



"I walk the night through..."

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Citation Information

Morrison, Toni. 1931-

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1 folder

Contact Information

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Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 01:16:08 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/9306t388c>

Listen to me, she is saying. I am your age when flesh is my only hunger. Men have two hungers. The beak that grooms also bites. Tell me, she says, what will it be when his work here is done. I wonder she says will he take you with him?

I am not wondering this. Not then, not ever. I know you can not steal me nor wedding me. Neither one is lawful. What I know is that I wilt when you go and am straight when Mistress sends me to you. Being on an errand is not running away.

Thinking these things keeps me walking and not lying down on the ground and allowing myself to sleep. I am greatly tired and long for water.

I come into a part where cows are grazing among the trees. If cows are in the woods a farm or village is near. Neither Sir nor Mistress will let their few heads loose like that. They fence the meadow because they want the manure and not a quarrel with neighbors. Mistress says Sir says grazing will soon die in the meadow so he has other business

because farming will never be enough in these parts. Black flies alone will kill all hope for it if marauding wild life does not. Farms live or die by the desire of insects or on the whim of weather.

I see a path and enter. It leads to a narrow bridge past a mill wheel poised in a stream. The creaking wheel and rushing water are what shape the quiet. Hens sleep and dogs forbidden. I hurry down the bank and lap from the stream. The water tastes like candle wax. I spit out the bits of straw that come with each swallow and make my way back to the path. I need shelter. The sun is setting itself. I notice two cottages. Both have windows but no lamp shines through. There are more that resemble small barns that can accept the day's light only through open doors:

None is open. There is no cooksmoke in the air. I am thinking every one has gone off. Then I see a tiny steeple on a hill beyond the village and am certain the people are at evening prayer. I decide to knock on the door of the largest house, the one that will have a servant inside. Moving toward it I look over my shoulder and see a light farther on. It is in the single lit house in the village so I choose to go there. Stones inter-

fere at each step rubbing the sealing wax hard into my sole. Rain starts. Soft. It should smell sweet with the flavor of the sycamores it has crossed, but it has a burn smell, like pinfeathers singed before boiling a fowl.

Soon as I knock a woman opens the door. She is much taller than Mistress or Lina and has green eyes. The rest of her is a brown frock and a white cap. Red hair edges it. She is suspicious and holds up her hand, palm out as though I might force my way in. Who hath sent you she asks. I say please. I say I am alone. No one sends me. Shelter calls me here. She looks behind me left and right and asks if I have no protection, no companion? I say No madam. She narrows her eyes and asks if I am of this earth or elsewhere? Her face is hard. I say this earth Madam I know no other. Christian or heathen, she asks. Never heathen I say. I say although I hear my father was. And where doth he abide, she asks. The rain is getting bigger. Hunger wobbles me. I say I do not know him and my mother is dead. Her face softens and she nods saying, orphan, step in.

She tells me her name, Widow Ealing, but does not ask mine. You must excuse me, she says, but there is some danger about. What danger I ask. Evil, she says, but you must never mind.

I try to eat slowly and fail. Sopping hard bread into lovely, warm barley porridge, I don't lift my head except to say thank you when she ladles more into my bowl. She places a handful of raisins next to it. We are in a good size room with fireplace, table, stools and two sleeping places, a box bed and a pallet. There are two closed doors to other parts and a closet looking place, a niche, at the rear where jugs and bowls are. When my hunger is quiet enough I notice a girl lying in the straw of the box bed. Under her head is a blanket roll. One of her eyes looks away, the other is as straight and unwavering as a she wolf's. Both are black as coal not at all like the Widow's. I don't think I should begin any words so I keep eating and wait for the girl or the Widow to say something. At the foot of her bed is a basket. A kid lies there too sick to raise its head or make a sound. When I finish the food down to the last raisin the Widow asks what is my purpose traveling alone. I tell her my

mistress is sending me on an errand. She turns her lips down saying it must be vital to risk a female's life in these parts. My Mistress is dying I say. My errand can save her. She frowns and looks toward the fireplace. Not from the first death, she says. Perhaps from the second.

I don't understand her meaning. I know there is only one death not two and many lives beyond it. Remember the owls in daylight? We know right away who they are. You know the pale one is your father. I think I know who the other ones may be.

The girl lying in straw raises up on her elbow. This be the death we have come here to die, she says. Her voice is deep, like a man's though she looks to have my age. Widow Ealing doesn't reply and I do not want to look at those eyes anymore. The girl speaks again. No thrashing, she says, can change it though my flesh is cut to ribbons. She stands then and limps to the table where the lamp burns. Holding it waist high she lifts her skirts. I see dark blood beetling down her legs. In the light pouring over her pale skin her wounds look like live jewels.

This is my daughter Jane, the Widow says. Those lashes may save her life.

It is late, Widow Ealing is saying. They will not come until morning. She closes the shutters, blows out the lamp and kneels by the pallet. Daughter Jane returns to her straw. The Widow whispers in prayer. The dark in here is greater than the cowshed, thicker than the forest. No moonlight seeps through a single crack. I lie near the sick kid and the fireplace and my sleep breaks into pieces from their voices. Silence is long and then they talk. I can tell who it is not only by the direction of the sound but also because Widow Ealing says words in a way different from her daughter. A more singing way. So I know it is Daughter Jane who says how can I prove I am not a demon and it is the Widow who says sssst it is they who will decide. Silence. Silence. Then back and forth they talk. It is the pasture they crave, mother. Then why not me? You may be next. At least two say they have seen the Black Man and that he. Widow Ealing stops and does not say more for a while and then she says we will know comes the morning. They will allow that I am says

Daughter Jane. They talk fast to each other. The knowing is theirs, the truth is mine, truth is God's, then what mortal can judge me, you talk like a Spaniard, listen, please listen, be still lest He hear you, He will not abandon me, nor will I, yet you bloodied my flesh, how many times do you have to hear it demons do not bleed.

You never tell me that and it is a good thing to know. If my mother is not dead she can be teaching me these things.

I believe I am the only one who falls asleep and I wake in shame because outside the animals are already lowing. Tiny baas come from the kid as the Widow picks it up in her arms and takes it outside to nurse the dam. When she returns she unshutters both windows and leaves the door wide open. Two geese waddle in followed by a strutting hen. Another flies through a window joining the search for scraps. I ask permission to use the commode behind a hempen curtain. As I finish and step out I see Daughter Jane holding her face in her hands while the Widow freshens the leg wounds. New strips of blood gleam among the dried

ones. A goat steps in and moves toward the straw nibbling nibbling while Daughter Jane whimpers. After the bloodwork is done to her satisfaction the Widow pushes the goat out the door.

At table for a breakfast of clabber and bread the Widow and Daughter Jane put their palms together, bow their heads and murmur. I do likewise, whispering the prayer Reverend Father taught me to say morning and night my mother repeating with me. Pater Noster....At the end I raise my hand to touch my forehead and catch Daughter Jane's frown. She shakes her head meaning no. So I pretend I am adjusting my cap. The Widow spoons jam onto the clabber and we two eat. Daughter Jane refuses so we eat what she will not. Afterwards the Widow goes to the fireplace and swings the kettle over the fire. I take the bowls and spoons from the table to the closet where a basin of water sits on a narrow bench. I rinse and wipe each piece carefully. The air is tight. Water rises to a boil in the kettle hanging in the fireplace. I turn and see its steam forming shapes as it curls against the stone. One shape looks like the head of a dog.

We all hear footsteps climbing the path. I am still busy in the closet and although I cannot see who enters, I hear the talk. The Widow offers the visitors seating. They refuse. A man's voice says this is preliminary yet witnesses are several. Widow interrupts him saying her daughter's eye is askew as God made it and it has no special powers. And look, she says, look at her wounds. God's son bleeds. We bleed. Demons never.

I step into the room. Standing there are a man, three women and a little girl who reminds me of myself when my mother sends me away. I am thinking how sweet she seems when she screams and hides behind the skirts of one of the women. Then each visitor turns to look at me. The women gasp. The man's walking stick clatters to the floor causing the remaining hen to squawk and flutter. He retrieves his stick, points it at me saying who be this? One of the women covers her eyes saying God help us. The little girl wails and rocks back and forth. The Widow waves both hands saying she is a guest seeking shelter from the night. We accept her how could we not and feed her. Which night the man asks. This one

past she answers. One woman speaks saying I have never seen any human this black. I have says another, this one is as black as others I have seen. She is Afric. Afric and much more, says another. Just look at this child says the first woman. She points to the little girl shaking and moaning by her side. Hear her. Hear her. It is true then says another. The Black Man is among us. This is his minion. The little girl is inconsolable. The woman whose skirts she clings to takes her outside where she is quickly quiet. I am not understanding anything except that I am in danger as the dog's head shows and Mistress is my only defense. I shout, wait. I shout, please sir. I think they have shock that I can talk. Let me show you my letter I say quieter. It proves I am nobody's minion but my Mistress. As fast as I can I remove my boot and roll down my stocking. The women stretch their mouths, the man looks away and then slowly back. I pull out Mistress' letter and offer it but no one will touch it. The man orders me to place it on the table but he is afraid to break the seal. He tells the Widow to do it. She picks at the wax with her finger nails. When it falls away she unfolds the paper. It is too thick to stay flat by it-

self. Everyone including Daughter Jane who rises from her bed stares at the markings upside down and it is clear only the man is lettered. Holding the tip of his walking stick down on the paper he turns it right side up and holds it there as if the letter can fly away or turn into ashes without flame before his eyes. He leans low and examines it closely. Then he picks it up and reads aloud.

The signatory of this letter, Mistress Rebekka Vaark of Milton vouches for th female person into whose hands it has been placed. She is owned by me and can be knowne by a burne mark in th palm of her left hand. Allow her th courtesie of safe passage and witherall she may need to complete her errand. Our life, my life, on this earthe depends on her speedy return.

Signed Rebekka Vaark, Mistress, Milton 18 May 1690

Other than a small sound from Daughter Jane all is quiet. The man looks at me, looks again at the letter, back at me back at the letter. Again at me, once more at the letter. You see, says the Widow. He ig-

nores her and turns to two women whispering to them. They point me to a door that opens onto a store room and there, standing among carriage boxes and a spinning wheel they tell me to take off my clothes. Without touching they tell me what to do. To show them my teeth, my tongue. They frown at the candle burn on my palm, the one you kissed to cool. They look under my arms, between my legs. They circle me, lean down to inspect my feet. Naked under their examination I watch for what is in their eyes. No hate is there or scare or disgust but they are looking at me my body across distances without recognition. Swine look at me with more connection when they raise their heads from the trough. The women look away from my eyes the way you say I am to do with the bears so they will not come close to love and play. Finally they tell me to dress and leave the room shutting the door behind them. I put on my clothes. I hear the quarreling. The little girl is back not sobbing now but saying it scares me it scares me. A woman's voice asks would Satan write a letter. Lucifer is all deceit and trickery says another. But a woman's life is at stake says the Widow, who will the Lord punish then?

The man's voice booms. We will relay this to the others he says. We will study on it, consult and pray and return with our answer. It is not clear it seems whether or no I am the Black Man's minion. I step into the room and the little girl screams and flails her arms. The women surround her and rush out. The man says not to leave the house. He takes the letter with him. The Widow follows him down the path pleading, pleading.

She returns to say they are wanting time to discuss more among themselves. She has hope because of the letter. Daughter Jane laughs. Widow Ealing kneels to pray. She prays a long time then stands saying I have to see someone. I need his witness and his help.

Who, asks Daughter Jane.

The sherif says the Widow.

Daughter Jane curls her mouth behind her mother's back as she leaves.

I am hung with fear watching Daughter Jane attend her leg wounds. The sun is high and still the Widow does not return. We wait. By and by the sun slows down. Daughter Jane boils duck eggs and when cool wraps them in a square of cloth. She folds a blanket and hands it to me, motions with one finger to follow. We leave the house, scurry around to the back. All manner of fowl cluck and fly from our feet. We run through the pasture. The nanny goat turns to look. The billy does not. A bad sign. We squeeze between the fence slats and run into the wood. Now we walk, softly, Daughter Jane leading the way. The sun empties itself, pouring what is left through tree shadow. Birds and small animals eat and call to one another.

We come to a stream, dry mostly, muddy elsewhere. Daughter Jane hands me the cloth of eggs. She explains how I am to go, where the trail will be that takes me to the post road that takes me to the hamlet where I hope you are. I say thank you and lift her hand to kiss it. She says no, I thank you. They look at you and forget about me. She kisses my forehead then watches as I step down into the stream's dry bed. I

turn and look up at her. Are you a demon I ask her. Her wayward eye is steady. She smiles. Yes, she says. Oh, yes. Go now.

I walk alone except for the eyes that join me on my journey. Eyes that do not recognize me, eyes that examine me for a tail, an extra teat, a man's whip between my legs. Wondering eyes that stare and decide if my navel is in the right place if my knees bend backward like the foreleg of a dog. They want to see if my tongue is split like a snake's if my teeth are filed to points to eat them with. To know if I can spring out of the darkness and bite. Inside I am shrinking. I climb out of the stream bed under watching trees and know I am not the same. I am losing something with every step I take. I can feel the drain. Something precious is leaving me. I am a thing apart. With the letter I belong and am lawful. Without it I am a weak calf abandon by the herd, a turtle without shell, a minion with no tell tale signs but a darkness I am born with, outside, yes, but inside as well and the inside dark is small feathered and toothy. Is that what my mother knows? Why she chooses me to live without? Not the outside dark we share, a minha mãe and me, but the inside one we

don't. Is this dying mine alone? Is the clawing feathery thing the only life in me? You will tell me. You have the outside dark as well. And when I see you and fall into you I know I am full alive. Sudden it is not like before when I am always in fright. I am not afraid of anything now. The sun's going leaves darkness behind and the dark is me. Is we. Is my home.