



Business

by Andrea Carter
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Aunt Jessie had been at the cane-on-the-ceiling business for close to an hour when Rita came to share her troubles for the first time that morning. In that given period, Jessie had not accomplished one thing that she had not set out to accomplish and she knew it. The whole affair had, in fact, started just that morning, when Mary Lou and Sonny and Jessica had up and left the breakfast table without so much as a hello, good-bye, or kiss my ass, and then had stayed upstairs all morning without a peep. Jessie could hear them up there mousing around; she knew they were up to no good, and it filled her with rage to know that she didn't know exactly what no good it was. So, she liked to think that--after forty-five minutes--she had this cane business down to an art.

The timing was most important, she'd decided: too long between whacks, and they'd forget that she knew exactly what they were about; too regular, and it'd get old too fast. This way, she was pleased to know that every time the rubber tip of the wooden cane cracked against the ceiling, at least one of the sneaks upstairs jumped and squirmed as sure as the day she was born. After all, Jessie thought, you have to treat children like children. The idea stuck, kept repeating itself, and Jessie liked it.

She even said it out loud as she sat down in the rocker and stretched her arm up to see if she could reach the ceiling without standing, but her voice was a whisper. She was about to say it again, maybe a little louder, when she glanced out the

window to see Rita coming hard for the house, moving as fast over the jugged, broken sidewalk as the phenobarbital would let her. The medicine Rita took for epilepsy made her body move in cartoon slow motion; at full speed, the effect was--downright comical, Aunt Jessie decided, craning her fleshy neck. For an instant, she watched Rita's jerky, wade-water walk and came very close to allowing herself a smile; then she remembered what she was about, and she stood up.

Clenching her teeth, she gave the ceiling another dull blow, pleased at the burn in the muscles of her arm. Then she cocked her head and listened for the absolute silence that was sure to follow. Her eyes narrowed when she heard a childish giggle and a muffled cough float down the stairway almost together. With nostrils flared, Jessie raised a heavy army and cracked at the ceiling again, twice, forgetting all about the timing. There was no sound. You just have to treat children like children, she she thought again.

But by the time Rita threw open the front door, Jessie had brought the cane to rest peacefully on the lap of her black and white, small-check gingham dress. Rita stood still for a moment, panting, the point of her pink tongue running across her lips compulsively. She sent a quick glance around the sun-bright room before her gaze came to rest on the old woman in the rocker. Then she swallowed hard and closed her eyes, which caused two measly tears to squirm down onto her lower lashes. With a long terrible wail that made Jessie's face twist, Rita dropped her head back so that her permanent-waved red hair rested on the back of her lavender sweater. Watching her, Jessie guessed that the sweater was at least one or more sizes too small.

"Lord God, Lord God, Aint Jessie," she moaned, "the most horrible thing happened up to the house this morning. I can't never go back there to LeRoy, I just know I can't." Her head began to flail from side to side. Jessie measured the little woman with her eyes from where she sat in the rocker.

"I take it you're just about to die," Jessie said, trying to remember exactly how many times Rita had nearly died since Labor Day; she knew it was at least six or seven. Immediately, Rita's movements stopped, and she stared hard into Aunt Jessie's face.

"Oh God yes, Aint Jessie," she sighed and rushed forward to fling her arms around the old woman. At the last second, Jessie raised her arm with the elbow up, so that Rita would

have gotten a nice black eye had she not stopped in time. It was eight, Jessie recalled.

"The last thing on earth I need," she said, pushing herself out of the rocker, "is you slobbering all over me this early in the day, Girlie." She reached for a straight-back chair and slid it in Rita's direction. "Now you just stop all this and calm yourself down before you make yourself sorry." Jessie hefted the weight of the wooden cane in her hand and threw a sidelong look at Rita. "If you don't, you know as well as I do that you'll end up having a spell, just as sure as the world."

"Oh, but Aint Jessie," Rita sobbed loudly, grabbing the chair and sitting down to rock back and forth on the palms of her hands, "LeRoy is madder than anything you've ever seen." Rita shook her head, fidgeting on the chair. "He says he's going to leave me and go back to live with his mama, who would love nothing better, I know." The full meaning of what she had just said hit her, and she let out another long moan, which washed across the room.

"Ri-ta!" Jessie said sharply, slapping the cane against the fleshy part of Rita's thigh and glancing briefly up the darkened stairway. Rita closed her mouth, sat up straight, and stared, wide-eyed and silent. "You just stop this business, Girlie, and I mean right now. God *Jesus*, everyone in town'll hear you, if you don't put a damper on that mouth." She pointed the cane in Rita's direction; Rita eyed it and drew back slowly. "Now, you just tell me what happened and leave off all the whining, cause I ain't got no use for it, you understand?" She stared at the redhead for a moment and walked toward the nearest window, looking through the parted curtains. "And while you're at it, get your hands out from under your hind end--I don't know what all that squirming's about, but I can tell right off that I ain't going to like it."

Obediently, Rita pulled her hands out, one at a time, and she took a couple of gulps of air as she reached to rub absently at her leg. Over her head, Jessie saw by the clock on the wall that it was nearly noon; with a sign and a short glance at the quieted figure in the chair, she lifted her arm quickly, and the cane met the ceiling with a thud. Rita came out of her chair as though someone had shoved her.

"Good God, Aint Jessie," she said in agitation, "you're going to knock a hole right in through the plaster, if you ain't careful." On her feet, Rita stared at the ceiling, looking for the sign of a crack in the yellow surface. Before she found one, she felt Jessie's cane come to rest near her navel.

"Rita," Jessie said, too quietly to mean it nicely, "sit yourself down and talk." Rita listened to the sound of each word, slow and separate, and she backed up until her knees found the seat of the straight-back chair.

"Alright, Aint Jessie, *alright*," Rita said. "I just can't figure out what the purpose of knocking a hole in the ceiling is, is all." She looked back and forth from Jessie to the ceiling until Jessie came back to the rocker and sat down. It took a couple of seconds, after the commotion, Jessie guessed, but finally Rita was able to recall why she was sick with shame and worry, and she locked her gaze on the old woman across from her. .

"LeRoy says he's going to leave me, cause I ain't been faithful. Now, he's wrong, ain't he?"

Jessie knew for certain that Rita had not been unfaithful recently, not since she herself had given the girl the what-for when she found her out on the back porch with the antique dealer. Jessie blew out a sigh through her lips.

"First, what exactly did LeRoy accuse you of?"

"Oh, Aint Jessie, something awful," Rita confided in a whine. "He said something just plain awful to me. He looked me right in the eye and said that I'd drop my pants for anything that moved." Rita hid her face in her hands, and Jessie dropped her head and bit her inner lips to keep her mouth from twisting. "He said that to me, his own wife," Rita mumbled through her fingers. Jessie stood up quickly and walked to the window, where she cleared her throat.

"Well, Rita," she said, "I guess you better go home and deny everything, then, is about all I can tell you." Jessie paused and looked up. "He ain't really going nowhere, I suspect." A knowing look came to the old woman as she spoke. "All a man really wants is a warm bed, Girlie, and he usually don't care what he has to put up with to get it." She clenched her whole body and cracked the cane against the ceiling again. Rita jumped.

"Good God," she breathed, sinking back down onto the chair. "The least you could do is let me know when you're planning to do that--Lord knows, the whole house'll fall in right on our heads before we know it." At that moment, they both heard the high squeal of laughter from above. Jessie started to raise the cane again.

"Well, I didn't know little Jessie was here," Rita said, twisting around to look upstairs. "What's she doing up there, anyway?" Jessie ignored her. "Jessica Marie Taylor," Rita

called out in falsetto, "you come down here and see your Aint Rita--what are you *doing*, Aint Jessie?" The old woman had grabbed her arm and was propelling her toward the front door.

"Good-bye, Rita," Jessie said, reaching for the doorknob.

"But what," Rita sputtered, "am I supposed to tell LeRoy?" She nearly fell as Jessie pushed her onto the front porch.

"If you want to keep *this* man, unlike that unfortunate retard you got yourself aholt of last time, you best just do as I said," Jessie hissed through the screen. "And see if you can't try to manage on your own for about five minutes or so--I got business of my own to attend to."

Rita's mouth wobbled woefully, and she bowed her head.

"Sometimes, Aint Jessie," she said reproachfully, "you are just plain old mean-souled." But Jessie had already closed the door in her face and turned back to look up the dim stairway.

"Mary Lou Burns," she bellowed at the top of her voice, refusing to call her niece by her married name even after several years, "you and Sonny might as well quit your sneaking around up there and get down here on the ball. If you think you're fooling me one bit you got another thing coming."

The young couple and their small daughter appeared instantly at the head of the stairs, and Jessie squinted to see them in the dark upper hallway. She realized that they were dressed in their Sunday school clothes.

"And where do you think you're off to?" she asked. She watched Mary Lou's round, childish face twitch with nervous expectation.

"Aunt Jessie," she started, taking the first step, turning to look up at her young husband, whose face was nearly as stiff and white as her own, "Aunt Jessie, we're going to Sonny's folks' house this afternoon. They're having an anniversary party for us, and they asked us specially to be there, and we," she swallowed, "we said we would."

"We been married five years today," Sonny piped in. "Five years, Aunt Jessie." Jessie stared up at him with a hatred that made his voice go sour in his throat. He stepped down to put one massive arm around his wife, silently. Only the child seemed unaware of the tension as she flounced down the stairs in a ruffly blue dress.

"*We're* going to Grandma Taylor's," she informed Aunt Jessie bluntly. "We been planning to go for a long time now." Jessie fixed her attention on the child briefly, trying to ignore the eyes that were no less blue than Sonny's.

“Grandma Taylor’s huh?” she asked with a cold, nasty smile.

“Yessir, and you can go too, if you want. Can’t she Momma?”

“Of course.” Mary Lou sounded as though she were being strangled.

“Mom and Dad’d be real glad to see you again, Aunt Jessie,” Sonny said, exchanging a brief glance with his wife.

“Uh-huh,” Jessie said.

“Boy--I can’t hardly wait,” the child confided to the old woman, “I ain’t seen Grandma for two Christmases, and besides, Eddie’ll be there too, Momma said, and Eddie’s my best cousin, and I’m going to marry him for sure when I get big enough.” The child rattled on under the battle of stares that took place above her head.

“You can’t marry Eddie, Jessica,” Mary Lou interrupted, “cause he’s your cousin.”

“Well, I will *too*.” Jessica answered her mother with a childish nastiness. “Just you wait and see, Missie.” Jessie came very close to smiling as she watched the child twirl in the middle of the floor, her blue skirt flying out full around her. The old woman turned back to the culprits, still on the stairs.

“We heard Rita down here,” Mary Lou said, her voice quick and high.

“Uh-huh,” Jessie said.

“We was just about to come down,” the younger woman laughed, a frantic sound, “but Sonny couldn’t get his tie knotted up right.” There was a long silence. Jessie looked at the clock on the wall.

“Uh-huh,” she said again, gripping her fingers tightly around the neck of the cane.

“She sure was sounding off about something or other,” Sonny said, trying to smile, and almost succeeding. He reminded Jessie of some silly stuffed bear, and she snorted shortly through her nose.

“We was trying to hear what was going on,” Jessica said, walking over to the corner of the room to pick up a blue and red top. “But there was so much racket, you wouldn’t believe.” Her mother gave her a solid look, which she ignored. “What was you going down here, anyway, Aunt Jessie?” She squatted to the floor and began pumping the handle of the top, making it spin violently. “Huh?” No one spoke. The child continued pumping the top, and the metallic whir was the only sound in the room. Finally, Mary Lou turned to her husband, stepping away from the arm that was still around her shoulders.

"You probably ought to go start the car, Honey," she said, smiling a quick twitch of a smile.

"Make sure it's warmed up, too," Jessica said flatly, watching the top. Sonny stared down at the child, but she refused to look up at him. Jessie's mouth curled at the corner as he moved slowly down the stairs, fishing in his pocket for the car keys.

"I'll just go start the car, then," he said with a grim smile in his wife's direction. No one said a word as he reached for the front door and went outside. Mary Lou followed him with her eyes until he turned the corner of the house. Then she watched nothing rather than look at Aunt Jessie.

"So long to you--Honey," Jessie said to the front door. The top turned noisily in the silence. 'I ought to snatch you bald-headed,' came the old woman's low growl from the foot of the stairs. Mary Lou bit her bottom lip. Jessica laughed a high, childish chuckle and let go of the top, watching it spin off, out of control, across the floor.

"Boy, that'd be a sight," the little girl smirked, watching her mother and Aunt Jessie very carefully.

"You," Mary Lou pointed at her daughter with an accusing finger, "are a damned sight too big for your britches."

"Well, look who's talking," Jessie said advancing toward the stairway. Mary Lou backed up a step and folded her arms across her chest. "If I were you, Missie, I don't think I'd talk about anyone else's britches."

"And I ain't got britches on, besides," Jessica said, pulling her dress up around her waist to reveal white panties. "Are you blind, Miss Missie?"

"Put your dress down," Jessie thundered. The child let go of the edge of her dress and dropped her head onto her chest, her mouth set in a pout. "As for you," she said, turning back to Mary Lou, "I would like for you to explain to me exactly why you think it's your duty to run down there around that boy's trashy family." Mary Lou raised her eyes to the ceiling.

"I knew this would happen," she said quietly, shaking her head. "I just knew it would."

"You knew what?" Jessie asked menacing swinging the cane so that it snapped in her palm, over and over.

"Nothing," Mary Lou muttered.

"You better talk to me, Girl, if you know what's good for you," Jessie said, popping the cane, never lifting her eyes above the bottom step.

“Oh, Aunt Jessie, try to understand just once,” Mary Lou begged. “They’re his folks; they’re Sonny’s *folks*. And it’s just for the afternoon. What can one afternoon hurt?” The old woman heard the whine that had sneaked into her niece’s voice. Children, Jessie thought.

“Save it all up,” Jessie said, “for some fool. I don’t want to hear about no one afternoons, and I don’t want to hear about it when that girl over there,” she pointed in the general direction without turning her head, “grows up to be just like him. That’s what comes of it; you take my word on that.” Mary Lou’s face tightened, and her eyes rolled almost wildly.

“What is so wrong with him, Aunt Jessie?” Mary Lou asked, her features stretched into grotesque lines.

“Wrong with him?” Jessie laughed a long laugh with no trace of humor. She stopped and slapped her thigh. “That’s a hoot. Even your own daughter knows he’s worthless and no good.” She looked over at Jessica, who was studying her black patent leather shoes, listening to the slow tap-tap they made upon the smooth, flowered linoleum. “Worthless, worthless, worthless,” Jessie sang out shrilly, shaking her head. Mary Lou put her hands to her hot cheeks to hide the moisture that was sure to appear any second.

“I just don’t know what you want, Aunt Jessie,” she said finally, her voice nearly steady. “He don’t drink or smoke or stay out nights.” Mary Lou raised her chin to keep tears from spilling down her face; she tried to concentrate on a trio of flower pictures on the opposite wall. “He works hard and does right by all of us.” She paused to swallow. “I just don’t see how come you got cause to complain, to never have a good word for him.” Jessica tapped her shoes louder and faster.

“You are a sucker,” Jessie intoned, “if ever I saw one. This man,” she twisted her voice over the word, “wants one thing from you, and one thing only. It’s all in the world he has ever cared about.” Jessie gripped the cane. “He can’t even provide a roof over his own family’s heads, Girl. What kind of a man lets an old woman provide for him?” Jessie turned to focus on the little girl refusing to meet her niece’s outraged eyes. “And you don’t notice his folks offering you a place to live or anything else, except for this little party business, here, cause they ain’t got a dime to their name. They ain’t nothing but poor, white trash--”

“You--you!” The younger woman’s throat was so tight that her voice came out a screech. “You begged and pleaded and

cried and said that you couldn't *live* if we moved away from you. You!" Mary Lou shook her head from one side to the other, loosely. "Don't you dare blame him for that now. Don't you ever blame him for that, Aunt Jessie." Swallowing, she saw Jessie fling the cane from her. It flew end over end across the room: when it landed, it lay on the linoleum like a live thing, rolling stiffly before it came to a final rest. The child walked over and kicked it with the toe of her shoe.

"From this day forward," Jessie said, pointing one fat finger at Mary Lou, "I don't want nothing to do with you, Missie. Do you understand me?" Mary Lou didn't answer. Jessie watched her sullen face for a moment before she turned to the child.

"You wasn't planning to go down there, too, was you?" The child continued to kick the cane.

"I wanted to go," Jessica said quietly, plucking at the skirt of her dress, glancing up occasionally at her mother, who had started to cry. Jessie's face hardened, her eyes narrowing.

"Well, then, you just go on," she said. The child did not respond. "And I just hope and pray that I die while you're gone." She yanked the child's arm and knelt down so that they were face to face. "How would you like to come home and find your only Aint Jessie dead?" Her hot breath fanned the child's features. Jessica's mouth quivered once before she began to cry in a low, hiccupy sob.

"I won't go--nowhere, Aunt Jessie," she sniffed wetly.

When the front door opened, no one noticed. Sonny stood rigid, looking from his wife to his daughter, both white-faced and weeping. Jessie saw him first; her eyes followed the path his had just taken, and she rose from her haunches triumphantly.

"You just go ahead and leave my house," she said quietly. "Not a one of us needs the likes of you around here." Jessie had said the words so many times, under her breath, to the ceiling in the middle of the night that they came easily now. Sonny ignored her and walked toward his daughter.

"Would someone mind telling me what in God's name has been going on in this house?" he asked, starting past the old woman. He was stopped short by the force of Jessie's heavy hand as it swung and hit him full in the mouth. Dazed, he tasted the nasty sweetness of blood on his inner lips, and he licked at it cautiously.

"Don't you curse in my house, you white trash, you," Jessie spat. She took his measure as he stood, motionless, and she

put a rough hand on his arm. When she started for the front door, Sonny followed her for about three steps; then, shaking his head as if to clear it, he planted his feet and yanked back on his captured arm. Mary Lou gasped in the stillness.

Jessie's fingers clawed at air as, completely off-balance, she dropped heavily to the floor. The three of them watched her go down, watched her dress fly up around her doughy thighs. Sonny's mouth hung open limply, and Jessica shook her head, grabbing fistfuls of her blue skirt. Jessie did not move.

"Well, you sonofabitch, you!" Rita shouted. Not one of them had seen her step onto the porch, but there was no way to ignore her entrance through the front door: her shouts broke across the quiet like a wave.

"Is that all you know how to do--beat up on old women who can't defend themselves?" Rita demanded, jumping onto Sonny's broad back, wrapping her legs around his waist. Jessie jackknifed into a sitting position on the floor. "Rita!" she reprimanded. Sonny shuffled across the room, trying to rid himself of Rita, who was pounding small fists into his back. "Rita," Jessie said again, slapping her palm on the floor. Rita started to turn to look at Jessie, but her arms went slack from around Sonny's neck, and her body half-fell, half-jerked itself to the floor.

"Now look what you've caused," Jessie hissed up at Sonny as she knelt over Rita's moving body, shoving her hand inside the girl's mouth to keep her from swallowing her tongue. When a puddle began to seep across the linoleum between Rita's legs, Jessica moved closer to her mother, at the foot of the stairs, and Sonny came to stand next to them. They watched Jessie through the worst of it, watched her sure hands. When it was over, the old woman sank into a sitting position and mopped a hand across her face. Sonny cleared his throat.

"Is there anything else we can do before we leave?" he asked loudly.

"Before--" Mary Lou started, bewildered.

"Jessica, girl, get yourself together now," he said. Jessica sniffed and shook her head.

"I have to stay here," she answered.

"You can come with us," he said. "Mary Lou, get you all's coats and come on. *Now*," he said meaningfully.

Jessie had not said a word. She sat stroking and petting Rita and pretended to ignore the movement around her.

"Bring Jessica's little purse, too," he called up the stairs after Mary Lou, then turned to grin down at his daughter. She did not look at him.

Out of the corner of her eye, the old woman watched the child. Jessica's eyes were there, waiting to meet the older ones, and Jessie smiled into them.

"I ain't going, Daddy." This time the child's words were final.

"You can't make a child do what it don't feel," Jessie said directly into Sonny's face. Mary Lou came down the stairs with two coats draped over her arm. She looked once around the room and hung Jessica's wrap over the banister.

"You ain't going, then, Jessica?" she asked. The child shook her head.

"Are you sure?" Sonny asked. "Eddie's going to be there and all," he reminded her, helping his wife with her coat. Jessica nodded and blinked back tears. With a final look at their daughter, the couple started toward the front door.

"What time do you all intend to be home?" Jessie asked from the floor.

"Oh--" Mary Lou looked at Sonny.

"Before dark," he answered. The door closed behind them, and Jessie raised her hand to her chest and blew out a long breath.

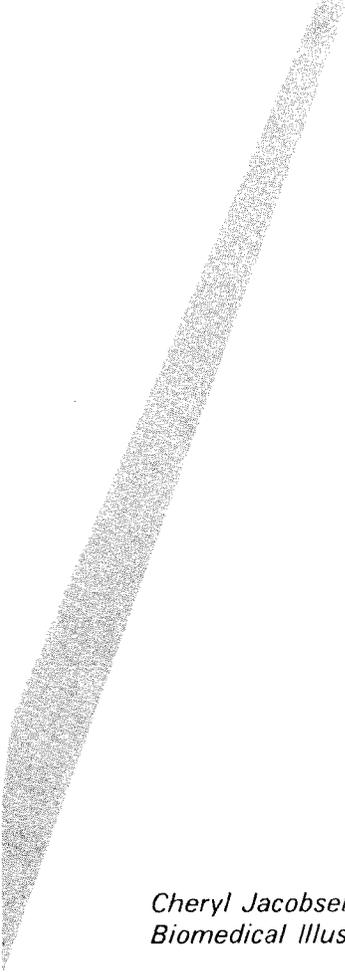
"See," she said to the child, "they ain't a bit concerned with you. All they care about is theirselves. Did you see the way that no-count Daddy of yours hurt your poor old Aint Jessie?" Rita began to stir on the floor, and Jessie reached out to quiet her.

"Yessir," Jessica said, walking over to the window beside the front door, pressing her face against the autumn glass. The car pulled into view.

"Ain't I told you time and time again that he was just like that?" Jessie asked, pulling herself to her feet, groaning from the exertion. Over the child's shoulder, Jessie saw the car move into the street and disappear over the hill at the end of the road. The window was clouded from Jessica's breathing.

"Well?" Jessie prompted.

"Yessir," the child said again.



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