



## Dorcus

---

No Known Copyright

Princeton University Library reasonably believes that the Item is not restricted by copyright or related rights, but a conclusive determination could not be made.

You are free to use this Item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use.

## Princeton University Library Disclaimer

---

Princeton University Library claims no copyright governing this digital resource. It is provided for free, on a non-commercial, open-access basis, for fair-use academic and research purposes only. Anyone who claims copyright over any part of these resources and feels that they should not be presented in this manner is invited to contact Princeton University Library, who will in turn consider such concerns and make every effort to respond appropriately. We request that users reproducing this resource cite it according the guidelines described at <http://rbcs.princeton.edu/policies/forms-citation>.

## Citation Information

---

Morrison, Toni. 1931-

Dorcus

1 folder (partial)

## Contact Information

---

## Download Information

---

Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 12:46:20 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/t148fn710>

Dorcus

n.b. "...There was no such thing as mid-life." Is this a reference to today, a looking back, which would mean that he bookvoice is in the now recalling and telling. Better to keep the bookvoice in the then as though it were the voice's now. Or not?

[ Dorcas's mother and father had been killed in East St. Louis during the 1917 race riots there. The mother's New York City sister, Alice, took Dorcus in.]

→ Alice stood for three hours on Fifth Avenue listening to drums saying what the <sup>Marching men</sup> marchers could not. What was possible to say on that rather pleasant July day, was in print--a banner repeating some promises from the Declaration of Independence. But all that was meant came from the drums. The men were so beautiful, so coldly quiet; built, it seemed to her, by the rolling, the muted, embrace of the drums. Time altered during the march; it was as though she stood there for weeks, looking in each and every face that passed. Days passed, nights too. and still she stood there with the hand of the little girl Dorcus in her own. It must have been weeks that she stood there because when it was over, although the clock on the [tk] window said 4:00, her fingernails had three <sup>grown</sup> weeks of growth.

Her protection of the newly orphaned girl in her charge was total thereafter. She hid her hair in braids tucked under lest white men and colored see it raining around her shoulders. High



heeled shoes with the graceful straps across the arch, the vampy hats closed on the head with saucy brims framing the face, make up of any kind--nothing but lemon cream at night--all that was forbidden. Especially the coats slung low in the back and not buttoned, but clutched, like a bathrobe or a towel around the body, forcing the women who wore them to look like they had just stepped out of the tub and were ready for bed. In one way she admired them, the coats and the women who wore them. She sewed them with pleasure at her machine, and she had to look twice over her shoulder when the Gay Northeasters and the [tk,tk] strolled down Seventh Avenue, they were so handsome. Whatever was in her heart, however, she kept there and never let Dorcus see how she admired those ready-for-bed clothes. And she told the Millwood sisters who kept a few small children during the day for mothers who worked out of the house, what her feelings were. They did not need persuading, having been looking forward to the Day of Judgement for years now, and expecting its <sup>Sweetness</sup> relief in any minute. They had lists of every restaurant, diner and club that sold liquor and were not above reporting their owners and customers to the police until they discovered that the news, in the Racket Squad Department, was not only annoying, it was redendant. When Alice Manfred collected little Dorcus in the evening, the three women occasionally sat down in the kitchen to hum and sigh over cups of Bosco at the signs of Eminent Demise: ankles in full view; lip rouge red as hellfire; burnt matchsticks rubbed on eyebrows; fingernails tipped with blood. And the men! The things they



thought nothing of saying out loud to any woman who passed by could not be repeated before children. They did not know, but suspected, that the dances were unspeakably nasty because the music was getting worse with each passing season. Songs that used to start in the head and fill the heart had dropped on down, down to places below the sash and the buckle belts. Lower and lower until the music was so low down, you had to shut your windows and just suffer the summer sweat when the men in shirt sleeves propped themselves in window frames, or clustered on rooftops, in alleyways, on stoops and in the apartments of relatives and played the low down stuff that signalled Eminent Demise. Because you could hear it everywhere. Even if you lived on <sup>St. Nicholas</sup> [tk] Avenue with a leafy sixty-foot tree every hundred feet, a quiet street with less than five cars parked at the curb, you could still hear it, and there was no mistaking what it did to the children under their care--cocking their heads and swaying.

Alice thought the low down music (and in East St. Louis it was worse than New York) had something to do with the thirty-seven dead, two of which were her sister and brother-in-law, killed in the riots. Some said it was the disgruntled veterans who fought in all colored units, were refused the services of the Y.W.C.A., over there and over here, and came home to ~~white~~ violence more intense than when they enlisted. Others said it was the outrage of whites at the wave of southern Negroes flooding the town and looking for work and places to live. Alice knew better. Her brother-in-law was not a veteran, and he had been living in East



St. Louis since before the War. Nor did he need a white man's job (he owned a pool hall on [tk] Street). As a matter of fact, he wasn't even in the riot; he had no weapons, confronted nobody on the street. He was pulled off a streetcar and stomped to death, and her sister had barely got the news when her house was torched and she was <sup>roasted</sup> burnt to a crisp in its flame. Dorcus, nine years old, sleeping across the road with her very best girlfriend, did not hear the fire engine clanging and roaring down the street because when it was called it didn't come. But she must have seen the flames, must have, the whole street was screaming. She never said. Never said anything about it. She went to two funerals in five days, and never said a word.

No. It wasn't the War and the disgruntled veterans; it wasn't the droves and droves of coloreds flocking to paychecks and streets full of themselves. It was the music. The nasty, get on down music the women sang and the men played and both danced to--close and wild. Alice was convinced and so were the Millwood sisters as they blew into cups of Bosco in the kitchen. There had been none of that music at the Fifth Avenue march. Just the drums and the Boy Scouts passing out explanatory leaflets to <sup>People</sup> whitemen in straw hats, who needed to know what the people weeping softly already knew. Alice picked up a leaflet that had floated to the pavement, read the words, and shifted her weight at the curb. She read the words and looked at Dorcus. Looked at Dorcus and read the words. There seemed a great gap between them, between the print and the child. For days, she glanced between them struggling for the



answer, for something to close the distance between the silent staring child and the slippery silver words. Like a rope, the drums spanned the distance, gathered them up and connected them: Alice, Dorcus, her sister and her brother-in-law, the Boy Scouts and the black unblinking faces, the watchers on the pavement and those in the windows above--all. Then it was over and instead of days, only three hours had passed. She carried that gathering with her always after that, and it was secure and tight--except when the men sat on window sills fingering horns. The rope broke then, disturbing her peace, making her furiously aware of flesh and love and something so free you could smell its bloodsmell, its life below the sash and its red lip rouge. But most of all she was aware of its appetite. Its longing for the bash, the slit; the caress of its evil anger disguised in flourish and laughing seduction. It did not make her generous, this music, as the beating drums had; it made her hold her hand in the pocket of her apron to keep from smashing it through the glass pane to snatch the world in her fist and squeeze the life out of it for doing what it did and did and did to her and everybody she knew or knew about. Better to close the windows and the shutters, sweat in the summer heat of a silent [tk] avenue apartment than to risk a yelping that might not know where or how to stop.

I have seen her, passing Betty Boop's Cafe or an uncurtained window on [tk] street when "[tk]" or "[tk]" drifted out, and watched her reach for the gathering rope thrown to her eight years ago on Fifth Avenue with one hand, and ball the other one into a fist in



her coat pocket. I don't know how she ~~did~~ it: balance herself with two different hand postures. But she was not alone in trying. And she was not alone in losing. <sup>she lost</sup> To the girl she had raised since she was nine years old, who sat in the house with her aunt and the Millwood sisters every day after school until Alice picked her up. <sup>T</sup> the music that terrified her aunt and made the Millwood sisters shake their heads, that belt buckle music from east St. Louis and who knew where else, was not only inside of her <sup>Dorcus</sup> and for her; it was about her. ~~Others could listen, could revile or enjoy it, she didn't care which. Because~~ it did not merely belong to her, it was her: her face in the mirror and away from it; her legs uncrossed and crossed; her laughter secret or unchained and so public it could startle you, and make you wonder.

Dorcus rested her cheek on her palm, and where the drums were not and the midnight flames were not was somebody licking his licorice stick, tickling the ivories, beating his skins, blowing his horn while a knowing woman sang ain't nobody going to keep me down you got the right key baby but the wrong keyhole you got to get it bring it and put it right here, or else.

She was marriagable for three years before Alice Manfred let her travel to [tk] with the YPBU where no dancing or dance music was allowed. But even YPBU couldn't control the world. After the boat ride, waiting in [tk]'s house for the parents, somebody brought an harmonica out of his shirt pocket; another boy picked up three spoons out of which they made ... [tk]



The drums Alice heard on Fifth Avenue on that mournful day in July were not an all-embracing rope of fellowship, restraint and transcendence. Dorcus remembered the sound of them as a beginning, a start of something she looked to complete. The first word of a command sentence she heard again and again in the music below the sash. Cooped up in her aunt's apartment, lying perfectly still on the white sheneille bedspread of her narrow cot [tk] The flames shooting high in the night had consumed her just as they did her mother and burned in her still. Instead of the grief of not dying and burning with her mother, of being an observer to it, she took it in, swallowed it to keep and hold it--never let it out and never put it out. Then, back then, it was all she had and all she needed. At first she was afraid to talk about it, this sweet, private fire. At first she thought if she spoke of it, it would leave her, or someone would take it away, or she would lose it through her mouth. But when they took her on a long train to New York City and crushed her in an even longer parade where she watched the dark unblinking men, the drums taught her that the fire would never leave her, that it would be waiting with and for her whenever she wanted to let it loose. It made her bold. Even as a nine year old in PS [tk] she was bold. However tight and tucked in her braids, however clumpy her high topped shoes that covered ankles other girls exposed in low cut oxfords, however black and thick her stockings, nothing hid the boldness swaying under her cast iron skirt. Eye glasses could not obscure it, nor could the



Pimples on her skin brought on by hard brown soap and nightly lemon cream. So her forays into the fire were not hurried because she was confident that it would always be there. Boys her own age were interesting, and she believed they were feeding her fire until she met someone who recognized it, saw it behind the eye glasses and underneath the cast iron skirt. The one who said "You ~~are~~ what Adam gave up the garden for and strutted on out of it." That association of danger, risk, sin, body and fire was what made her want to see him again. That and the treasure in his weekend sample case, not to speak of the gifts he brought her religiously. What was more, he took her to places where the music was, where in darkness one could feel the heat and hear the hiss; look at it, listen to it and enter it; somehow become it. You could not be afraid of or be hurt by anything you yourself became, provided you were bold enough to eat it, be it. This man with the weekend sample case knew that right away. And she knew he knew it because he understood what Eve had done and why. And that Adam was unfazed by the ~~consequences of the risk.~~ he had taken.

Guess how they met. Not at the candy counter of Duggie's where he first saw her and wondered if that, the peppermint she bought, was what insulted her skin, light and creamy everywhere but her cheeks. And not at YPBW meetings, because Joe Trace left church-going to Violet, except for Easter and Women's Day when it was embarrassing not to have your husband there. No. They met in Alice Manfred's house.

He had gone there to deliver an order to Malvonne Edwards's



found 237 and climbed the stairs to 4C.

The insults between C.T. and Bud had been too good, too funny: he had watched them longer than he thought, because it was past noon apparently, for the noise of women could be heard through the door. He rang anyway.

The peppermint girl with the bad skin answered the door, and while he was telling her who he was and what he'd come for, Sheila poked her head into the vestibule and shouted "CPT! I knew it. I'm surprised at you Joe Trace." He smiled and stepped in the door; stood there smiling and did not put his sample case down until the hostess, Alice Manfred, came and told him to come on in.

They were thrilled to have him interrupt their social. It was a luncheon meeting of the [tk] to plan for the Thanksgiving fund raiser for [tk], and they had settled what they could, tabled what they could not, and begun the lunch over which Alice had taken the greatest pains. Satisfied with their work and with each other's company, they did not know they missed anything until Alice sent Dorcus to answer the ring, and Sheila, remembering what she had said to Joe, jumped up when she heard a male voice.

They made him feel like the singing men in spats. The young ones who clustered on the corners wearing ties the color of handkerchiefs sticking out of their breast pockets. The young roosters who stood without waiting for the girl-chicks waiting for them. Under their flirty appraising eyes he felt the spats cover his shoe tops and the pleasure of his own smile. They laughed, pulled their stomachs in, tapped the table cloth with their



fingernails and began to tease, berate and adore him all at once. They told him how tall men like him made them feel, complained about his lateness and his insolence, asked him what else he had in his case besides whatever it was that made Sheila so excited. Wondered why he never rang their doorbells, or climbed four flights of double flight stairs to deliver anything to them. They sang their compliments, their abuse, and only Alice confined herself to a thin smile, a closed look and did not join the comments with one of her own. Alice and the peppermint candy girl who had opened the door.

Of course he stayed to lunch. Of course. Although he tried not to eat anything and so spoil his appetite for the winter greens he was sure were simmering in the pot for him. But the women touched his hair, looked right at him. Ordered him. "Come on over here man and sit yourself down. Fix you a plate? Let me fix you a plate." He protested; they insisted. He opened his case; they offered to buy him out. "Eat, baby, eat," they said. "You not going out in that weather without something sticking to your bones don't make no sense with all we got here, Dorcus girl, bring this man a empty plate so I can fill it for him, hear?"

They were women his age, with husbands, children, grandchildren, even, and hard workers for themselves and anyone who needed them. And they thought men delicious and terrible, taking every opportunity to let them know that they were. In a group such as this one, they could do with impunity what they were cautious about alone with a stranger who rang the doorbell with a sample

case in his hand no matter how tall he was, how country his smile, or however much sadness was in his eyes. Besides, they liked his voice. It had a rough pitch, some note they heard only when they visited stubborn old folks who would not budge from their front yards and overworked fields to come to the big city. It reminded them of men who wore hats to plow and to eat supper in; who blew into saucers where they poured their coffee to cool it, and held knives in their fist when they ate. So they looked right at him, and told him any way they could how delicious he was and how terrible.