



"I see you..."

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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 01:08:17 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/hd76s4655>

I see you. You and your invisible friend, inseparable on the beach. You both are sitting on a red blanket eating ice cream, say, with a silver coffee spoon, say, when a real girl appears sloshing the wavelets. I can see you, too, walking the shore in a man's undershirt instead of a dress, listening to the friend nobody sees but you. Intent on words only you can hear when a real voice says Hi, want some? Unnecessary now, the secret friends disappear in favor of flesh and bone.

It's like that when children fall in love with each other. On the spot, without introduction. Grown ups don't pay it much attention because they can't imagine anything more majestic to a child than their own selves and

so confuse dependence with reverence. Parents can be lax or strict, timid or confident, it doesn't matter. Whether they are handing out goodies and, scared by tears, say yes to any whim, or whether they spend their days making sure the child is correct and corrected—whatever kind they are, their place is secondary to a child's first chosen love. If such children find each other before they know their own sex, or which one of them is starving, which well fed; before they know color from no color, kin from stranger, then they have found a mix of surrender and mutiny they can never live without. Heed and Christine found such a one.

Most people have never felt a passion that strong, that early. If so, they remember it with a smile, dismiss it as a crush that shriveled in and on time. It's hard to think of it any other way when real life shows up with its list of other people, its swarm of other thoughts. If your name is the subject of Corinthians 1:13 it's natural to make it your business. You never know who or when it will hit or if it can stay the road. One thing is true—it bears watching, if you can stand to look at it. Heed and Christine were the kind of children who can't take back love, or park it. When that's the case, separation cuts to the bone. And if the break up is plundered too, squeezed

customers running in and out of my house was too bothersome so I gave in to Maceo's pleading. He had a certain reputation for fried fish (sooty black and crisp on the outside; flaky tender inside) but his side orders let you down every time. What I do with okra, with sweet potatoes, hopping john and almost anything you could name would put this generation of take-out brides to shame if they had any—which they don't. Every house had a serious cook in it once; somebody who toasted bread under an oven flame not in an aluminum box; somebody who beat air into batter with a spoon instead of a machine. *who knew the secret of cinnamon bread.* Now, well, it's all over. People wait for Christmas or Thanksgiving to give their kitchens proper respect. Otherwise they'd come to Maceo's Café Ria and pray I hadn't dropped dead at the stove. I used to walk all the way to work until my feet swole up and I had to quit. A few weeks into daytime tv and my bad health Maceo knocked on the door and said he couldn't take the empty tables any longer. Said he was willing to drive back and forth between Up Beach and Silk every day if I would save him one more time. I told him it wasn't only the walk; it was standing as well. But he had a plan for that, too. He got me a high chair with wheels, so I could scoot from stove to sink to cutting table. My feet healed but I got

so used to wheel transportation I couldn't give it up.

Anybody who remembers what my real name is dead or gone and nobody inquires now. Even children, who have a world of time to waste, treat me like I'm dead and don't ask about me anymore. Some thought it was Louise or Lucille because they used to see me take the usher's pencil and sign my tithe envelopes with L. Others, from hearing people mention or call me, said it was El for Ellen or Elvira. They're all wrong. Anyway, they gave up. Like they gave up calling Maceo's Maceo's or supplying the missing letters. Café Ria is what it's known as and I glide there still.

Girls in love like the place a lot. Over iced tea with a clove in it, they join their friends to repeat what he said, describe what he did and guess what he meant by any of it. Like

He didn't call me for three days and when I called him he wanted to get together right then. See, there? He wouldn't do that if he didn't want to be with you. Oh, please. When I got there we had a long talk and for the first time he really listened to me. Sure he did. Why not? All he had to do was wait 'til you shut up then he could work his own tongue. I thought he was seeing what's her name? No, they split. He asked me to move in.

Sign the paper first, honey. I don't want anybody but him. It's like that,
Huh? Well, no joint accounts, hear? You want porgies or not?

Foolish. But they spice the lunch hour and lift the spirits of broken-hearted men eavesdropping at nearby tables.

We never had waitresses at the diner. The food is displayed in steam trays, and after your plate is heaped you take it to the cash register for cost analysis done by Maceo, his wife or one of his no-count sons. Then you can eat here or take it on home.

The girl with no underwear—she calls herself Junior—comes in a lot. The first time I saw her she looked to me like somebody in a motor cycle gang. Boots. Leather. Wild hair. Maceo couldn't take his eyes off her either—had to lid her coffee twice. The second time was on a Sunday just before church let out. She walked the length of the steam table checking the trays with the kind of eyes you see on those "Save this Child" commercials. I was resting by the sink and blowing on a cup of pot liquor before dipping my bread in. I could see her pacing like a panther or some such. The big hair was gone. It was done up in a million long plaits with something shiny at the tip of each one. Her fingernails were painted

blue and her lipstick was dark as blackberries. She still wore that leather jacket, and her skirt was long this time, but you could see straight through it—a flowery nothing swinging above her boots. All her private parts going public along side red dahlias and baby breath.

One of Maceo's trifling boys leaned up against the wall while Miss Junior made up her mind. He never opened his lips to say good afternoon may I help you? anything in particular? or any of the welcoming things you're supposed to greet customers with. I just cooled my liquid and watched to see which one would behave normal first.

She did.

Her order must have been for her self and a friend because Christine came back home a champion cook and Heed won't eat. Anyway, the girl chose three sides, two meats, one rice pudding and one chocolate cake. Maceo's boy, Theo they call him, smirking more than usual, moved from the wall to load up the styrofoam plates. He let the stewed tomatoes slide over the compartments to discolor the potato salad, and forked the barbecue on top of the gravied chicken. I got so heated watching Theo disrespect food I dropped the bread into my cup where it fell apart like grits.

She never took her eyes off the trays. Never met Theo's hateful stare until he gave her change at the register. Then she looked right at him and said, "I see why you need a posse. Your dick don't work one on one?"

Theo shouted a nasty word to her back but it fell flat with no audience but me. Long after the door slammed, he kept on repeating it. Typical. Young people can't waste words because they don't have too many.

When Maceo walked in, ready to take over before the after-church lines started forming, Theo was dribbling air balls in his dream court behind the register. As if he'd just been signed by Orlando and the Wheatie people too. Not a bad way to work off shame. Quick, anyway. Takes some people a lifetime.

This Junior girl—something about her puts me in mind of a local woman I know. Name of Celestial. When she was young, that is, though I doubt if Junior or any of these modern tramps could match her style. Mr. Cosey knew her too, although if you asked him he'd deny it. Not to me, though. Mr. Cosey never lied to me. No point in it. I knew his first wife almost as long as he did. I knew he adored her and I knew what she thought of him after she found out where his money came from. Contrary

to the tale he put in the street, the father he bragged about had earned his way as a Court informer. The one police could count on to know where a certain colored boy was hiding, who sold liquor, who had an eye on what property, what was said at church meetings, who was agitating to vote, collecting money for a school—all sorts of things Dixie law was interested in. Well paid, tipped off and favored for fifty-five years, Daniel Robert Cosey kept his evil gray eye on everybody. For the pure power of it, people supposed, because he had no joy, and the money he got for being at the beck and call of whitefolks in general and police in particular didn't bring comfort to him or his family. Whites called him Danny Boy. But to Negroes his initials, DRC, gave rise to the name he was known by: Dark. He worshiped paper money and coin, withheld decent shoes from his son and passable dresses from his wife and daughters until he died leaving 114,000 resentful dollars behind. The son decided to enjoy his share. Not throw it away, exactly, but use it on things Dark cursed: good times, good clothes, good food, good music, dancing til the sun came up in a hotel made for it all. The father was dreaded; the son was a ray of light. The cops paid off the father; the son paid off the cops. What the father corrected, the son

celebrated. The father a miser? The son an easy touch. Spendthrift didn't cut ice with Julia. Her family were farmers always being done out of acres by white landowners and spiteful Negroes. She froze when she learned how blood soaked her husband's money was. But she didn't have to feel ashamed too long. She gave birth and didn't wait to see if history skipped a generation or blossomed in her son.