



"The hiking boots..."

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Citation Information

Morrison, Toni. 1931-

"The hiking boots..."

1 folder (partial)

Contact Information

Download Information

Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 01:11:53 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/9k41zk09z>

The hiking boots, purchased with Anna Krieg's instruction, are what she needs. The road to the Hotel is treacherous for an hysterical pedestrian on a chilly night in tennis shoes and no socks. The tough-minded Anna Krieg would have been prepared: ruck sack, water, flashlight, brot, dried fish, nuts. Christine had learned how to cook from her while both, wives of American soldiers, were stationed in Germany. Barely twenty, devoted to the PX, Anna was adept with fresh vegetables, varieties of potatoes, sea food but especially voluptuous desserts. [tk recipes] Cooking lessons and beer made the evenings cheery and postponed the collapse of Christine's marriage into a desolation exactly like the quarters they lived in. In return for the friendship, Christine agreed one day to hike with Anna. She bought

the good boots and rucksack Anna recommended and early one morning they set out. Halfway to the halfway point, Christine stopped and begged to cancel, to hitch back to the base. Her feet were on fire; her lungs hyphenating. Anna's face registered extreme disappointment but understanding too. "Poor, soft American, no stamina, no will." They turned back in silence.

When Christine opened the door she found Ernie locked in the arms of the staff sergeant's wife. She wanted to kick him but her feet hurt so she settled for six bottles of Spaten hurled in rapid succession at his head.

For the benefit and morale of the other wives in this newly desegregated army, she felt obliged to go through the motions of jealous rage, but she was more dumbfounded than angry. Puzzled as to who Ernie Holder thought he was, other than a ragged-y PFC who had offered devotion, a uniform and escape to another country in exchange for her own gorgeous well-bred self. She left him the next day, taking ruck sack, cooking skills and hiking boots with her. From Idlewild, she called her mother. May seemed relieved to hear her voice but ambivalent about her return to Silk. Her jumbled chatter held no curiosity about Christine's

situation but was spiked instead with references to the "swamp wife" and a burned "freedom" bus. Clearly she was being warned away.

Since the atmosphere May described seemed so dank and small-town-y, Christine lingered. After two nights not quite on the street (a bus station didn't count), after being turned away from the YWCA, Christine moved into a Philis Wheatley House. On looks alone she got a job in a restaurant waitressing until they discovered she could cook. It was a friendly, neighborhood place where she laughed at the ways customers found to hustle free food, and where she spent years avoiding and lying to May while searching for a husband. She had found three, none her own, when she met Fruit. "Don't hide the meat. I like to see what I eat." Christine withheld the red gravy and wondered at his clarity—which she discovered later was his habit and his gift. When she listened to him everything was suddenly so clear she spent nine years in his company. He was a fine-boned man, intense, with large beautiful hands and a mesmerizing voice. He clarified the world for her. Her grandfather (a bourgeois traitor); her mother (a handkerchief head); Heed (a field hand wannabee); Ernie (a sell out). And he outlined her own obligations. With

apology for her light skin, gray eyes and hair threatening a lethal silkiness, Christine became a dedicated helpmate, coherent and happy to serve. She changed her clothing to "motherland", sharpened her language to activate slogans, carried a knife for defense, hid her inauthentic hair in exquisite gele's; hung cowrie shells from her ear lobes and never crossed her legs at the knees.

Her fears that she might disappoint such a man, fierce, uncorruptible, demanding, or that he might be forced to treat her like dirt were never realized because Fruit liked dirt. His view of soil, earth, crops was a romance he shared with her. A farm, he said, if we had one, it could be a base for us. Christine agreed, but events were so swift and money, (collected, wheedled, extorted) was needed for other emergencies.

All over the country there were sleeping neighborhoods that needed arousing, inattentive young people needing focus. The hiking boots were broken in at marches; her ruck sack simulated comfort at sit-ins. Pumped by seething exhilaration and purpose Christine's personal vanity became racial legitimacy and her flair for acting-out became courage. She hardly remembered the quarrels now: informants galore, tainted money, random

acts vs. long range plans, underground vs. dance with the media. Theirs
 - (Eleven black), six white -
 was in independent group of seventeen that joined with other groups only
 when they judged the activity strong enough. What she relished was the
 work; who she loved was Fruit. There, with him she was not in the way; she
 was in. Not the disrupting wife, the surplus mistress, the unwanted nuisance
 daughter, the ignored granddaughter, the disposable friend. She was
 valuable. There was no reason why it could not last.

The beginning of the end, when it came, was unrecognizable as such.
 A small quite insignificant toilet flush. After a routine abortion, the last of
 seven, she rose, tapped the lever and turned to watch the swirl. There in a
 blur of congealed red, she thought she saw a profile. For less than a second
 that completely impossible image surfaced. Christine bathed and went
 back to bed. She had always been unsentimental about abortions,
 considering them as one less link in the holding chain, and she did not want
 to be a mother—ever. So this seventh intervention did not trouble her in the
 least. Although she realized she had conjured up the unborn eye that had
 disappeared in a ~~beet~~ ^{cloud of Strawberry} red cloud, still, on occasion, she wondered who it
 was who looked up at her with such quiet interest. At the oddest

moments—cloistered in a hospital waiting room with a shot boy's weeping mother, dispensing bottled water and raisins to exhausted students—that non-committal eye seemed to be there, at home in the chaos of cops and tears. Had she paid close attention, perhaps she could have stalled, even prevented, the real end, ^{but} Her grandfather died. Fruit encouraged her to attend the funeral (Family is family, he said, smiling, even if they are political morons.) Christine hesitated. She would have to be in Heed's murderous company; her mother and she would continue to argue politics as they did on intermittent phone calls screaming accusations: Why can't you all just quiet down? Three hundred years of quiet not enough for you? Whites are killing us all, so what good is it? SLAM.

He was dead. The dirty one who introduced her to nasty and blamed it on her.

He was dead. The powerful one who abandoned his own kin and transferred love and rule to her playmate.

He was dead. Well, good. She would go and view the wreck he left behind.

Nothing is watching now. It is long gone, that non-judgmental eye,

along with the rucksack and the hiking boots which she desperately needs now if she is going to stop the snake and her minion from destroying the balance of her life. The two of them, Heed and Junior, were nowhere in the house. The garage is empty, the driveway clear. Nothing could make Heed leave her room but devilment—and at night? There is only one place she could be interested in—the Hotel—and there is no time to waste even if she has to run all the way.

No one could have guessed, but Fruit was eight years younger than she was so of course he pleased himself with other women. That was the beauty, the honesty of their relationship. She of all people, queen of seduced husbands, understood, having grown up in a Hotel where the tippy toe of bare feet, the rustle behind the equipment shed, the eye-blaze of one female guest aimed at another had been everyday stuff. Hadn't she heard her grandfather tell his wife in front of everybody, "Don't trouble your tail. I don't want it and I sure don't need it," and leave that wife dancing alone at the birthday party while he raced off to meet whoever it was he did need? Notwithstanding Ernie Holder and the Spaten soaring toward his head, loving men meant sharing them. Get used to it and do it with grace, right?

Other women's beds were not a problem. Anyway, with all the work to be done, who had time to monitor every stray coupling? She was the designated woman, the one everybody acknowledged as such. Their names spoken in a planning meeting sounded like a candy bar: Fruit n Chris. Chris n Fruit.

The candy bar didn't crumble until somebody raped one of the student volunteers. A Comrade had done it. The girl, too ashamed to be angry, begged Christine not to tell her father, a university dean.

"Please, please don't."

"What about your mother?"

"Oh no! She'll tell him!"

Christine bristled. Like a Doberman puppy in training, the girl had gone into protection mode. ~~Big Daddy Good Father~~ ^{Good Daddy Big MAN} mustn't know.

Christine ignored her, told everyone and was satisfied especially by Fruit's response. They all took care of the girl, cursed and fumed at what the Comrade had done; promised to speak to, punish, expel him. But didn't. The next time he showed up, it was "Hey man, how's it going?" When Christine cornered Fruit he reported what the Comrade had said: it wasn't

his fault the girl was all over him bra- less sitting sloppy he'd even patted her behind to alert her to his interest she giggled instead of breaking his jaw and asked him if he wanted a beer. Fruit shook his head, mourning human stupidity and retrograde politics. Yet mourn was all he did. Regardless of her urging, "speaking to"—not to mention "punish" or "expel"—he never got around to. Yes, Fruit thought the Comrade a menace, but he could not tell him so. Yes, he believed the Comrade jeopardized their principled cause, but he could not confront him. The girl's violation carried no weight against the sturdier violation of male friendship. Fruit could upbraid, expel, beat up a traitor, a coward or any jive turkey over the slightest offense. But not this one—this assault against a girl of seventeen was not ~~written~~ ^{even a foot note} on his list of Unacceptable Behavior. It would have helped if the other girls' moans of sympathy for the raped one had not been laced with disturbing questions: what did she do? ~~Why~~ didn't she...?

Eventually Christine shut up about it and the good work of civil disobedience and personal obedience went on interrupted only now and then by the profile, turning, offering its uncritical eye. When she got back from her Grandfather's funeral, she opened her ruck sack and shook out

the paper bag of engagement rings. Solitaires of all sizes. Enough to get ~~sixteen~~ ^{twelve} women to sign the guest book at Hotel Love. The question apparently was how comfortable the suite. In 1973 Tremaine Avenue, with its high level of comfort, was mighty attractive. Especially since everybody, militants and moderates, wanted to be in and stay out at the same time, the good work of disobedience was merging with disguised acquiescence. The issues changed, spread, moved from streets and doorways to offices and Conferences in elegant hotels. Nobody needed a street worker-baby sitter-cook-mimeographing-marching nut-and-raisin-carrying woman who was too old anyway for the hip new students with complex strategies; a woman not educated enough for the college crowd; not shallow enough for television. The disinterested eye, carefully studied by the Supreme Court, had closed. She was irrelevant. Fruit sensed her despair and they parted as friends.

He was, she thinks, the last true friend she had. He would have mourned again if he knew what she settled for: kept woman to a mimeographed copy of her bourgeois grandfather. And rightly, for after Dr. Rio threw her out there was no place like and no place but home. Hers.

To hang on to and keep an insane bitch from evicting her.

Christine was in a car the last time she traveled this road. Up front too, because her wide skirts, a powder blue heap of chiffon, needed room. She wore a movie star's gown, strapless with rhinestones sprinkling the top. Her mother sat in the back seat; her grandfather was driving the 1939 tk, which irritated him because it was already 1947 and post war cars are still unavailable to most civilians. That is what he is saying, explaining his strange mood at a time of giddy celebration: Christine's delayed sixteenth birthday and graduation party. She thought the real reason he was agitated was the same reason May and Christine were jubilant. At the family-only dinner preceding the Hotel party they have managed to eliminate Heed and had the pleasure of watching her disciplined by her husband. At last, just the three of them. No ignorant, clinging wife-let to sully this magnificent homecoming display.

Christine, led from the car on her grandfather's arm, made a glamorous entrance; an Oh, so pretty girl in perfectly beautiful gown proof and consequence of racial up lift and proper dreams. The band plays [n.b. v. tense] "Happy Birthday" over the crowd's applause then segues into

"Harbor Lights." May beams. Christine glows. The Hotel is packed with uniformed veterans, vacationing couples and Cosey's friends. The musicians switch to "How High the Moon" since the future is not just bright, it is there, visible in paychecks, tangible in G.I. Bill applications, audible in the scat vocalist's range. Just look through the wide doors beyond the open air dance floor and see the way the stars go. Hear the waves roll; inhale the ocean's cologne, how sweet and male it is.

Then a flutter, a murmur of disbelief. Turning heads. Heed is in the center of the room dancing with a man in a green zoot suit. He lifts her over his head, brings her down between his legs, casts her aside, splits and rises on angled legs in time to meet her hips shimmying toward his clenched pelvis. The band blasts. The crowd parts. Bill Cosey places his napkin on the table and stands. The guests look sideways at his approach. Zoot suit halts mid-step, his pocket chain swung low. Heed's dress looks like a red slip; the shoulder strap falls to her elbow. Bill Cosey doesn't hiss or shout, and he does not command or take her away. In fact he does not touch her. The musicians, alert to every nuance of crowd drama, grow silent, so everybody hears Bill Cosey's dismissal and his remedy.

The crash of the sea is sounding in Christine's ears. She is not close enough to the shore to hear it so this must be heightened blood pressure. Next will come the dizziness and zig zags of light before her eyes. She should rest a moment, but Heed is not resting. Heed is doing something secret with an able bodied spider to help her.

She should have known. She did know. The minute Junior sat down at the kitchen table lacing her lies with Yes mams, oozing street flavor like a yell, she knew: this girl will do anything. Yet that was precisely what was so appealing. The bold eyes, the mischievous smile. Her willingness to do any errand, tackle any difficulty was a blessing for Christine. But more than that, Junior listened. To complaints, jokes, justifications, advice, reminiscences. Never accusing, judging—simply interested. In that silent house talking to anybody was like music. Who cared if she sneaked around with Vida's grandson from time to time? Good for him. Fun for her. A happily sexed girl would be more likely to stay on. What Christine had forgotten was the run away's creed: Hang in, hang out, hang loose. Meaning friendship, yes. Loyalty, no.

The Hotel is darker than the night. No lights, but the car is parked in

the driveway. No voices either. The ocean is whispering underneath the blood roaring in her ears. Maybe this is a lure. Maybe she will open the door and they will kill her, as they would not Anna Kreig who would have had the sense not to bolt out of a house in tennis shoes and no Swiss Army knife.

Christine gazes into the darkness huddling the porch steps where a sunlit child is rigid with fear and the grief of abandonment. Yet her hand raised in farewell is limp. Only the bow in her hair is more languid than that hand. Beyond her gaze is another child, staring through the window of an automobile, idling, purring like a cat. The driver is the grandfather of one, the husband of the other. The passenger's face is a blend of wild eyes, grin and confusion. The limp hand waves while the other ones' fingers press the car window. Will it break? Will her fingers crack the glass, cutting the skin and spill blood down the side of the door? They might because she is pressing so hard. Her eyes are large but she is grinning too. Does she want to go? Is she afraid to go? Neither one understands. Why can't she go too? Why is he taking one to a honeymoon and leaving the other? They will come back, won't they? But when? She looks so alone in that big car,

but she is smiling—or trying to. There ought to be blood. There must be blood somewhere because the sunlit child on the porch is holding herself stiff against the possibility. Only her farewell hand is soft, limp. Like the bow in her hair.

A thorn of pain scratches Christine's shoulder as she climbs the steps. She reaches through the dark for the door knob. She can't find it. The door is open.

"You sure you want to do this? We can go back." Junior leaves the motor running. Her exquisite nose ring flickers in the dropping sun. "Or tell me what to look for and you stay here."

Heed is not listening. Neither is she looking through a car window at a ruined hotel in twilight. She is twenty-eight years old standing at its second floor window facing the lawn and beyond that sand and sea. Beneath her women and children look like butterflies flitting in and out of the tents. The men wear white shirts, black suits. The preacher is in a rocking chair; he keeps his straw hat on. More and more she rents to

churches, groups. Former guests, older now, don't return to Cosey's Resort often. Their children are pre-occupied with boycotts, legislation, voting rights. A mother sits apart, a white handkerchief over her nursing breast. One hand holds the baby, the other slowly fanning in case a fly soars near. She could have had children too, Heed is thinking. Would have had them if she had known in 1942 what one slip into another man's arms taught her in 1958: that she wasn't barren at all. The man—he came to collect his brother's body, accompany it on the train back home. Heed, remembering the pain of losing a brother, two brothers, to water, tells him his room, as long as he likes, will be free. And if there is anything else she can do....He sat on the bed and wept. She touched his shoulder. [mtk]

Undying love is what they promised each other. He will return in six weeks and they will go away together. For six weeks Papa's fishing "parties" were a relief, his night murmurs pathetic. She planned so carefully even L didn't catch on: new clothes packed away in two suitcases; the till modestly but regularly raided.

He never showed.

→ Her badly smashed heart was quickly mended when she learned, after

fifteen years of questions and pity, that she was pregnant. Gleaming in anticipation, she felt kind, generous. Unique but not isolated; important without having to prove it. When a single instance of spotting was followed by heavy clotting, she was not alarmed because her breasts continued to swell and her appetite remained ravenous. Dr. Ralph reassured her everything was fine. Her weight gain was as sharp as May's looks, and steady, like Papa's smiles. She had no menses for eleven months and would have had none for eleven more if L had not sat her down, slapped her—hard—then peered into her eyes saying, "Wake up, girl. Your oven's cold." After months of darkness thickened by public snigger and her husband's recoil, she did wake up and rode into daylight on a broomstick.

SKINNY AS WITCH

^

The mother finishes nursing and rocks the baby on her shoulder. Back and forth. Back and forth. The church folk, drained of color by a rising moon, leave the lawn in small groups. Overfed. Calling out happy goodbyes.

Her baby was a son, she was sure, and had he been born she wouldn't need to sneak off, driven by an untethered teenager to a collapsing hotel in order to secure her place. [mtk]