



## "Don't be afraid..."

---

No Known Copyright

Princeton University Library reasonably believes that the Item is not restricted by copyright or related rights, but a conclusive determination could not be made.

You are free to use this Item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use.

## Princeton University Library Disclaimer

---

Princeton University Library claims no copyright governing this digital resource. It is provided for free, on a non-commercial, open-access basis, for fair-use academic and research purposes only. Anyone who claims copyright over any part of these resources and feels that they should not be presented in this manner is invited to contact Princeton University Library, who will in turn consider such concerns and make every effort to respond appropriately. We request that users reproducing this resource cite it according the guidelines described at <http://rbcs.princeton.edu/policies/forms-citation>.

## Citation Information

---

Morrison, Toni. 1931-

"Don't be afraid..."

1 folder

## Contact Information

---

## Download Information

---

Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 01:14:39 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/9880vw58q>

absence was hardly noticed as she concentrated on her daughter. Instantly, she knew what to name her. ~~Fair~~<sup>Fair</sup>. Knew also what to name herself.

At noon the following day, while nursing, she saw a figure climb down from a cart without the help of the driver who hastily drove off. It wore Florens' dress and cap, but its hands were tied and it moved so slowly it took more than a moment for Sorrow to be sure because when she lifted a hand in greeting, there was no response. Not a smile, not even a glance at the suckling. It was as though she were seeing the ghost of Florens, a bound and barefoot one; the real one nowhere in sight. Yet the specter had substance for, with a shriek of joy, Lina ran down the path and, just as eight years ago, threw a shawl around Florens and held her in her arms. Sorrow lifted her baby over her shoulder and watched the two women disappear. Patting the baby's back, she wondered what happened. For all his kindness and healing powers, had she been wrong about the blacksmith? Had Lina been right all along? Suffused with the insight new mothers claim, Sorrow doubted it.

He had saved her life with vinegar and her own blood; had known right away Mistress' state and prescribed solvent to lessen the scarring. Sir admired him and his ironwork. When he rode off the rooster had not yet crowed and he was as cheerful as a bluebird. It was Florens who had done a bad thing, she thought. A very bad thing to need tying up. But what could it be? Yet, knowing her all these years, Sorrow was certain of one thing: regardless of her ferocity under the hickory tree, Florens could never, would never hurt a soul.

As the days came and went, the changes became more profound. Mistress sent for a Bible, decided to frequent the church, forbade anyone to enter the new house. At one point, Sorrow, feeling perhaps the legitimacy of her new status as a mother, was bold enough to remark to her Mistress, "It was good that the blacksmith came to help when you were dying." Mistress stared at her. "Ninny," she answered. "God alone cures. No man has such power." Even Lina was unnerved. She remained obedient to Mistress and even more taciturn, but became almost servile to Florens, as tender to her as if she were bruised. Most of

all Florens changed. Secretly, and protected by Lina, she spent every night in Sir's huge empty house, and every day dutifully going about chores. She was not unpleasant, but clearly enjoyed nothing. There had always been tangled strings among them. Now they were cut. Each embargoed herself; spun her own web of thoughts unavailable to anyone else. It was as though they were making separate plans.

Twin was gone, traceless and un-missed by the only person who knew her. Sorrow's wandering stopped too. Now she attended routine duties, organizing them around her infant's needs, and impervious to the insults of others. She had looked into her daughter's eyes; saw in them the gray glisten of a winter sea, and said "I am your mother. My name is Complete."

There is only a little blood and the sound is small, no more than the crack a wing of roast grouse makes when you tear it, warm and tender, from its breast. He screams screams then faints. I don't hear your horse only your shout and know I am lost. That I may never again in this world know the sight of your welcoming smile or taste the sugar of your shoulder as you take me in your arms when I arrive. My journey to you is hard and long and the hurt of it is gone as soon as I see the yard, the forge, the little cabin where you are. The smell of fire and ash trembles me but it is the glee in your eyes that kicks my heart over. You are asking me how and how long and laughing at my clothes and the scratches eve-

ryplace. But when I answer your why, you frown. We settle, you do, and I agree because there is no other way. You will ride at once to Mistress but alone. I am to wait at the forge, you say. I can not join you because it is faster without me. And there is another reason, you say. You turn your head. My eyes follow where you look.

This happens twice before. The first time it is me peering around my madre's dress hoping for her hand that is only for her little boy. The second time it is a pointing screaming little girl hiding behind her mother and clinging to her skirts. Both times are full of danger and I am expelled. Now I am seeing a little boy come into the forge holding a corn husk doll. He is younger than everybody I know. You reach out your forefinger toward him and he takes hold of it. You say this is why I can not travel with you. The child you call Malaik is not to be left alone. He is a foundling and that his father is leaning over the reins and the horse is continuing until it stops and eats grass in the lane. People from the village come, learn he is dead and find the boy sitting quietly in the cart. No one knows who is the dead man and nothing in his belongings can tell. You accept him un-

til a future when a townsman or magistrate places him which may be never because although the dead man's skin is rosy the boy's is not. So maybe he is not a son at all.

I worry as the boy steps closer to you. How you offer and he owns your forefinger. I am not liking how his eyes go when you send him to play in the yard. But then you bathe my journey from my face and arms and give me soup. It needs salt. Bits of rabbit floating down there. My hunger is sharp but I can not eat much of it. We talk of many things and I don't say what I am thinking. That I will stay. That when you return from healing Mistress whether she is live or no I am here with you always. Never never without you. Here I am not forbidden or given away. No one steals my warmth and shoes because I am small. No one handles my backside. No one whinnies like sheep or goat because I drop in fear and weakness. No one screams at the sight of me. No one watches my body for how it is unseemly. With you my body is pleasure is safe is belonging. I can never not have you have me.

I am calm when you leave although you do not touch me close.  
You saddle up and ask me to water the bean shoots and collect the eggs.  
I go there but the hens make nothing so I know Madre is coming soon.  
The boy Malaik is near. He sleeps behind the door to where you do. I  
am calm, quiet knowing you are very soon here again. I take off Sir's  
boots and lie on your cot trying to catch the fire smell of you. Slices of  
starlight cut through the shutters. Madre leans at the door holding her  
little boy's hand, my shoes in her pocket. As always she is trying to tell  
me something. I tell her to go and when she fades I hear a small creak-  
ing. In the dark I know he is there. Eyes big, wondering and cold. I rise  
and come to him and ask what. What Malaik, what. He is silent but the  
hate in his eyes is loud. He wants my leaving. This can not happen.  
Feathers lift and I feel a sharp clutch of talons inside. This expel can  
never happen again. tk

In the morning the boy is not here but I prepare porridge for us  
two. He is standing in the lane holding tight the corn husk doll and look-  
ing toward where you ride away. Sudden looking at him I am remember-

ing the dog's profile rising from Widow Ealing's kettle. Then I can not read its full meaning. Now I know how. I am guarding. Otherwise I am missing all understanding of how to protect myself. First I notice Sir's boots are gone. I look all around, stepping through the cabin, the forge, in cinder and in pain of my tender feet. I see the curl of a garden snake edging up the door saddle. I watch its slow crawl until it is dead in the sunlight.

I am clear.

The boy quits the lane. He comes in but will neither eat nor speak. We stare at each other across the table. He does not blink. Nor me. I know he steals Sir's boots that belong to me. His fingers cling the doll. I think that must be where his power is. I take it away and place it on a shelf too high for him to reach. He screams screams. Tears falling. I walk outside to keep from hearing. He is not stopping. Is not. A cart goes by. The couple in it glance but do not greet or pause. Finally the boy is silent and I go back in. The doll is not on the shelf. It is flung to a

corner like a precious child thrown away. Or no. The doll is sitting there hiding. Hiding from me. Afraid. Which? Which is the true reading? Porridge drips from the table. The stool is on its side. Seeing me the boy returns to screaming and that is when I clutch him. That is why I pull his arm. To make him stop. Stop it. And yes I do hear the shoulder crack but there is no blood from it. A little comes from his mouth hitting the table corner. Only a little. He drops into fainting just as I hear you shout. But not my name. Not me. Him. Malaik you shout. Malaik.

Seeing him still and limp on the floor with that trickle of red from his mouth your face breaks down. You knock me away shouting what are you doing? shouting where is your ruth? With such tenderness you lift him, the boy. When you see the angle of his arm you cry out. The boy opens his eyes then faints once more when you twist it back into its proper place. Yes, there is blood. A little. But you are not there when it comes, so how do you know I am the reason. Why do you knock me away without certainty of what is true? You see the boy down and believe bad about me without question. You are correct but why no ques-

tion of it? I am first to get the knocking away. I fall and curl up on the floor. The feathers are moving again. No question. You choose the boy. You call his name first. You make him lie down with the doll and turn to me your broken face, eyes without glee, rope pumps in your neck. I am lost. No word of sorrow for knocking me down. No tender fingers to touch where you hurt me.

Your Mistress recovers you say. You say you will hire someone to take me to her. Away from you. Each word that follows cuts.

Why are you killing me I ask you.

I want you to go.

Let me explain.

Now.

Why? Why?

Because you are a slave.

What?

You heard.

Sir makes me that.

I don't mean him.

Then who?

You.

What is your meaning? I am a slave because Sir trades for me.

No. You have become one.

How?

Head bridled. Body wild.

I am adoring you.

And a slave to that too.

You alone own me.

Own yourself, woman and leave us be.

No. No. You put me in misery.

All wilderness. No constraint.

No. Don't.

Slave.

I have shock. Are you meaning I have no consequence in this world? Now I am living the dying inside. No. Not again. Not ever. Feathers lifting, I unfold. The claws scratch and scratch until the hammer is in my hand.

It is hard without Sir's boots. Wearing them I could walk a stony river bed. Move quickly through forests and down hills of nettles. It is also hard without Mistress' letter. They are my only protection. My way fails. What I read or cipher is useless now. Heads of dogs, garden snakes all is nothing. Most of all it is hard without you who I am thinking always as my life and my safety. My safety from harm, from any who look closely at me only to throw me away. From all those who believe

Is that a  
tremble in your  
eyes?

they have claim and rule over me. You say I am wilderness. I am. Are you afraid? You should be. The hammer strikes air many times before it gets to you where it dies in weakness. Our clashing is long. I am trying to tear you open. You hold my arms behind me hard. You tie me up. When the drayman comes he is afraid too so you do not unbind my wrists. I settle. I float. An ice floe cut away from the riverbank in deep winter. I have no shoes. I have no kicking heart no road no tomorrow. The feathers close. For now.

You will kneel to read my telling, squat perhaps in a few places. I apologize for the discomfort. Sometimes the tip of the nail skates away and the forming of words is disorderly. Reverend Father never likes that. He raps our fingers and makes us do it over. I stop this telling only when the lamp burns down. Then I sleep among my words. The telling goes on as dream and when I wake it takes time to pull away, leave this room and do chores. Chores that are making no sense. We clean the chipped chamber pot but are forbidden to use it. We build tall crosses for the graves in the meadow. We clean where Sir dies but are forbidden to be

anywhere else in this house. Spiders reign in comfort and sparrows make nests. Mistress has cure but she is not well. All smiles and laughter are gone. Each time she returns from the village meeting house her eyes are nowhere and have no inside. Like the eyes of the women who examine me behind the closet door, Mistress' eyes only look out and what she is seeing is not to her liking. Her clothes are different. She prays much. We all Lina, Sorrow, her daughter and me are ordered to sleep either in the cowshed or the store room where bricks rope tools all manner of building waste are. No more hammocks under trees for Lina and me. No more fireplace for Sorrow and her baby girl. Mistress does not like the baby. One night in heavy rain Sorrow shelters herself and the baby here, downstairs behind the door in the room where Sir dies. Mistress slaps her face. Many times. She does not know I am here every night else she would whip me too as her piety demands. She is not the same. Neither is Sorrow. She is a mother now. Nothing more, nothing less and I like her devotion to her baby girl. She will not be called Sorrow. She has changed her name and is planning escape. She wants me to go with

her but I have a thing to finish here. Worse is how Mistress is to Lina. She requires her company on the way to church but sits her by the road because she cannot enter. Lina is forbidden to bathe in the river and must drive the plow alone. I am never hearing how they once talk and laugh together. Lina is wanting to tell me, remind me that she early warns me about you. But her reasons for the warning make the warning itself wrong. I am remembering what you tell me from long ago when Sir is alive. You say you see slaves freer than free men. One is a lion in the skin of an ass. The other is an ass in the skin of a lion. That it is the withering inside that enslaves and opens the door for what is wild. I know my withering is born in the Widow's closet. I know the claws of the feathered thing did break out on you because I can not stop them wanting to tear you open the way you tear me. (*over*)

There is no more room in this room. These words cover the floor. From now you will stand to hear me. The walls make trouble because lamp light is too small to see by. I am holding light in one hand and carving letters with the other. My arms ache but I have need to tell you this.

Still, there is another thing  
of lion who thinks his  
mane is All.

I can not tell it to any one but you. I am near the door and at the closing now. What will I do with my nights when the telling stops? Sudden I am remembering. You won't read my telling. You read the world but not the letters of talk. You don't know how to. Maybe one day you will learn. If so, come to this farm again, open the gate you made, enter this big, awing house, climb the stairs and come inside this talking room in daylight. If you never read this no one will. These careful words, closed up and wide open will talk to themselves. Round and round, side to side, bottom to top, top to bottom all across the room. Or. Or perhaps no. Perhaps these words need the air that is out in the world. Need to fly up then fall, fall like ash over acres of primrose and mallow. Over a turquoise lake, beyond the eternal hemlocks, through clouds cut by rainbow to lodge finally in the heart of the land. Lina will help. She finds horror in this house and <sup>\*</sup>I know she loves <sup>more</sup>fire. <sup>^</sup>I will keep one sadness. That all this time I can not know what my Madre is telling me. She can be pleased to know that the soles of my feet are hard as cypress.

\* much as she  
needs to be  
Mistress' need

See? You are correct. Madre too. I am wilderness but I am also  
Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None.