



JChap 3A

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Citation Information

Morrison, Toni. 1931-

JChap 3A

1 folder (partial)

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Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 12:46:43 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/4b29bb57h>

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[rev. 1.6.91; 1.18.91] JChap3A

I remember that luncheon in Alice Manfred's house, and something was off. Alice seemed subdued. Later on, after Dorcus died, she ^{didn't let anybody in} spoke to nobody. The coolness I remember from that October lunch got deeper, and I was as relieved as I was surprised when ^{she} finally welcomed Violet as a visitor. [tk the violence in B comm in 1926]

Armed black women were all over the country. That, at least, they had learned. Didn't everything on God's earth have or acquire defense? Speed, some poison in the leaf, the tongue, the tail? A mask, flight, numbers in the millions producing numbers in the millions? A thorn here, a spike there.

Natural prey? Easy pickings? "I don't think so." Aloud she said it. "I don't think so."

Alice was waiting with less hesitation than before and none of the scarey angry feelings she had the first two times a woman saying she was Violet Trace had tried to see her, ^{to} talk or something. Knocked on her door so early in the morning Alice thought it was the law.

"I don't have a thing to say to you. Not one thing." She had said it in a loud whisper through the chained opening in the door and slammed it shut. She didn't need the name to be afraid or to know who she was: the star of her neice's funeral. The woman who ruined the service,

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changed the whole point and meaning of it and was practically all anybody talked about when they talked about Dorcus's death and in the process had changed the woman's name. Violent they called her now. No wonder. Alice, sitting in the first seat in the first aisle watched the commotion stunned. Later, and little by little, did feelings, like sea trash expelled on a beach--strange and recognizable, stark and murky--return. Chief among them was fear. Something she did not feel for Joe who had been the one who did it: seduced her niece right under her nose in her very own house. The nice one. The man who sold ladies products on the side; a familiar figure in just about every building in town. A man store owners and landlords liked because he set the children's toys in a neat row when they left them scattered on the sidewalk. Who the children liked because he never minded them. And liked among men because he never cheated in a game, egged a stupid fight on, or carried tales, and he left their women alone. Liked among the women because he made them feel like girls; like by girls because he made them feel like women--which, she thought, was what Dorcus was looking for. Murderer. But Alice didn't fear him the way she did his wife. For Joe she felt trembling fury at his snake-in-the grass stealing of the girl in her charge;

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and embarrassment that the grass he had snaked through was her own--the watched and guarded environment where unmarried and unmarriagable pregnancy was the end and close of livable life. After that--zip. Just a wait until the baby that came was old enough to warrant its own watched, guarded environment.

Waiting for Violet, with less hesitation than before, Alice wondered why it was so. At fifty-eight with no children of her own, and the one she had access to and responsibility for dead, she wondered about the hysteria, the violence, the damnation of pregnancy without marriageability. It had occupied her own parents' mind completely for as long as she could remember them. They spoke to her firmly but carefully about her body: sitting nasty (legs open); sitting womanish (legs crossed); breathing through her mouth; hands on hips, and began to resent her the moment she got breasts, a resentment that increased to outright hatred of her pregnant possibilities and never stopped until she married Manfred when suddenly it was the opposite. Even before the wedding her parents were murmuring about grandchildren they could see and hold, while at the same time and in turn resenting the tips showing and growing under the chemises of Alice's younger sisters. Resenting the blood spots, the new hips, the hair. That and the necessity for

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new clothes. "Oh, Lord, girl!" The frown when the hem could not be taken down further. The waist refused another stitch. Growing up under that heated control, Alice swore she wouldn't, but she did, pass it on. She passed it on to her sister's only child. And wondered now would she have done so, had her husband lived or if she had had children of her own. If he had been there maybe she would not spent her life thinking war thoughts. Although war was what it was. Which is why she had chosen surrender and made Dorcus her own prisoner of war.

Other women, however, had not surrendered. All over the country they were armed. Alice worked once with a Swedish tailor who had a scar from his ear lobe to the corner of his mouth. "Negress," he said. "She cut me to the teeth, to the teeth." He smiled his wonder and shook his head. "To the teeth." The iceman in Springfield had four evenly spaced holes in the side of his neck from four evenly spaced jabs by something thin, round and sharp. Men ran through the streets of springfield, East St. Louis, and the City holding a red wet hand in the other, a flap of skin on the face. Sometimes they got to a hospital safely alive only because they left the razor where it lodged. Black women were armed; Black women were dangerous and the less money they had the deadlier the weapon they chose.

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Who were the unarmed one? Those who found protection in church and the judging, angry God whose wrath in their behalf was too terrible to bear contemplation. He was not just on His way, coming, coming to right the wrongs done to them, He was here. Already. See? See? What the world had done to them, it was now doing to itself. Did the world shit on them? yes but look where the shit came from. Were they berated and cursed? O yes but how the[fx all this] world cursed and berated itself. Were the women fondled in kitchens and the back of stores? Uh uh. Did police put their fists in women's faces so the husbands' spirits would break along with the woman's jaw? Did men (those who knew them as well as strangers sitting in motorcars) call them out of their names every single day of their lives? Uh huh. But in God's eyes and theirs, every hateful word and gesture was the Beast's desire for its own filth. The Beast did not do what was done to it, but what it wished done to itself: raped because it wanted to be raped itself. Slaughtred children because it yearned to be slaughtered children. Built jails to dwell on and hold on to its own private decay. God's wrath, so beautiful, so simple. Their enemies got what they wanted, became what they visited on others.

Who else were the unarmed ones? The ones who

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thought they did not need folded blades, packets of lye, shards of glass taped to their hands. Those who bought houses and hoarded money as protection and the means to purchase it. Those attached to armed men. Those who did not carry pistols because they became pistols; did not carry switchblades because they were switchblades cutting through meetings, shooting down statutes and pointing out the blood and abused flesh. Those who swelled their little unarmed strength into the reckoning one of leagues, clubs, societies, sisterhoods designed to hold or withhold, move or stay put, make a way, solicit, comfort and ease. Bail out, dress the dead, pay the rent, find new rooms, start a school, storm an office, take up collections, rout the block and keep their eyes on all the children. Any other kind of unarmed black woman in 1926 was silent or crazy or dead.

Alice waited this time for the woman with the knife. The woman people called Violent now because she had tried to kill what lay in a coffin. She had left notes under Alice's door every day beginning in February--a month after the funeral. But Alice was not frightened of her now as she had been before. At first she'd thought the woman would end up in jail one day--they all did eventually. But easy pickings? Natural prey? "I don't think so. I don't think so."

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[tk] ble. I did everything anybody told me to. Till I got

here. "What could you want from me?"

"Oh, right now I just want to sit down on your chair," Violet said.

"Sorry. Just can't think what good can come of this." I don't know.

"I'm having trouble with my head," Said Violet placing her fingers on the crown of her hat.

"See a doctor why don't you?"

"Is that her?" and so nice, so quiet. Did he beat

on you "Yes."

"I'm not the one you need to be scared of."

"Who is?" Marcus.

"I don't know. That's what hurts my head."

"You didn't come here to say you sorry. I thought maybe you did. You come in here to deliver some of your own evil."

"I don't have no evil of my own."

"I think you'd better go." He want soft money.

"Let me rest here a minute. I can't find a place where I can just sit down. That's her there?"

"Yes. I just told you that." stitch up your cuff.

Violet "She give you a lot of trouble?" and Alice was

irrit "No. None. Well. some." loose from her sleeve.

he was "I was a good girl here age. Never gave a speck of

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trouble. I did everything anybody told me to. Till I got here. City make you tighten up." the tiniest stitches.

"Why did he do it?"

"Why did she?"

"Why did you?"

"I don't know."

"Your husband. Does he hurt you?"

"hurt me?"

"I mean he seemed so nice, so quiet. Did he beat on you?"

"Joe? No. He never hurt nothing."

"Except Dorcus."

"And squirrels."

"What?"

"Rabbits too. Deer. Possum. Pheasant. We ate good down home.."

"Why'd you leave?"

"Overseer didn't want rabbit. He want soft money."

"They want money here too."

"But there's a way to get it here."

"Take that dress off and I'll stitch up your cuff."

Violet came in the same dress each time and Alice was irritated by the thread running loose from her sleeve. As well as the lining ripped in at least three places she

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could see. Violet sat in her slip with her coat on, while Alice mended the sleeve with the tiniest stitches. At no time did Violet take off her hat.

"At first I thought you came here to harm me. Then I thought you wanted to offer condolences. Then I thought you wanted to thank me for not calling the law. But none of that is it, is it?" "I had to sit down somewhere. I thought I could do it here. that you would let me and you did. I didn't give Joe much reason to stay out of the street. I wanted to see what kind of girl he'd rather me be."

"Foolish. He'd rather you were eighteen that's all." "No. Something more."

"You don't know anything about your own husband, I can't be expected to help you."

"You didn't know they were seeing each other no more than I did and you saw her every day like I did Joe. I know where my mind was. Where was yours?."

"Don't chastize me. I won't let you do that." "City tightens you up, but then I got to feeling loose."

"If you had found out about them before he killed her, would you have?"

"I wonder."

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"I don't understand women like you. Women with knives."

"I wasn't born with a knife."

"No, but you picked one up."

"You never did?"

"No I never did. Even when my husband was killed I never did that. And you. You didn't even have a worthy enemy. Somebody worth killing. You picked up a knife to insult a dead girl."

"But that's better ain't it? The harm was already done."

"She wasn't the enemy."

"Oh yes she is. She's my enemy. Then, when I didn't know it and now too."

"Why? Because she was young and pretty and took your husband away from you?"

"You said it. Wouldn't you? You wouldn't fight for your man?"

Alice was not a laughing woman. But she laughed then because not for years had anything struck her as that funny.

Violet stared at her and was at once reminded of True Belle who entered the single room of their cabin and laughed to beat the band. They were hunched like mice near a can fire , not even a stove on the floor, hungry

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and irritable. True Belle looked at them and had to lean against the wall to keep her laughter from knocking her down. They should have hated her. Gotten up and hated her. But what they felt was better. Not beaten, not lost. Better. They laughed too, and suddenly the world was right side up. Violet learned then what she had forgotten until this moment: that laughter was serious. More complicated, more serious than tears. So she remembered how she must have looked at the funeral, at what her mission was. The notion of women quarreling over a man, fighting each other to win him, struck her too as the saddest, funniest thing in the world. She laughed till she coughed and Alice had to make them both a cup of settling tea.

She was polite at the lunch, of course, and too dignified either, but not paying attention to things. Distracted she was. About drowsy, probably. I always believed that girl was a pack of lies. I could tell by how she carried her underclothes were beyond her years. Even if her dress wasn't. Maybe back in October, Alice was beginning to think so too. By the time January came, nobody had to speculate. Everybody knew. I wonder if she had a premonition of Joe Trace knocking up her daughter. Or it could have been something she read in all those newspapers stacked neatly along the washboard in her