

## WEARY

*Memories were pleasant when they showed up, but they were like chipmunks or like hummingbirds: they came and went of their own accord, not to be captured and held for later examination and enjoyment.*

Marzy Mays waited behind one other customer, and shortly it was her turn. Wearing her most confident face she stepped forward to clutch the high countertop and told the agent: "I'd like to buy a bus ticket."

"To where, Lady?" The agent had seen this old Negro woman on the sidewalks many times. She could have been a "homeless" person except that he had never seen her attempt to use the depot's rest rooms. Then again, maybe she didn't bother with facilities.

Marzy hadn't heard well. The waiting room echoed with the clank and clang of heavy doors, whoosh of dragged suitcases and parcels, the voices of live conversation and the aural assault of the required pseudo-music.

She guessed at the question and answered: "Uh, where can I go? I mean, what cities does the bus go to?"

The agent had anticipated this kind of conversation when he saw Marzy further back in the line. How did I know this was going to happen? he asked himself silently while he turned around to reach for a stack of schedules on the desk. He pushed one across the counter. Can you..."

"Uh, yeah, I can read. I can read fine," Marzy assured him. She took the schedule and wobbled to a bench to study her choices. The booklet was about twenty pages thick, and the print was extremely fine. Marzy feared she'd take an embarrassingly long time to read through it, but it fell open to the middle, and while she was collecting her wits and courage, three or more names on the left-hand page struck her: Lima, Findlay, Bowling Green... There was something right about those names. Briefly she flipped through the latter half of the schedule, then the front, but in the scan nothing else appealed to her.

Back at the ticket window she pointed to the correct spot on the lucky page and asked: "How much to

Lima?" She was sure she had pronounced it correctly, as in Lima bean, and it had sounded right.

"Eleven seventy-five."

Marzy said no more, but with a satisfied smile she carefully measured piles of change onto the counter top. She sensed the agent's studied patience with her, and in her heart she thanked him. Then she pushed the coins across the worn marble in low stacks, watching them go as a duck might watch her ducklings paddle away to explore.

"Gate Two in a half an hour," the agent said noncommittally as he slid her a ticket.

Marzy returned to a bench facing Gate Two. When a bus pulled in five minutes later and three or four passengers debarked, Marzy wanted to leap to board it, but she thought she'd better wait for a call. The terminal was not very busy this morning, but it was early yet. Marzy looked around and tried to determine whether others might be boarding with her. No one else appeared to be ready for travel, though, so Marzy resolutely held the bench down.

She shifted often, unable to satisfy her desire for comfort. It wasn't the hard bench that was at fault, exactly. Something felt, well, out of place inside her. It wasn't a pain, really. Indigestion was an approximate description. Marzy was pretty sure she had eaten well that morning, but she fussed that she couldn't remember where. Or what. But she never took chances with her diet, so the unsettled feeling wasn't from something she'd eaten. It also had an insidious side to it, teasing her into a momentary panic a couple of times as she sat, then subsiding so that she all but forgot the discomfort. Then it would creep back and just sit there with her, inside her; her companion, her parasite, her secret.

When her bus was called, Marzy was the last of a half dozen or so who went forward, while from the platform she could see that a couple of heads had stayed on board during the stop.

Now, Marzy had learned some dignified ways in her seventy-one years, and this was one of those times to use them. She was careful not to put on airs as she climbed the steep steps into the front of the coach, but she

wanted to be respected as a worthy traveling companion by whomever she might meet. So, with her best plastic Lazarus bag clutched close under her right arm, she stopped in the front of the aisle to choose a seat. The seven or eight others were already seated, and maybe three pairs of eyes gave her a fleeting glance.

Marzy was smiling. She felt it. It felt awkward, and she worried that it was her subservient-obedient smile. She tried to change it to one more gracious, but by this time nobody was looking. The driver pounded up the steps, dropped into his seat, and hissed the door closed while Marzy continued to a suitable seat next to the window on the driver's side of the bus. She wouldn't be hurried, but she feared that, if she didn't lower her rather large body to a seat soon, the bus would lurch backward out of its berth and topple her. Again, she sensed a white man's calm but unpredictable patience while she sat.

Diesels sounded angry to her when they roared into action. They were power under protest, like tigers performing in a circus ring. This one roared that way now, backing out of its berth. Then with gears gnashing into forward it jounced across the deep gutter into the street. It growled through several more gear changes, and Marzy watched a blur of mismatched buildings slip past. One thing she noticed, always noticed, were the people. There were people on sidewalks, beside parked cars, in windows, on steps. There were approachable people, such as she, and there were people who resembled park statues, such as those wearing neckties or those in high heels.

No matter how fast the bus careened through the streets, nor how blurred the buildings became, the people were distinct – their hair, their shoes, the rings on their fingers. But nobody looked toward the bus. No one saw Marzy leaving.

One moment Marzy saw a face that was familiar, but only inasmuch as it reminded her of someone. A girl – a college student – had sought out Marzy and some of her acquaintances recently, and had "studied" them for psychology class. She was a pleasant young thing. Her name was Randa Tash, Marzy remembered, and she called herself black, but the pity was she was as pale as anyone of the predominant race which calls itself

white. Marzy chuckled half aloud over this black identity thing. She preferred to be a Negro. She hated to be called colored. And she cringed at the contrived word Negress. To her, Negro was dignified. Yes, it referred to skin color. But someone who wasn't really coal-black in color could wear the name nonetheless. And Negro was capitalized, even by white people. They respected it.

Randa Tash hadn't meant anything to Marzy personally. She'd been around a few times, then had stayed away. Maybe school had finished for the summer, or something. As Marzy appreciated the soft, formed coach seat with its erect back, she pondered the only thing she could recall from all that Randa Tash had said to her: "You people live from moment to moment, don't you."

This was a sad thought. It was true; the girl had understood well. But she couldn't know why, at least in Marzy's case. Marzy herself hardly grasped the why of it. The plain fact was, she couldn't keep anything else in her present thoughts. If she tried to plan which street to turn onto next while she was out walking, by the time she reached that intersection she always completely forgot the plan. If she tried to catch a fleeting memory of something past, even a useful thing like where she'd last seen a certain friend, or that friend's name, it escaped her. Memories were pleasant when they showed up, but they were like chipmunks or like hummingbirds: they came and went of their own accord, not to be captured and held for later examination and enjoyment.

Marzy tried to remember now how she had made up her mind to board a bus this day. She could recall pushing wide the front door to the terminal, and a little of what took place inside, but where she had been before that, or with whom, she couldn't say.

Out her window Marzy opened her eyes and glanced at the passing fields. Corn it was mostly, waist-high and thrusting for the sky under a very warm and very friendly July sun. She shut her eyes again. She would probably doze, and that would be nice, but she knew her butt and her back would sweat against the cloth-covered seat. When it would be time to rise and leave, her skirt and blouse would stick to her. Well, she'd deal

with that when it became necessary.

A bit of her history swam across her drowsy thoughts, then. These were the rare memories that she could recall at will. In her bag she carried crumbling clippings and wrinkled photos of that certain period, which helped keep those days alive for her, but they came back now more vividly than if she had sought to consider them:

Her church. She could see it, but couldn't say now where it was. A big square church, brown with white trim. The roof was steeply pitched and was capped with a blunt steeple. Inside Marzy was clapping and singing, leading the singing.

She could see the man in the pale yellow suit while she sang, and she knew that he would want to talk with her after the service. He was a Negro, just like everyone else in the church, but he was not familiar to her. So, she found him afterward, and yes, he was thinking of speaking to her. Would she like to be a professional performer? An actress? He needed a woman much like herself to tour the Midwest as Aunt Jemima.

Aunt Jemima! What a gloriously happy time that had been. All through the mid- and late-1950's she really was Aunt Jemima. She had an act of songs and storytelling that she put together herself, and she took her act to elementary schools and high schools, parades and holiday celebrations. She even appeared on many local television shows. She had been hired to promote Aunt Jemima pancakes, of course, but not to do so overtly. If she did her job well, and she did, then thousands and thousands of people would allow as how there really was an Aunt Jemima, and they had seen her in person. They would remember this in the grocery store aisles.

A special pride went with her identity as Aunt Jemima that comforted Marzy even now. She never shared it with another living soul. It had been the deciding thought when she took the job many – how many, dear God! – years ago. She didn't care about the sponsor or the product, although she was confident in its quality. She didn't care how much money it brought in. She didn't mind acting in a certain way on stage, the way she had been instructed to act in order to project the Negro kitchen servant image. She was creating the character, in

fact, against a mental model she knew too well; in years past she had known plenty of neighbors who had played that rôle in real life. She was proud to do the job because people who bought the product would make terrific pancakes and would believe that a Negro was responsible for the recipe, for the perfection of it, for the reliability of the product box after box. To this degree Marzy had understood marketing, although no one had ever taught her any of its precepts and assumptions.

Marzy remembered when it had ended, too. The memory came back forcefully in her nap on the bus. It had nothing to do with her. She was tops. It was the company. They wanted to keep the name, but didn't want to have such a stereo-typed front person. Nobody took pains to explain this to her, though. One day she walked off a school stage, and another stranger was standing there like the man in the yellow suit. He asked for her props and then simply said: "We won't be needing you any more."

That wasn't so bad, it turned out. She only had to tell one job agency who she was, and she had a job as a cook in the governor's mansion. They didn't hire Marzy Mays; to them they had hired Aunt Jemima, even though she had given her real name. She didn't even have to prove whether she could cook before she joined the governor's kitchen staff.

For the next – how many years? – she toiled at this job. She had the 5 a.m. to 2 p.m. shift, Saturday through Thursday. Breakfast, of course. And it had been good work, but very hard. She vaguely saw faces in her mind, the approving faces of family and old friends who were thrilled to know someone who had made it so big, and so late in life! – first Aunt Jemima and now cooking for the governor. Who was governor then, anyway? To Marzy it hadn't been important. He didn't know her either, so why should she remember?

The recollections faded fast, and Marzy felt herself waking. The bus was cruising up I-75 and the slight elevation gave an artist's perspective of a Midwest cityscape, rendered to fit narrowly in the bus's window frame. Yes! Marzy thought. It looks right! Then she feared that maybe it was right, but maybe it wasn't the town for which she'd bought her ticket. She struggled to remember the name of the town she was going to, and

gave up without looking to see what was printed on the ticket.

But the bus did turn off, and entered the city, and whisked past houses and buildings that were different from the ones she had seen that morning. In no time the bus stopped and she was in the aisle. She had waited to be the last one off, and counted herself lucky that she was, for she had to adjust her moist clothing while the others filed ahead of her.

Outside the terminal Marzy wasted no time wondering where to go. She still had bits of the memory from her nap to ponder, and so she let her feet plot her a southerly course past shouting signs, rich concrete banks, and huge storefronts. Her stomach begged attention, and she burrowed into her Lazarus bag for a brown banana and a courtesy pack of two crackers. Her dry throat could wait for moisture.

The memories fizzled, and Marzy had no present thoughts at all for a while. She knew that a toilet would be needed by day's end, but that was a minor worry. No, now her feet ached. In fact, she ached everywhere. She could tell that her organs ached deep inside her, as if her companion discomfort had shared its poison with other gullible parts of her body. Her muscles were fatigued. Even her skin felt strained.

Marzy could put a word to it all: weary. She was profoundly weary, in a way that someone working bent over in a field should feel at the end of the day. But Marzy had only sat and ridden and napped. She was sure she shouldn't have felt so...

Marzy paused to consider her location. She was near a street corner and she had just crossed a concrete bridge spanning a narrow, muddy river flowing between steeply-sloped banks. An endless line of small businesses stretched ahead – gas stations, one- and two-story stores that sold appliances or repaired shoes or cut hair. Here and there a bar, a corner grocery. Here and there between these buildings were once-proud residences with touches of green grass.

Marzy dropped her gaze and pressed on.

The aching never stopped, but it never grew any worse. She felt, after a while, as if she had walked two

hours. Once in a while she'd had a sense of wrong direction and had let her feet retrace some blocks. Once in a while she worried a little that she was not in the town she had hoped for. If she weren't, that was okay. She could handle any town. She wasn't even sure she had ever been to the town for which she had bought the ticket. She had just known she wanted to go somewhere, and Lima sounded nice. It sounded right.

The businesses had given way mostly to houses. Some were row houses of brick. Most were single family homes and were very modest. Eventually, as she trudged onward, they were very humble. Occasionally she paused again and looked ahead and all around. At one such stop she realized that there were no white people among those in sight. Nearer the bus terminal she had passed people on the street who didn't acknowledge her. Now she was passing people in their yards, and they watched her openly. The women faced her and watched. The men took a back-to stance with their hands on their hips and peered at her over one shoulder, then the other. They were all Negroes.

Marzy trudged onward. The pain in her feet, the challenge in her chest, the need to relieve herself, all became intense simultaneously at times, then all were forgotten soon afterward. Eventually, if she had thought about it, Marzy would have realized that she felt none of it any more.

At another stop in her forward progress Marzy found herself standing on the ties between a pair of rails. These were busy rails, too: no grass growing in the ballast, fresh black oil down the center of the roadbed, shiny crowns to the rails themselves. She hurried off the tracks and back among the houses nearby.

She passed several quiet, well-kept little churches. As she turned to glance at one such, bigger than most of the others, the setting sun, split by a distant rooftop, caught her square in the eyes and left her sightless for a few moments.

About this time a small car rolled to a stop beside her and a thin older man with a bald head and pink scalp leaned across the seat toward the open window near her. "You look like you could use a lift, Ma'am," he told her. "I'm just offering, understand. You look mighty tired."

Marzy stopped and pondered for a moment, but concluded that she didn't even quite comprehend what he had told her. "I'm just fine, thanks, Mister," she replied. She realized that her voice wasn't as full as she had intended, but she was pretty sure she had given him a grateful smile. Then she slouched back into her journey. The little automobile pulled back into traffic and Marzy noticed that the man seemed to be concerned for her still as he drove away. In her heart she thanked him. He didn't know her, and yet he cared. She pressed on.

Now and then she read street signs. They told her nothing.

Marzy dropped one heavy, hard foot ahead of the other. She was rewarded, at last, by one street sign: Mizpah Mission Drive. It stirred no memories, although she half expected that it might as she pronounced it to herself. No, it was simply a pleasant-sounding name that was interesting to contemplate until the thought and the name would slip from her mind's clutches and elude her.

She began having a serious problem walking. The narrow, quiet street was paved, but the paving didn't fit the surroundings. The houses – well, now they were shacks – sat flat on the ground. They had a little more yard space than the larger houses had. The paving was laid onto the same flat dust as the poor shacks, and there were no storm drains or gutters or curbstones. Everything from tar to floor was on one earthen level. Marzy tried walking on the dirt at the edge of the street, but it was too rough and threw her off balance more than once. But the pavement was too hard. She ached the same all over, but once again her feet really hurt.

In the gathering dusk the streets were empty except for an occasional cat with matted fur or a child sitting still on a tricycle, watching her pass. Voices and smells of cooking drifted from open doorways, then radio crackle and the brief tap of a hammer, all signs of life crudely lived, but obstinately too. This was not a neighborhood that anyone passed through on the way to anywhere else. The cars in the yards were few and broken.

A profound sadness descended over the old woman, as if from a realization that she was nobody, nowhere, with no one and nothing. Then she glanced around one more time, and saw a shack she knew was right. Yes, it

was right. "Thank you, Jesus!" she muttered. Twenty, forty, sixty paces – she counted them – eighty, eighty-six, until she reached the warped door. A hasp hung loosely. There was no padlock. The house was dark and silent, but of course it would be. With more effort than she expected to need she pulled the door part way open. It scraped hard against the earth. Vines grew in the hinges. She couldn't pull it closed just yet, but that could wait.

The yard was wide and ran far back from the street. The dwelling was too small for the lot, and seemed to have sunk into the earth, crouching perhaps, trying to make itself inconspicuous. Inconspicuous it was, too, and inconspicuously Marzy disappeared into the shadow of the entryway.

And inside! "Dear God..." she rasped when she glanced around the darkened main room. "It looks like I didn't clean it this morning." Everything was gray, either with dust or from fading – everything consisting of a broken down oak drop-leaf table with a suggestion of white paint in the crevices, a two-burner white enamel gas stove, a cupboard hanging in a tired tilt from the colorless gray wall, and several plastic bags of unidentified belongings or trash against the front wall. A stool stood at one end of the table on the rough-planked, leaf-strewn floor. A movement of air, hinting of a coolness yet several hours away, grazed Marzy's cheek and she turned toward the only source of deepening twilight. The room's only window was half gone leaving a wide section of glass on one side with an odd diagonal curve from top to bottom. As Marzy tried to comprehend the broken pane, a wasp circled in through the open half and then out again straight-away.

"I didn't leave it like this," Marzy cried half-inwardly, half in a mumble, like a child saying: "It wasn't my fault."

There was a narrow room off the back, and if she could have walked that far she would have been sure to find the bed. If the rest of the house was like this, then the mattress probably lay bare, in need of sheets. Where were her sheets? She couldn't look just now. Just now she needed to sit, and the stool was right behind her, next to the table, where she could rest an elbow and catch her breath. How long had she been standing here

without drawing a breath?

Glancing over her shoulder, Marzy aimed her butt at the stool and let her legs give out.

Patrolman Neal Schwertfager, one of a proud line of Schwertfagers of mixed German descent who had made careers of law enforcement, and Rookie Wendell Upthegrove, no less proud but the first of his mixed west-African lineage to wear a badge, had freshly reported for duty and were at the station right at shift change when the call came in: body found in an abandoned house at 1419 Rayburn Street.

Schwertfager and Upthegrove were partners. Rayburn was on their beat. Neal flicked on the bubble gum machine when they pulled out on this call, but no siren. People were sleeping, and besides, this was a no-pulser. The night was tropical and the air eddying through the patrol car's open windows was thick with the voices of the night: shouts, screen doors on taut springs, muffler decay, wolf whistles, naughty laughter, colicky crying, even a flush, and above it all the descant of crickets. To their passing car it was all merely scraps of sound, an orchestra tuning up, a trip around the radio dial, a barrage on the senses.

Neal drove at a moderate but no-nonsense speed, the sounds professionally shut out but first professionally filtered for a cry of distress, a crack of weaponry, a tinkle of shattered glass. Wendell concentrated on a string of words here, a movement there, and finally concluded that it would be interesting just to walk this street, Metcalf Street, at night, so that whole, uncut, even though brief, episodes of others' lives, played from screen doors and porches on the public stage of a darkened summer night, could be absorbed and analyzed. He wondered why such a simple exercise wasn't part of an officer's formal training. He would make it part of his own.

"Remember Aunt Jemima?" Wendell asked Neal as the car's tires provided a drone for the trip to the south side Lima neighborhood. Schwertfager gave him an affirmative nod but kept his eyes on his driving. "House we're going to is the one Aunt Jemima used to live in. Before she was famous. My old Aunt Marzy, actually."

"Aunt Jemima was your aunt?" Neal responded, giving his partner a glance that held no mockery, just a

measure of amusement.

"Yeah, really. My great aunt. Marzy Mays is her real name." Wendell sat silent for a few seconds, then added: "Nobody around here's seen or heard from her in ten or twelve years."

"I saw her way back in, probably, first grade. Lincoln School. Would have been 1950 or thereabouts."

"You went to Lincoln?" Wendell asked. "So did I. Mistress Mummaugh, kindergarten. Mistress MacDonald, first grade. You were there before me, I think."

Neal chuckled. Probably only six or eight years before Wendell, he guessed. He and this Army M.P.-trained rookie were a lot more alike than different, and Wendell wasn't wise-cracking about the veteran officer's age, only remarking on it in order to gauge the span when they had both passed through the same elementary school. A few seconds later they turned off Metcalf and cruised passed the school. Schwertfager faced front as they went by but noticed that his partner turned and took in the whole street lamp-lit scene.

Seconds later Wendell was thrown into a hard lean as Neal cut down a shortcut and then glided past a stop sign in front of Duff Truck Lines. There was no other traffic.

"What's she been up to?" Neal ventured. "Aunt Jemima," he added.

"Last I knew she was splitting her time. She stays some of the time with a son in Columbus, but his wife thinks her mother-in-law is bats. So she puts herself on the bus and goes to my Uncle Charlie's outside of Cincinnati – that's her brother – until he gets tired of her and ships her back to Stoney's."

"That's her son."

"Yup."

"She rich?" Neal asked, guiding the car onto the first of several narrow streets in the target neighborhood. He was just keeping the conversation going as a way of steeling himself for the always-unsettling first glimpse of a found body. He wondered what Wendell's reaction to it would be.

The rookie may have been bracing for the same jarring sight and seemed to understand the nature of the

question. "She did real well, for an old mammy. Cooked for the governor after the Jemima thing. But I don't expect she had a pension or even a bank account."

Neal slowed the cruiser half a block from the destination as Wendell radioed dispatch of their arrival. The street was populated with a hundred expressionless faces turned toward the headlights, faces made blacker by the color drain of nighttime. Casually, but respectful of the official car, the thin crowd parted and made way. Neal pulled onto the dirt in front of the shack, the high beams aimed at the tilted cross-buck door. A dozen grownups stood around the front yard in twos, and twenty kids on bike fossils were drawn up to an imaginary perimeter eight or ten yards from the shack. At the half-open door, a white-haired old man in a sleeveless undershirt and stiff, brown leather breeches, with skin so black it shone almost bluish, stood as erect as his hunched back would allow.

Upthegrove recognized the old gentleman, Everest Shambley, and waved to him with his flashlight as he exited the cruiser. The young policeman had played pretend policeman in this very yard as a child, on visits to Aunt Marzy, and Ol' Everes', as he had always been known, had been a neighborhood fixture even then. The two officers strode to the low doorway, and Wendell paused to shake Everest's hand. The old man seemed distraught, but didn't, or couldn't, say anything as Neal first, and then Wendell ducked inside.

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