



The Sound of Lilacs

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Citation Information

Morrison, Toni. 1931-

The Sound of Lilacs

1 folder

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Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 01:26:17 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/z316q619q>

The Sound of Lilacs

It would be very difficult, if not impossible, for you to tell my age. Except for a little flabbiness under my arms and the fact that my teeth have grown old, you would never know that I am fifty-two. (Even as I write that, fifty-two, I want to cover it with my hand, so carefully do I guard my age.) I am, in fact, a very lovely and remarkably preserved woman. It has been a habit of mine never to squint or frown, so I am even without those spider web lines about the eyes. I could wish for firmer breasts. Still, as I say, you would never know.

My loveliness and deceptive age I remark upon simply because it is ~~important in order for you to~~ important in order for you to understand me and what I did. Now, please, don't assume that I am asking for an early verdict of "not guilty" or even a "recommendation for mercy" in spite of guilt. I am beyond all that now. I have felt shame ooze through these tired veins like swamp water. ~~I have guilt~~ I have felt guilt pressed like a cold key on my bosom. And fear? I awake sometimes in the night and search frantically for my hands which I believe I have lost while I slept.

So. None of your pity. I want only that you should know and understand. My name is Berenice and I have had two wealthy husbands. The first one had a highly disciplined mind but, otherwise, no restraint. He looked at the world about him too carefully one day and began to go mad. His madness was manifest principally in his habit of sticking his head into every available pillow slip--to harness the pictures in his brain, he said. I could have endured his eccentricities, for, at twenty-two, that

is what I believed them to be, but then he began to exude that awful odor that is produced by certain kinds of mental disease. Soon he lost his physical health too, and, not long after he had begun treatment and just after our divorce, he died.

My second marriage was the result of the antipathy I had developed in the first. I became allergic to intellectualism of any kind. Thus, Mr. Berenice Number Two was as healthy, wholesome and uncomplex a specimen as diet and ignorance could produce. He knew the benefits and limitations of every mouthwash, and he glittered with muscletone. His nails--kind little nails they were--were so clean one pitied them. He was as fascinating as a boiled egg. Our divorce--so far was it from the glamour and drama of the first one--did not even interest me.

The subsequent years were the fruitful ones...spotted with delicious affairs, half-affairs and "situations." ...Afternoon partings while still in evening dress. ...The wounded eyes of a bride as she stared into the bathroom--themelancholy glint of seed pearls. The days of the months of the years were packed close like books on library shelves stacks, and they, too, without air. Only the hours were open; and it was the hours, I think, that brought me to three months ago when an O very young, young man asked permission to enter.

At my request a shop had sent one of their shipping-clerk-messenger-boys to pick up some pieces of flawed cbyrystal. And crystal is somehow the best word for everything that followed.

When the boy entered the room and I saw that he was young and good looking, I became "fetching". I tried to be charming, feminine, a little scatter-brained but desirable. Mind you, I do not flirt. There

is no disaster more absurd than an older woman who flirts. What I wanted, you see, was simply to have this bright young man look at me.

We smiled.

The crystal arranged on the table blinked at us. We ran our forefingers over the rims of the glasses and felt the rogueishness of the sound and the gesture. His speech was halting so he built his sentences on laughter. He knew a great deal about his work and his product, but as he spoke I thought I detected an adventuresome carelessness in the corners of his mouth. A mouth of glee. A mouth that could scream with pleasure.

I felt at that moment that something fine and good could be born between us. I, an older woman, could offer him a friendship unlike any other he had known: no requisites, therefore no jealousy, and no burdens. A haven from judging eyes. I could be to this boy someone with whom he needed no pretense, no armor. And as for me--he could give me in return a lovely gift: trust and affection uncomplicated by tiresome sexual forays. Deadly treks into chartered wastelands without adventure, without curiosity.

O dear, no. Forget all that I've just said. I had no such innocent intentions. The truth is he bent over to wrap a piece of crystal in its purple cloth. I looked at his neck and was just barely successful in controlling an urge to plant my mouth there. Nothing in a long time had enchanted me so as did that neck. I could sing unswaned songs about that neck. About the steadiness of its color. The obvious affection with which the hair bent toward the nape. The virgin path from jaw line to shoulder blade.

...I spoke. ...Had he ever modeled?....Venus and Adonis...He had not heard of....

How refreshing to have a young and lovely boy look at me!

I had that night my Dream of Lines. It is a dream quite inoffensive in description, but terrifying to the dreamer. White lines, thick ones, alternate with thin ones. They move. The thick lines swell into rectangular blocks and take on the property of weight. I adjust to the change in dimension. But no sooner than I have grown comfortable with the metamorphosis, the heavy blocks become thin and weightless. Again I need to adjust. I can never catch up. Never anticipate the moment of change. I spend eternities in this pursuit, and wake exhausted, biting little bits of air.

It does not trouble me that you do not understand this dream. I understand it very well, but I do not know what I understand about it. Anyway, it was the reoccurrence of this dream that made me know I would see the boy again as soon as I could arrange it.

Among all of that fragile, glittering crystal, the smiling wine glasses and smug flower bowls, there was no sign of that lovely, loving, unsullied neck. A discreet telephone call? Yes. A discreet telephone call.

He wore a medal around his neck and it amused me to say over and over again: St. Christopher is lying on my eyes...St. Christopher is lying on my eyes...St. Christ....

The days became as pure oil. I say oil because I felt smooth and slick. I laughed oil, smiled oil, my fingers were oily on his neck. We agreed, although privately, to clear our eyes of everything and see no one, not even ourselves. We took hard whiskey and napoleons to watersides. Visited

festering nightclubs that erupted like boils along the street. I bought him clothes; he brought me clover.

O, lest you think that our liaison was an idyllic one, some dull hedonism from the dull '30's, let me assure you that it was nothing of the sort. Except for his great beauty and the inexplicable good taste he displayed in worshipping me, he was an abysmally untutored boy. I recall opening one particular charge account for him and discovering his convulsively plebian signature. His verbs had no intercourse whatever with ~~their~~ subjects. There was, mark you, so much to teach him. His selection of ties was uneventful and merely to look at his socks required limitless patience. Then, too, he had a queer notion about putting on a musical extravaganza which would have as its theme a message about the brotherhood of man--the point of which was something less than profound. But what irritated me most was his Paleolithic devotion (acquiescence, really) to God. It hadn't the charm of superstition or the excitement of fanaticism. He was simply convinced, in some vague, vegetable-like way, that "God cared" and "rightousness would prevail. These ideas, if they can be called such, didn't curtail his behavior with me, but occasionally, at the least expected moments, he would give evidence of that most crippling of ignorances.

Once we happened upon an evangelist--a hawk-eyed, screaming wretch--enthusiastically "doing good" on the outskirts of Metropolitan Park. He was standing on a park bench and, with a good deal of zest, directing those of us who were near toward the Way. He was not at all inarticulate and I can remember, in part, the climax of his sweaty prose.

"Hold fast to the truth," he said, and become One with God. Abhor

the Lie! Repel the Lie! What is your vanity but a lie? (Something like that) What is your pride but a lie? What is your success but a lie? Lie and you hit God below the belt! (Can one seriously entertain debate about a God who wears a belt?) Seek the truth, and it shall make you free! (from him, hopefully). Love truth! Worship it! Truth is not hard to find. It nestles in the blaze of a robin's breast. (I thought that rather good) It lingers on the edge of an infant's cry--elusive and obvious. It has the color of laughter, the sound of lilacs, the shape of a pleasant memory."

Later, driving home, the boy asked me what did I really think of Jesus Christ. It was that kind of thing, you see, that annoyed me. What can anyone think of Jesus Christ? What on earth is there to think?

"Jesus Christ," I answered, "is something commuters say when they miss the 5:35 to Dullsville."

My wit made him mulish. I dismissed the conversation as having no possibilities and dwelt instead upon the probabilities of the night and its more accessible miracles.

Do I sound cold? I promised to be honest. I've never had to "seek truth"--in robin's breasts or elsewhere; I live it. And I'd be dishonest if I led you to believe that our affair was bliss without equal, or that his rather rudimentary excursion into philosophical jungles had any effect on me or him.

I deceive you, of course. The incident had a strange consequence which actually provoked me into this confession which, mind you, is no confession at all. I did what I could for him. There is no equivocation about that. And he, in turn, was good enough to divert me from increasing awarenesses

of my age.

Still, let me say it quickly, I feel--now that it is over--corrupt. Can you imagine it? I think this feeling, which is temporary, stems from the sordid way it all ended.

In a quite foolish burst of bravado he broke his arm. After it was properly splintered and set, he grew impatient of the limitations it imposed on him. Oh, all right. I grew impatient--of the limitations it imposed--on me. The dear boy used his arm prematurely. This necessitated some further treatment part of which involved the taking of a drug. For no sound reason (the doctors in their white idiot world--where the "incurable" is that for which there is no known cure--thought it quite reasonable, of course) his body reacted violently to the drug, and a "syndrome" or some such developed. I haven't a clue to what a syndrome is--probably one of those terms doctors use (like virus) when they discover themselves face to face with their blinding, unconquerable ignorance-- Anyway, my boy my lovely boy grew thin and weary and his lips and the roof of his mouth were covered with sores.

I visited him often and tried to ~~sustain~~ maintain his misery while maintaining perspective. He found speech difficult, so I did a good deal of the talking. At first his mother came. But he would not look at her. She was reduced to lingering in the halls or looking sheepishly and enviously at me from the far corner of the room. (Please note that I made certain he had the best of care!) Then she came no more.

"Please," I chided him, "don't let this destroy you. Illness is only a disposition."

"Am I ugly?" he asked.

"Quite." I answered.

"There is a priest who comes in..."

"Dearest child, " I said, "there is no need to be maudlin. What are you going to do. Repent of me? Just in case? Can you truthfully say you are sorry? That you didn't have a marvellous time? Listen. we've always spoken the truth to each other. Let's not sink into melodrama now. I realize how uncomfortable you must be, but this isn't the end. Young and beautiful boys don't die. And if they do, they do it fetchingly."

I was about to tell him that he must confirm all that we had done and said by facing his illness with some sophistication, but once again , my young and erstwhile beautiful boy looked at me. Then he closed his eyes, squeezed them, rather. I asked him what the matter was.

"If you don't talk, maybe I can hear it." His words were quiet and heavy, like clumps of sod. He could barely form them.

"Hear what?"

"The sound. The sound of lilacs."

His speech, hampered by the sores, was guttural. Probably like the beginnings of language. The first unheard and unheard of cry of that helpless Piltdown in Eden.

"Opiate drivel," I said. "You'll feel better after the bedpan."

He died before I could get back the next afternoon.

Now, I did not kill him or contribute in any way to his wretched syndrome. That is all I wanted to tell you. Other than an inability to bathe often enough, and that exasperating morning search for my hands among the bedclothes, my life goes on as it did before. I am, perhaps, a bit more eccentric--but just a tiny bit more. For example, this morning I came upon a surly flower vendor (they are always surly) and

bought a bunch of lilacs. Quite without thinking I put them to my ear. Imagine my relief to discover that lilacs have no sound.

Chloe Morrison