



JChap 7

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Citation Information

Morrison, Toni. 1931-

JChap 7

1 folder (partial)

Contact Information

Download Information

Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 12:53:39 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/12579x83w>

JChap 7: Oct.,90

JChap 7

Victory might remember. He was Joe's best friend, and they hunted through and worked in that whole county. Not even a police map would show the walnut tree Joe fell out of, but Victory would remember it. It could be there still, in somebody's backyard, but the cotton fields and the colored neighborhood around them were churned up and pressed down. One week of rumors, two days of packing, and 900 Negroes, encouraged by guns and hemp, rode out of town on wagons or walked on their feet to who knew (or cared) where. With two days notice? How can you plan where to go and if you do know of a place you think will welcome you, where is the money to arrive?

They stood around at depots, camped in fields on the edge of the road in clusters until shooed away for being the blight that had been visited upon them--for reflecting like still water the disconsolateness they certainly felt, and for reminding others about the wages sin paid out to its laborers.

They burnt the canefield where Wild hid, or watched, or laughed out loud, or stayed quiet. The sugar smell lingered in the smoke--weighting it. Would she know? Would she understand that fire was not light or flowers moving toward her, or flying golden hair? That if you tried to touch or kiss it, it would swallow all your breath away?

JChap 7: Oct., 90

The little graveyards, with hand made crosses and sometimes a stone marker pleading for remembrance in careful block letters, never stood a chance.

Hunter refused to leave; he was more in the woods than in his cabin anyway, and seemed to look forward to spending his last days in the places he felt most comfortable. So he didn't haul the gear he collected to a wagon. Or walk the road to X as Joe and Victory did to look for a workplace. Some farm that gave you space to sleep and food in return for clearing brush. Or a mill that had a bunkhouse. Joe and Victory walked the road along with the others and knew they were near Crossland when they passed the walnut tree where they used to sleep on nights when, hunting far from home, cool air could only be found high in its branches. And when they looked back down the road, they could still see smoke lifting from what was left of the fields and the cane of Vernonsville. They both found work at a sawmill, then at x, then x, x. Then one spring the southern third of the county erupted in fat white cotton balls, and Joe left Victory at X for the lucrative crop picking outside Crossland. But first, first he had to know if the woman he believed was his mother was still there--or had she confused fire with hair and lost her breath to it.

[1. Joe goes back, tracks back to see if Wild is still there. that encounter depletes him.

She wasn't always in the cane. Nor the back part of the woods on a whiteman's farm. He and Hunter and Victory had seen traces

JChap 7: Oct.,90

of her in those woods: ruined honeycombs, the bits and leavings of stolen victuals and many times the signal Hunter relied on most-red wings, those blue black birds with the bolt of red on their wings. Something about her they liked, said Hunter, and seeing four or more of them always meant she was close. Hunter had spoken to her there twice, but Joe knew that those woods were not her favorite place. Across the stream, beyond the place where the trout and the X were plentiful but before the stream went underground heading for the mill, the bank turned around an incline. On top of it, some fifteen feet above the stream was a sheltering rock formation its entrance blocked by hedges of old hibiscus. Once, after pulling ten trout in the first two hours of dawn, Joe had walked past that place and heard what he first believed was some combination of running water and wind in high trees. The music the world makes, familiar to fishermen and shepherds, woodsmen have also heard. It hypnotizes mammals. Bucks raise their heads and gophers freeze. Attentive woodsmen smile and close their eyes.

Joe thought that was it, and simply listened with pleasure until a word or two seemed to glide into the sound. Knowing the music the world makes has no words, he stood rock still and scanned his surroundings. A silver line lay across the opposite bank, sun cutting into the last of the night's royal blue. Above and to his left hibiscus thick, savage and old. Its blossoms were closed waiting for the day. The scrap of song came from a woman's throat, and Joe thrashed and beat his way up the incline and through the

JChap 7: Oct.,90

hedge, a tangle of muscadine vines, Virginia creeper and hibiscus rusty with age. He found the opening to the rock formation but could not enter it from that angle. He would have to climb above it and slide down into its mouth. But he saw enough tracks to know she was there.

He called out.

"Anybody there?"

The song stopped, and a snap like the braking of twigs took its place.

"Hey! You in there!"

Nothing stirred and he could not persuade himself that the fragrance that floated over him was not a mixture of honey and shit. He left then, disgusted, and not a little afraid.

But after the dispossession, after having seen the smoke and tasted the sugared air on his tongue. he went back. Skirting the burned ground, and fields of black stalks; looking away from the cabins that were now hot bricks where the wash tub stood, he headed for the stream and the hole in it where trout multiplied like flies. When he reached the turn he adjusted the rifle strapped to his back and dropped to his haunches. Slowly, breathing softly through his mouth he crawled toward the rocks shut away by greenery grown savage in sun and air. There was no sign of her, nothing he recognized. Entering the rock place he saw nothing a woman could use and the vestiges of human habitation were cold. Had she run away, escaped? Or had she been overtaken by smoke, fire, panic,

JChap 7: Oct.,90

helplessness? Joe waited there, till his listening made him drowsy and he slept for an hour or more. When he woke the day was slipping and the hibiscus was as wide as his hand. He hauled himself down the incline and, as he turned to go four red wing shot up from the lower limbs of a white oak tree. Immediately Joe is on his haunches, whipering: "Is it you? Just say it. Say anything." Some one near him is breathing. Turning round now he examined the place he has just exited. Every movement and leaf shift seemed to be her. "Give me a sign, then. You don't have to speak. Let me see your hand. Just stick it out someplace and I'll go; I promise. A sign. " He begged pleaded for her hand until the light grew small. "Are you my mother?" Yes. No. Both. Either. But not this nothing. Whispering into hibiscus stalks and listening to breathing, he suddenly sees himself pawing around in the dirt for a not just crazy but also dirty woman who happened to be his secret mother that Hunce once knew and cared for but who orphaned her baby rather than nurse him or coddle him or stay in the house with him. A woman who frightened children, made men sharpenknives, for whom woman left food out (might as well--otherwise she stole it). Leaving traces of her sloven unhousebroken self all over the county. shaming him before everybody but Victory, who neither laughed nor slant-eyed him when Joe told him what Hunter had said. "She must be tough, " was Victory's reply. "Live outside like that all year round, she must be tough." ~~not tree; swinging in the tarp~~ Maybe so, but right then Joe felt like a lint-headed fool,

JChap 7: Oct., 90

crazier than she and just as wild. would he too slip into mud over black roots, patches of dirt crawling with termites. He loved the woods because Hunter taught him how to. but now they wre full of her, a simple-,minded woman too silly to beg for a living. Too brain-blasted to do what the meanet sow managed: nurse what she birthed. The small children believed she was a witch, but they were wrong. This creature hadn't the intelligence to be a witch. She was powerless, invisible, wastefully daft. Everywhere and nowhere.

There are boys who have whores for mothers and don't get over it. There are boys whose mothers stagger through town roads when the juke joint slams its door. Mothers who throw their children away or trade them for folding money. He would have chosen any one of them over this indecent speechless lurking insanity. The blast he aimed at the white oak limbs distrubed nothing for the shells were in his pocket. The trigger clicked harmlessly. Yelling he raced back down the bank and followed the stream out of there.

From then on his work was maniacal. He took every job offered or heard about. Cut trees, cane; plowed till he could hardly lift his arms; picked chickens and cotton; hauled lumber, grain, quarry rocks and stock. Some thought he was money hungry, but Victory knew Joe didn't like to be still or thought of as lazy. Sometimes he worked so long and laate he never got back to the bed he bunked in. Then he would sleep in the walnut tree; swinging in the tarp they kept there for when they needed it.