pulls out, fast.

Betty's orange plastic high-heel stands in the middle of the floor as if she has just stepped out of it.

She spreads one hand over her lipstick-smearred nose and mouth. "You're a battered woman?"

"What you say?"

"You...you were the victim of a wife beater."

"You talking that Oprah-Winfrey trash!" says Lavonia. "I ain't everbody else, I be me and I take care of me."

"Yeah, but you oughta get some counseling," says Betty. "You know, see a psychologist or join a battered women's support group. I can put you in touch..."

"Save yo touching for somebody need it. I be on my own since I be a youngun and my old daddy went to making eyes at me."

"Oh, my God!" says Betty. "You were molested too?"

"Well," says Lavonia, "I reckon you could call it that, but ain't no more than other younguns been through I knowed of."

Lavonia decides to heap on another pity story--see what this is called--when she spies through the left window black water gushing through a ramp culvert. She tells Betty about the time when she was six years old and she and her sisters and brothers had placed a sheet

of tin over the mouth of a culvert, damming up the flowing black-water in a ditch, then took turns crawling into the still shallow water at the other end of the concrete pipe. When the children outside would lift the tin, the one inside would be flushed out like a fish. All except chubby Lavonia, who got stuck and almost drowned. Out like a light for who knows how long.

"You need a education," says Betty, plundering in her pocketbook and taking out a black notebook and thumbing through to a blank page.

"I got all the educating I want, living," says Lavonia. "Might can't talk fancy like you but I get it said, sister. Sides, I ain't got time for no education, I got a job taking care of a old lady with a bad mind."

"Alzhiemers," says Betty.

"I don't know bout that, but I baby her and she baby me and I draws a good check."

Lavonia can tell by the length of the curve and the bright opening of woods onto sandy ground and reedy saplings that they are nearing the turnoff to the graveyard. Over the years she has buried a half-dozen loved ones, including a baby girl who died in her sleep one night, nestled in the crook of Lavonia's arm. There was a patch of blood on the bosom of Lavonia's pink nightgown and she would always wonder whether she had smothered the baby in her sleep. Sickness and death were women's business, back then. Children, dead or alive, had nothing to do with men after the seed was planted. He planted it, she tended it.

"And you need to do something bout that weight," says Betty, who is still writing, maybe writing everything Lavonia has told her for all she knows. And suddenly she is as curious about Betty as Betty seems to be about her. Those long orange fingernails, like tiny scoops, with silver decals of stars and moons--how does Betty keep them glued on? how does she wash her face? what about dishes? "How you cook and all with them fingernails?" Lavonia asks.

Betty holds up her writing hand and admires the nails. "Eddie do all the cooking when he was living."

"Say what?"

"Yeah," says Betty, "me working and all, you know."

"What he cook?"

"Whatever--beans and rice, pasta..."

"Pasta?"

"Like macaroni, you know?" Again, Betty writes.

"He ever do yo dishes?"

"I have to stay after him bout that."

"He ever hit you?"

She stops writing, peers up with those gilt eyes. "Never."

"Why you take up with Eddie?"

Betty shrugs her padded shoulders. "Why not? I like the way he sing at church; I like the way he make over me." She laughs. "Eddie done housebroke--ain't mess up nothing."

"Yeah, and a young man, he hang around too long," says Lavonia.

"Don't he?"

"How's that?"

"A man with a life insurance policy ain't worth nothing to a woman if he don't die."

"A lot a-good it gone do me and that ten thousand made out to spouse."

Betty is tearing out a sheet of paper from her notebook as the hearse slows and turns down the woods road where cars are parked close between overhanging gums and bays. Wet myrtle bushes scrub the sides of Lavonia's white limo. Betty hands the sheet to Lavonia and locates her orange plastic shoe and slips it on. "Anyhow, ain't no hard feelings now," says Betty. "You call me and let's get you started on one of our programs for troubled women."

Lavonia takes the paper, folds it and places it in her pocketbook with the gift handkerchief and snuff and whiskey.

As the limo stops behind the hearse with the funeral director and his sons waiting under black umbrellas, the driver comes around and opens the door and Betty steps out and takes hold of one of the Blaxton son's hands, and he escorts her off toward the graveyard where the rain is falling on the raw-dirt and dead weeds and the broken glass lamb on a child's caving grave. Green prickly pears, like cactus, grow in clusters in the patchy brown grass from the flat square graveyard to the railroad embankment. Spindly pines rock in the wind.

William Blaxton, himself, stands in the open door, waiting for Lavonia.

"I believe I'll just set here awhile," she says and waves him away.