



Chapter 7

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Citation Information

Morrison, Toni. 1931-

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1 folder (partial)

Contact Information

Download Information

Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 01:11:32 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/vh53x131r>

August 15, 2002
November 13, 2002
December 2, 2002

Chap. 7

"I don't know what to say to the boy."

"Well, think of something. Fast. Or I will."

"What? What can you tell him?"

"The purpose of a zipper. The responsibility of a father. The mortality rate of AIDS."

"AIDS?"

"Who knows where she's been or with who? Who is she, anyway? Got no people, nobody ever heard of her. Dresses like a street woman. Acts like a, a..."

"She wouldn't be working for them if she wasn't all right. Had references or some such."

"Are you kidding or just crazy?"

"Vida."

"Christine has a reputation make Jezebel cringe, and Heed's a Johnson remember."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means morals of any kind whatsoever are not known in that family. What would Heed, who got married at the ripe old age of eleven, know about morals, restraint..."

"She never ran around on Cosey and you know she never condoned Christine's past. You can't blame her for what her daddy did."

"No, but I can take note of what her daddy is. Did she or didn't she try to burn her own house down?"

"I never did believe that."

"Well the seed don't fall far from the pod. If they take in that kind of girl to work for them, what else might be going on over there? How can you trust either one of them? Just because Heed let Romen clean her yard doesn't mean she's changed."

"Changed from what?"

"From a deceitful bitch who has to control people."

"I thought this was about Romen's behavior."

"It is. Behavior influenced by an ex-hooker and a witch. Listen Sandler, I am not about to be a great grandmother or an unpaid nurse or a deep pocketbook for some trashy teen mama just because you don't know what to say to a fourteen year old boy. Besides, we're responsible for Romen. Our own daughter expects us to be. Counts on us to be."

Sandler grunted and let his wife's argument, point by point, roll on. He did know what to say to Romen, but he knew it wouldn't matter. It would just make the relationship hotter, more enticing. He wouldn't be telling him to choose one girl over another, but to give up the only one he had complete physical access to. Like telling a duck not to waddle. He would have to think up something else. Condoms at the least, but Vida expected more—an end to the relationship. Add to that the fact that he thought Romen was handling things pretty well, considering. He wasn't doping, ganged up, courting arrest and his house manners had definitely improved. But Vida was right. The neighborhood had changed and so had the times. They didn't know the girl, had no recent knowledge of the Cosey women. Just gossip, speculation and memory from local people who didn't know anymore than they did. Once upon a time, everybody knew

everything. Once upon a time, a man could speak to another about his son or daughter; or a group of women would swoop down on a fast girl.

Except the Johnsons. Nobody swooped down on them. They were not typical, especially in Up Beach where people lived on top of one another and every vip and vop was monitored.

Oh, Christ, he thought, that was fifty years ago. What was the point in remembering the good old days as though the past was pure. He knew for a fact it was simply hidden. Vida, in her tale of wickedness, had not said a word about Bill Cosey. She acted as though Heed had chased and courted a fifty-two year old man older than her father. That she had chosen to marry him rather than having been told to. Vida, like most people, probably hated the idea that she stayed married to him, liked it, and took over his business. In their minds she was born a liar, a gold digger unable to wait for her twelfth birthday for pay dirt. They forgave Cosey. Everything. Even to the point of blaming a child for a grown man's interest in her. What was she supposed to do? Run away? Where? Was there some place Cosey or Wilbur Johnson couldn't reach?

He had seen Heed more recently than anyone the day he knocked on

the door and asked her if she could take Romen on as after school help. She was civil. Neat as a pin, as always. Offered him iced tea, probably to let him see Christine's status in the house. Sandler had always found her less of a pain than others had. Because of his friendship with her husband, he guessed. Her edges softened by his recollection of Bill Cosey telling him that he had not touched her until her period came; waited a year and only then took her on a honeymoon for the initiation. Still she was not easy to be around. He couldn't say whether she was good looking or not because "false", "touchy" were the words that came to his mind about her. False the way anybody would be who had jumped from a log to a castle overnight. Touchy the way anybody would be who had envy plus May on her back. But what Sandler saw was nothing like what Bill Cosey saw. For him it was as though twenty-five years hadn't happened. The Heed that Cosey reminisced about in his cups on the boat—as though she were dead—was not a frowning woman always on the look-out for a slight, a chance to find fault, but a long legged angel with candle eyes and a smile he couldn't help but join.

Uneasy with other men's sexual confidences (he certainly wasn't

providing any of his own) Sandler always made it his business to change the subject. But he remembered Cosey's dream-bit expression as he rambled on about his first sight of Heed: hips narrow, chest smooth as a plank, skin soft and damp, like a lip. Cosey never explained the attraction any other way, except to say he couldn't wait to watch her grow. That the steady, up close observation most men never have and don't know the pleasure of kept him lively. Although by then he was fully involved with grown women, the memory of his child bride still stirred him. Vida had nothing to say about that, and Sandler didn't want the misery of bringing it up, of tilting his wife's idol with a crack of insight.

Oh, well. This is what I'm for, he thought. The day Romen came to stay he knew he had to protect him. From bad cops, street slaughter, dope death, prison shivs and friendly fire in whitefolks wars. He never would have believed a female would be his first danger.

So he planned a reason to be alone with his grandson. To his surprise the boy was as eager as he was. Did he want to talk too?

Fifteen aluminum-foiled platters were stack on newspaper in the back seat. A name taped to each one. The list of shut-ins Vida had clipped to

the visor included addresses as though he might forget that Alice Brent was rooming now; that Mr. Royce had moved in with his daughter who worked nights. Or that Miss Coleman, still on crutches, was staying with her blind brother on Bay Street. The shut-ins had three choices: fish, chicken or barbecue, and the conflagration of food smells changed his car from a machine to a kitchen where talk could be easy.

Romen turned the radio on soon as he slid in, fiddling the buttons until he found what he liked: the music Vida made him wear headphones to hear. That way only the throb and Romen's listening face disturbed her—not the words. Sandler liked the music but agreed with his wife that unlike the outrageous language of their own generation ("I want some seafood, mama. Chicken and rice are very nice but gimme seafood, mama."), the language of Romen's music had the subtlety of an oil spill. "Polluting and disfiguring the natural mind." said Vida. Sandler reached over and turned the knob to "off." He expected a whine from Romen, but none came. They rode in silence until he arrived at tk house. Sandler had to pull the hands of three children away from his trousers to get to the front door. Alice Brent insisted on inviting him in, relinquishing when he told her she was first but

he had fourteen deliveries left. Flattered, she let him go. He heard Romen click the radio back off, too late for Sandler not to notice. At least he respects my preference, he thought. Pulling away from the curb he tried to think of some small talk. Something they could share before the interrogation or the lecture began. They had no son. Dolly, a lovely obedient child, corrected whatever rebellion she developed first into an early marriage, then into the armed forces. But it couldn't be that hard. Sandler's own father and grandfather had not trouble telling him what to do. Short biting commands: "never carry a lazy man's load," when he hauled too much to save himself frequent trips. "If she don't respect herself she won't respect you" or "Don't hang your pants where you can't hang your hat," when he claimed a quick conquest. No long sermons and no talking back. None of that worked with Romen. Sulk was the result of Sandler's efforts along those lines. Nineties children didn't want to hear "sayings" or be managed by lessons too dusty to be read let alone understood. They got better advice from their sharp-edged music. Straight no chaser. Black no sugar. Direct as bullet.

"She pregnant?"

Romen was startled but not angry or evasive. "No! Why you ask me that?"

Good, thought Sandler. Direct like his father but minus the threat.

"You spend an awful lot of time with her. Doing what?"

"Just stuff."

"What stuff?"

"Ride around, you know," said Romen. "Went out to that old hotel last Saturday. Just looking around." For a floor, a pallet, anything would do as long as it was in a strange place. His palms were wet with excitement because she insisted he drive. Not just because he didn't know how, but also because she liked to nuzzle and distract him while he struggled to control the wheel for the thrill of almost hitting a tree or skidding into a ditch while fingering each other.

"You got in, there?" asked Sandler

"Yeah, it was open." The padlocked doors, the windows tight as iron so angered Romen he rammed his fist into a pane, matching the determination of Junior's hand in his jeans. They had thought the place would be scarey: cobwebs and garbage-y corners. Instead the kitchen,

glowing in noon light, welcomed them to its table as well as underneath.

Other rooms were dim, but no less promising. Junior counts each one as they explore themselves in every one, all the way from the lobby floor to the top.

"I don't believe anybody's been in there for years. Must be rat heaven."

"Sorta." No rats. Birds. Flying and tittering in the rafters. The whole place smelled like wine.

"I take it they didn't get in your way?"

"No. I mean. We were just looking, fooling around, you know?"

"Who you think you talking to?"

"No, like, I mean..."

"Romen, we men or not?"

Romen looked at his high tops. Black canvas with a cool white circle.

"Okay, then. Get off it. Straight, now."

"Okay. Well. She likes, she likes to..." Romen rubbed his knees.

"And you don't?"

"Aw, you know how it is."

"What happened?"

"Nothing. I mean, yeah. We made out and, like, explored everywhere. No big deal." Except for the attic. Getting up there required hoisting himself on a chair to get to the chain to pull down the folded stairs to climb in there without light. "We need matches," he told her, or a flashlight." "No we don't," she whispered. "I like it dark." A rustle of wings and twitter as they entered. "Bats?" he wondered, but the wings that flew past, shooting through the hall light filtering into the attic were yellow and he was about to say "look, canaries when she pulled him to her. It was hide and seek then. Losing then finding one another in a pitch black room; stumbling, bumping heads, tripping, falling grabbing a foot , a neck, then the whole person, they dared darkness with loud laughter and moans of pleasure and pain. Floor boards creaked then split beneath them, raking their nakedness and sharpening their play, lending it a seriousness he could not have imagined.

"No big deal?"

"Well, it did get, you know. Rough, I guess you'd say. Know what I mean?" He pushed, no, slammed her against the wall—after she squeezed

his privates—and she had laughed instead of crying out or screaming when he bit her cheek—hard. It shifted then. From black to red. It was as though outside, looking on he could see himself clearly in the dark—his bruised sweaty skin, his glittering teeth and half-closed eyes.

“What did you do, Romen. Out with it.”

“Not me. Her.”

“Say it, boy. ”

‘She plays hard, that’s all. I mean she likes being hurt.’

Sandler braked at an intersection. It was a moment before he realized he had stopped at a green light. Romen was looking through the passenger window. Waiting. For some response, some grown man comment worthy of his trust, his confidence. An answer to the question coiled in his confession. A chuckle from his grandfather would mean one thing. Reproach would mean another thing. Was there anything else?

“What do you think about that?” Sandler pretended to be searching for an address.

“Weird. Whack.” She did like it. Even preferred it. But the rush was in him as well. Standing outside himself—smiling, impressed—watching

himself inflict and suffer pain above scream level where a kind of joy lay, the Romen who could not bear mittens laced to a bed post, purple polish on bitten nails, the wine and vegetable smell of pulling bodies—that Romen disappeared. Never to be seen again, he was certain. Not in full, anyway. Just a faded version who, afterwards, felt annoyance instead of shame. Driving away from the hotel he complained ("Hey, girl. Stop it. You going to make me have a wreck.") about her leg banging his, the tip of her tongue on his neck, nipples pushed into his ear. Then there was the other thing. For the first time Junior had taken off her boots and her socks. When they undressed back in the kitchen, as usual she kept her socks on. In the attic she removed them, tying one tightly around his neck. He was half way down the attic ladder when he looked up. Junior, sitting in the opening, had one on, one off. He couldn't be sure—light in the hall was scarce—but he thought he saw her slip a hoof into the sock.

"Whack, huh. Well, I never believed much in free will. It ain't nothing if there is nothing you can control." Sandler parked in front of a pale blue house. The grass in front was patchy, starved for rain. "But of the few things you do have some say over, who you choose to hang out with is one.

Looks like you hooked yourself up with somebody who bothers you, makes you feel uneasy. That feeling is information, ^{Romen,} information you can count on. You can't always pay attention to what other people say, but you should pay attention to that. Don't worry about whether backing off means you a wimp. It can save your life. You not helpless, Romen. Sometimes it takes more guts to quit than to keep on. Some friends you know better than to bring home. There's a good reason for that, you understand?"

"Huh? Oh. Yes, sir. I hear you."

"A good man is a good thing, but there is nothing in the world better than a good good woman. She can be your mother, your wife, your girlfriend, your sister or somebody you work next to. Don't matter. You find one, stay there."

The platters were cold but still savory and Sandler's mood was cheerful as they completed the deliveries. Romen was eager to help, jumping out first at each stop, lifting trays like a waiter as he trotted to the

doors. Vida would be pleased. Relax, he'd tell her. Relax.

^{at his grandson who} Romen did not turn on the radio. ^{just} He laid his head on the neck rest, and ^{He glanced} ~~closed his eyes~~ ^{went to sleep} and swallowed the saliva gathering in his mouth in

anticipation of Junior's. (insert)