

Like Myrtle



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I was like, I don't know. I couldn't connect. The phone. And then I like bumped into somebody. "Watch were you're going!" I hit the call. The sun was like blinding me. In the park. I couldn't hear. Some guys playing some brass instruments. Hello, hello! Hazel! Like speak up! But there was like no one there, so NVM. Texting. Hazel, this is your mom. LMK where you like are. ILY. BAE. No answer. So I tried the phone again, since I was like I was like I was like. *Stop! WTF! Is that like you. Hazel? "Caution. Bus is Turning" OMG! All this noise! It has me like crazy, right now, totally! She's forty-two years old. Do her recent friends behave this way? Hazel doesn't know. Whatever. No problem. IDK what's happening. Hazel, like speak up! IOW, like tell me you're there!*

Forty two. Thinking, her words are clear, unadorned, and in dreams, when there are words for the images, what is spoken is articulate, even graceful, not a like in sight. The dream.

He has returned to me in that same ratty suit, leaving the woman who snared him. In fog, in the gazebo at lake's edge. There is no touching. He appears, out of the fog, standing in the grass below me, fat arms hanging down at his sides. But there is no gate, and I cannot step down. There are no stairs. George in a whisper:

What's up? He doesn't move. Our daughter, I say in my own whisper, Hazel. He can't hear me. I could lean over at the lattice wall and reach down. There's music. I hear it. He hears it and stumbles back a few steps. Then I move back a few steps. The fog. He's lost in it, and I'm happy. In the music. Some child's tune? Did I sing it to Hazel? Then I awaken, sweating.

Hazel! Puedes escucharme? SMH. Speak arriba. Habla mas fuerte! Ah, Gucci! I can like hear you. Like what? Your father? He's like there?

Her father had left them. There was another woman. She never saw her. Sometimes, late at night, she weeps for him. But her mother, this incessant jabber. Where did it come from? Her own teen years? But he is here now. Is he coming back to them? She doesn't know. She doesn't care.

"Look where you're going!" Like okay! I get it! WTF! It's like my daughter.

Hazel, he's like there? LOL WTH. DGMW. I don't really want to see him. But I seem to be like texting. All these abbreviations or whatever. Everybodys like gabbing OMW. I'm like OMW! Across the street, there's like Barnes & Noble.

Her phone was in her face. Down from the curb still jabbering. The light was red. A compound fracture of her right femur; a puncture wound where a sharp edge of the collapsing grill speared deep under her left breast; her jaw was broken, as were six fingers; a ruptured kidney, a broken ankle, a dislocated shoulder; fracture of the orbital bone above the right eye. Had she spoken. Were she able and some other human, she might have said KMN.

Their wedding was a dream. Myrtle Milkey joined hands with George Hoag in that small, intimate chapel in the country. They had a child, Hazel, a name she had chosen over her husband's objections (he'd favored Everleigh), and things went down hill from the day of her birth. It was not other women and it was not money. It was, though it might seem trivial, a difference of values.

Myrtle was a housewife who painted. Actually, she was a painter who housewifed. She was quite conservative in her attitudes and dress. Significantly overweight, she draped herself in heavy fabric that fell to her ankles, sackcloth (no ashes), the scuffed tips of her orthopedic oxfords faintly visible. She was a Socialist, and she

shunned most politicians. She wasn't interested in sex. No makeup, her hair was always pulled back into a bun, and she had the face of a sad nun.

George, on the other hand, was a business man whose business was the Stock Market. Though he thought of himself as heavy, actually he was fat and on top of that desperately horny. Blubbery through the chest and shoulders, above which sat a small head; thick purple lips; eyes that were obscured by wild untended lashes. His nose was undescrivable, hardly any chin at all. He wore a too-tight grey gaberdine and a brown tie over a white shirt that was faintly stained by various food products. To maintain what he thought of as his importance and dignity, he dressed in such garments even when home with his family.

Myrtle painted landscapes and still lifes, and she had a knack for coloring objects and people with a paint that resembled crayons, as if a child had filled in animals and trees between outlines. The colors produced comedy, fear, pleasure, and sometimes sadness. She colored the sky, the water, the birds, the walls, almost everything, and yet the landscapes and still lifes showed through in their beautiful conventionality.

And as time went by she purchased a phone and began to loosen up and text, and by doing so she acquired a number of friends. They seldom if ever saw each other. They communicated through phones. And she began to love the abbreviations, those shortcuts that allow the user to avoid even the semblance of speech there in the written word, and in time she began to speak these shortcuts, though always, for the most part, in private.

She painted most of the time, but for a few hours set aside for texting, and she placed her daughter Hazel on a cushion, faced so that she could view the canvas and her mother painting it. And Myrtle would ask her about things: do you like this color? Should this beach be painted green? They ate in the studio. They played a few games. She told her things about art, about poetry, about the great novels, about ethics. Hazel was four years old and was homeschooled.

George had holdings in stocks and bonds. He did very well for himself and, as far as he was concerned, for his family. He gambled and he drank. He thought about money and competition. Who he could knock down, then climb up upon, probably crushing

them, so he could rise higher. He went down to the Market on occasion, looking and acting like a silly-ass, but most of the time he worked from home, phoning and texting. One of their guest rooms was transformed into his office. Fine furniture, a small bar, expensive paintings of waddling ducks and swim suit models on the walls. Nothing painted by Myrtle. Among other things, it was their aesthetic values that were irreconcilable.

They lived together in a kind of repressed coexistence. George gathered the wealth that bought him the finest single-malt scotch and a few thousand for an evening at the casino. When it came to Myrtle and sex, she'd moved to the far right, from uninterested to "No Way!," and he remained horny as a rancid old (or middle-aged) goat. Unattractive as he was, women were out of the question, though he made a few feeble attempts, one even with a prostitute who shunned him. He'd tried everything to get off: pornographic pictures and videos; sexy lingerie that he perched and rubbed all over his unmentionables, those that were out of his sight, due to the rise of his impressive stomach; web sites for women who were a complement to his exceptional girth; videos of the Women's National Water Polo Team. But there was nothing for it, and though he was awkward and failed even there, he ended up partaking, quite often, of that most intimate yet unfulfilling of performances.

Then there's Myrtle. She continues to perform her odd and at times beautiful paintings. She has showings of her works and sells much of it. Then, when Hazel is fourteen, the woman comes into the picture, an eventuality that Myrtle can't imagine given George's personality and physical aspects. She doesn't care. She forgives him. She wants rid of him. Then, after a difficult year, they sign the papers and he is gone. Two years later, the accident and the phone call.

Father and daughter stood beside each other, looking down at Myrtle where she lay in casts and bandages, a tube in her nose, and needles taped to her arms in various places. Was she unconscious? Or was she faking it? Hazel thought the latter. George had no idea. Then her muffled voice.

B3. Like C-P, BRT. I'm like EM?, Where's my phone? I've got to call Hazel! Hazel, are you there? WYCM. Oh, here it comes, my phone my face. Im like SITD.

“I’m right here mother.” What am I to do?

“Maybe you could start by dropping those text messaging things. I don’t get it. Don’t you want to be clear, or something? What’s the payoff?” *That was George of course, awkward as always, there only to pick up some old files and dirty pictures he’d stashed in the attic. Because of Hazel, he’d agreed to come to the hospital. Her eyes were open now.*

What? What? What? IMO, maybe YMMD! WFM. ICYMI, te escucho. te derecho. Espere! I know! I’ll take them into my paintings! And so it was.

George left with his files, never to be seen again, and Hazel discovered, in just a few days, that she didn’t miss him. After six months in the hospital and at-home physical therapy, Myrtle stepped back into her paintings. The same subjects and crayola colored objects. But now there was more. Subtle and half-hidden text messaging abbreviations could be found tucked into the bark of blue trees, figures floating in the sand at the beach, a tennis racket with NC woven into the strings.

There were NP rocks, CUS peaked out from deep in the branches of a pine tree. They were everywhere, and they, according to the critics and a few viewers, only enhances Myrtle’s already startling art, adding yet another strange and exciting element. Now the painting could be read! Well, almost. And through her many sales, she and her daughter led a very comfortable life.

“What’s for dinner?”

“Now, you know Hazel, you’ve gained a little weight.” “So?”

“A salad. A large one, with fruits and berries and many kinds of lettuce.” “Oh Gee.”

Myrtle continued with her Spanish lessons, and with the exception of time out for meals and a little TV, she painted. She had reclaimed George’s office and had work done. Tall windows were installed along with a large sky-light. She’d had a high circular platform built, upon which, five steps up, stood her easel and paint table. She felt herself to be a kind of goddess, a goddess of painting, when she climbed up there to work at a canvas.

And as in days of yore, her daughter Hazel sat on cushions on the floor at the side of the platform below her, as she had as a child. And the two spoke of famous artists, of summer vacations experienced in the various travel brochures they’d garnered, of the

ancient history of mollusks, cuneiform tablets, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. And of cooking too, and of housewifery as a single woman.

And Hazel looked up to her mother, where she towered on the platform high above. And even as the sun sank, she watched her paint.

BFF

A Lexicon:

NVM	Never mind	LMK	Let me know
ILY	I love you	BAE	Before anyone else
WTF	What the fuck	OMG	Oh my God
IDK	I don't know	IOW	In other words
SMH	Shaking my head	WTF	What the fuck
LOL	Laugh out loud	WTH	What the hell
DGMW	Don't get me wrong	OMW	On my way
OMW	On my way	KMN	Kill me now
B3	Blah, Blah, Blah	C-P	Sleepy
BRT	Be right there	EM?	Excuse me
WYCM	Will you call me	SITD	Still in the dark
IMO	In my opinion	YMMD	You made my day
WFM	Works for me	ICYMI	In case you missed it
NC	No comment	NP	No problem
CUS	See you soon	BFF	Best friends forever