



Grace

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Citation Information

Morrison, Toni. 1931-

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1 folder (partial)

Contact Information

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Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 12:57:25 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/kd17cz425>

Thursday 18th August, 1994

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Either the pavement was burning or she had sapphires hidden in her shoes. K.D., who had never seen a woman mince or switch like that, believed it was the walk that caused all the trouble. Niether he nor his friends lounging at the Oven saw her step off the bus, but when it pulled away there she was--across the street from them in pants so tight, heels so high, earrings so large they forgot to laugh at her hair. She crossed Central Avenue toward them taking tiny steps on towering block heels not seen, Aunt Olive said later, since 1942.

She walked fast, as though tripping through red coals or else in pain from something stuck in the toes of her shoes. Something valuable, otherwise she would have removed it.

K.D. carried the equipment box through the dining room. Narrow panels of lace spilled from a basket on the side table. Aunt Olive worked ^{thread} ~~lace~~ like a prisoner: daily, methodically, for free, producing ^{lace} more than could ever be practical. Out back the garden skirting to the left [^] was weed-free and nicely tilled. K.D. turned right toward the shed and entered. The collies were thrilled to see him. He had to

straddle Good to keep her down. Her ears were soft in his fingers and he was steady with the camphor-soaked cotton. The ticks came away like coffee grounds. He put his palm under her jaw; she licked his chin. Ben, the other collie, head ~~on~~ ^{her} paws, looked on. Life at Steward Morgan's ranch loaded the dogs with mess. They needed a few weeks in Ruby under K.D.'s care twice a year. He took the bristle brush from the box. Dug deep in Good's hair, brushing it smooth and singing, softly in a Motown falsetto, the song he'd made up for her when she was a baby. "Hey good dog; Stay good dog; Old good dog; My good dog. Everybody needs a good a good a good good dog. Everybody needs a good a good a good good dog."

Good stretched ~~with~~ ^{her} pleasure.

Just those concerned would be at the meeting tonight.

Everybody, that is, except the one who started it all. His uncles Deek and Steward, Reverend Misner, Arnette's father and brother. They would discuss the slapping but not the pregnancy and certainly not the girl with sapphires hidden in her shoes.

Suppose she hadn't been there. Suppose her navel had not peeked over the waist of her jeans or her breasts had just hushed, hushed for a few seconds till they could figure out how to act--what

attitude to strike. In public, all males, without girlfriends hanging around, they would have known. As a group they would have assumed the right tone immediately. But Arnette was there, whining, and so was Billy-Marie.

K.D. and Arnette had separated themselves from the others. To talk. They stood near the dwarf oaks behind the picnic benches and tables for a conversation worse than he ever thought talking could be. What Arnette said was, "Well, what are you going to do about it?" What she meant was I'm going to Langston in September and I don't want to be pregnant or to abort or get married or feel bad by myself or face my family. He said, "Well, what are you going to do about it?" thinking you cornered me at more socials than I can remember and when I finally agreed I didn't have to take your drawers down you beat me to it so this ain't my problem.

They had just begun to veil threats and unveil mutual dislike when the bus pulled away. All heads, all, turned.

"If that's the kind of bitch you want, hop to it, nigger."

K.D. looked from Arnette's neat shirtwaist dress to the four grades of hair on her head and then into her face--sullen, nagging, accusatory--and slapped it. The change in her expression worth it.

Somebody said, "Ow!" but mostly his friends were assessing the screaming tits closing in on them. Arnette fled; Billy-Marie too but, like the good friend she was, looked back to see them forcing themselves to look at the ground, the bright May sky or the length of their fingernails.

Good was finished. Her belly hair could stand a light clipping--its knots were otherwise impossible--but she was beautiful. K.D. started on Ben's coat rehearsing his line of defense to Arnette's family. His ^(Cover) ~~uncles~~ had frowned at the same time. And like a mirror image in gestures if not in looks, Steward spit fresh Blue Boy while Deek lit a fresh cigar. However disgusted ^J they both were, K.D. knew they would not negotiate a solution that would endanger him or the future of Morgan money. His grandfather had named his twins Deacon and Steward for a reason. K.D. was the ^{last} ~~only~~ male Morgan in a line that included a state auditor and two bankers. He was their hope and their ^{And their family} ~~despair.~~ Certainly Morgans had not built two town^s, fought white^{law} ~~folk~~, colored Creek, bandits and bad weather to see ranches and houses and a bank and a bakery and a drugstore end up in Arnold Fleetwood's pocket. Or would the uncles see it another way? Maybe Arnette's baby would be a boy, a Morgan grand nephew. Would her lazy father,

When he described the incident to
his uncles, they

Arnold, have any rights then that the Morgans had to respect?

Fondling Ben's coat, picking burrs from his silky strands of hair, K.D. tried to think like his uncles--which was hard. So he stopped trying and slipped off into his dream of choice. Only this time it included GiGi and her screaming tits.

"Hi." She cracked her gum like a professional. "Is this Ruby? Bus driver said this was it."

"Yep. Yeah. Uh huh. Sure is." The lounging boys spoke as one.

"Any motels around?"

They laughed at that and felt comfortable enough to ask her who she was looking for and from where had she come.

"Frisco," she said. "And rhubarb pie. Got a light?"

The dream, then, would be in Frisco.