



"Women are eager to talk to me..."

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-

"Women are eager to talk to me..."

1 folder

Contact Information

Download Information

Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 01:20:09 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/fj2366681>

5.

WOMEN ARE EAGER TO TALK TO ME WHEN THEY HEAR MY LAST NAME. MONEY? THEY CHUCKLE AND ASK THE SAME QUESTION: WHO NAMED ME THAT OR IF ANYBODY DID. IF I MADE IT UP TO MAKE MYSELF FEEL IMPORTANT OR WAS I A GAMBLER OR THIEF OR SOME OTHER KIND OF CROOK THEY SHOULD WATCH OUT FOR? WHEN I TELL THEM MY WHOLE NAME, FIRST AND LAST, THEY SCREAM WITH LAUGHTER AND SAY: THERE AIN'T NO SUCH THING. ALL MONEY IS FAKE. NO END OF PLEASANT TALK AFTER THAT AND IT'S ENOUGH TO KEEP OUR FRIENDSHIP GOING WAY AFTER IT'S DRIED UP JUST SO THEY CAN MAKE LAME JOKES: HEY, MONEY, HOW YOU MAKING IT? HEY, MONEY! GOT SOME? MONEY, COME ON OVER HERE. YOU OWE ME.

TRUTHFULLY, OTHER THAN A FEW QUICK OPPORTUNITIES, I'VE KNOWN ONLY FOUR WOMEN. THREE OF THEM WERE

SERIOUS RELATIONSHIPS AND I LIKED THE SMALL BREAKABLE
THING INSIDE EACH ONE. WHATEVER THEIR PERSONALITY,
SMARTS OR LOOKS, SOMETHING SOFT LAY INSIDE EACH. LIKE
A BIRD'S BREASTBONE, SHAPED AND CHOSEN TO WISH ON.
A LITTLE V, THINNER THAN BONE AND BARELY HINGED, THAT I
COULD BREAK WITH A FOREFINGER IF I WANTED TO, BUT
NEVER DID. WANT TO, I MEAN. KNOWING IT WAS THERE,
HIDING FROM ME, WAS ENOUGH.

IT WAS THE FOURTH WOMAN WHO CHANGED
EVERYTHING. IN HER COMPANY THE LITTLE WISHBONE V
TOOK UP RESIDENCE IN MY OWN CHEST AND MADE ITSELF AT
HOME. IT WAS HER FOREFINGER THAT SCARED ME AND IF IT
WASN'T FOR THAT LETTER, I'D STILL BE HANGING FROM HER
APRON STRINGS. SHE HAD NO COMPETITION EXCEPT FOR THE
HORSES, A MAN'S FOOT AND YCIDRA TREMBLING UNDER MY
ARM.

GOT THAT?

6.

The actors were nicer than the actresses. At least they called her by her name and didn't mind if their costume was off or a bit stained. The women called her 'girl', as in "Where's the girl?"

"Girl, where's my Pond's cleanser?" Plus they had fits if their costumes weren't perfect.

Lily's resentment was mild because seamstress/wardrobe was a financial promotion from cleaning woman and she got to show off the sewing skills her mother had taught her: slip stitch, blanket stitch, chain, back, yo-yo, shank button and flat. In addition, Ray Stone, the director, was polite to her. He produced two sometimes three plays a season at the Skylight Studio and taught acting classes the rest of the time. So, small and poor as it was, the theater was as busy as a hive all year. In between productions and after classes, the place hummed with intense argument and sweat misted the foreheads of Mr. Stone and his students. Lily thought they were more animated then than on stage. She couldn't help overhearing these quarrels, but she didn't understand anger that wasn't about a scene or how to say some lines. Now that the Skylight was shut, Mr. Stone arrested, and she out of a job it was clear she should have listened closely.

It must have been the play. The one that caused the problem, the picketing, then the visit from two government men in snap brim hats.

tk

The pay was less at Wang's Heavenly Palace Dry Cleaners and there were no tips from actors. Yet working in daylight was an improvement over walking in darkness to get to and from the theater. Lily stood in the press room, her irritation blossoming into anger. The response she had gotten from the real estate agent had her seething. Frugal and minding her own business, she had added enough to what her parents' left her to put a down payment on a house. Searching through ads didn't help so she consulted a real estate agent. When she described her purpose and the neighborhood she preferred, the agent smiled and said, "I'm really sorry."

"These are sold already?" Lily asked.

The agent dropped her eyes then decided not to lie. "Well, no, but there are restrictions."

"On what?"

The agent sighed. Obviously not wanting to have this conversation, she lifted her desk blotter and pulled out some stapled papers. Turning a page, she showed Lily an underlined passage. Lily traced the lines of print with her forefinger:

NO PART OF SAID PROPERTY HEREBY CONVEYED SHALL
EVER BE USED OR OCCUPIED BY ANY HEBREW OR BY AN
PERSON OF THE ETHIOPIAN, MALAY, OR ASIATIC RACE
EXCEPTING ONLY EMPLOYEES IN DOMESTIC SERVICE.

"I've got rentals and apartments in another part of the city.
Would you like...."

"Thank you," said Lily and left the office as quickly as pride let her. Nevertheless, when her anger cooled and after some mulling, she returned to the agency and rented a second floor, one bedroom apartment near Jackson Street.

Although her employers were far more considerate than the actresses at Skylight Studio, after six months of pressing and steaming for the Wang's, and even after she was renting a large apartment instead of a room, she was feeling restless. Into that boredom came a tall man with a bundle of army issue clothes for same day service. The Wang couple, at lunch in the back room, left Lily to attend the counter. She told the customer that same day service applied only if requests were made before noon. He could pick his things up the next day. She smiled when she spoke. He did not return the smile but his eyes had such a quiet, far away look—like people who made their living staring at mountain tops or oceans—she relented. "Well, I'll see what I can do. Come back at 5:30." He did and, holding the clothes hangers over his shoulder,

waited on the sidewalk until she came out. Then he offered to walk her home.

They slid into each other.

So when he said he had to leave for family reasons Lily felt one abnormal pulse beat. That was all.

Life with Frank had been glorious at first. Its break down was more of a stutter than a single eruption. She had forgiven much: (over). *Then there was* like the time they went to a church convention held in a high school stadium. Known more for table after table of delicious free food than proselytizing, the church welcomed everybody. And everybody came—not only members of the congregation. The non-believers, lined up the entrance, out numbered them. Literature passed out by serious-looking young people and sweet-faced elders was stuffed into purses and side pockets. When the morning rain stopped and soft light sweetened the sky, Lily and Frank exchanged their slickers for sweaters and strolled hand in hand to the stadium. They were in good spirits all afternoon—chatting with people and

long silences, firings from jobs he held only
a week, increasing indifference to social life

helping children load their plates. Then smack in the middle of all ^{at} then sunlight and gaiety, he bolted. They had been standing at a table, piling seconds of fried chicken on their plates, when a little girl with slant-y eyes reached up over the table edge to grab a cupcake. Frank leaned over to push the platter closer to her.

When she gave him a broad smile of thanks he dropped his food and ran through the crowd. People parted before him—some with frowns others simply agape. Alarmed and embarrassed, Lily put down her paper plate. Trying hard to pretend he was a stranger to her, she walked slowly, her chin up, making no eye contact, past the bleachers and away from the exit Frank had taken.

When she returned to the apartment, she found it, thankfully, empty. How could he change so quickly? Laughing one second, terrified the next? ^{Was} ~~Is~~ there some violence in him that could be directed toward her? He had moods, of course, but was never argumentative or the least threatening. Lily drew up her knees and, leaning on them, pondered her confusion and his; the future

she wanted and the question of whether he could share it. Dawn light seeped through the curtains before he returned. Lily's heart jumped when she heard the key turn in the lock, but he was calm and, as he put it 'beat up with shame.'

"Did it have something to do with your time in Korea that spooked you?"

Frank smiled. "My time?"

"Well, you know what I mean."

"Yeah, I know. It won't happen again. Promise." Frank enclosed her in his arms.

Things went back to normal. He ^{got steady} ~~worked~~ at a car wash in the afternoons; she at Wang's weekdays and doing alterations on Saturdays. They did less socializing but Lily didn't miss it. The occasional movie was enough until they sat through "He Ran All the Way." Afterwards Frank spent much of the night clenching his fist in silence. There were no more movies.

Lily's sights were set elsewhere. Little by little she was being singled out for her sewing skills. Twice she had provided lace for a bridal veil and, after once embroidering a linen tablecloth at the request of a well-to-do customer, her reputation grew. ~~Lily~~ ^{She} determined to open a dressmaking shop; perhaps becoming a professional designer some day. ^(She would call it simply 'Lily's')

As Frank promised, there was no other public explosion. Still. The times when she came home to find him sitting on the sofa, one sock on, the other in his hand while he stared at the floor were unnerving. Lily let him be, trounced off to the kitchen to clean up whatever mess he'd left. She tried; she really tried. Every single bit of housework—however minor—was hers: his clothes scattered on the floor; food encrusted dishes on the table, not even in the sink; beard hair in the drain; water logged towels bunched on bathroom tiles. Lily could go on and on. And did. Complaints grew into one-sided arguments since he wouldn't engage. The fog of displeasure surrounding her, thickened. Her resentment was justified by his

obvious indifference along with his combination of need and irresponsibility. Their bed work, once so satisfying, became for her a duty. On that snowy day when he asked to borrow one hundred dollars to take care of his sick sister in Georgia, Lily's anger fought with relief and lost. She picked up the dog tags he'd left on the dresser and hid them away in a drawer. The loneliness she felt before Frank walked her home dissolved, and in its place a sharp tingle of freedom, of earned solitude, of choosing the wall she wanted to break through minus the burden of caring for a tilted man. Unobstructed and undistracted, she could get serious and develop a plan to match her ambition. And succeed. That was what her parents had taught her and what she had promised them. To choose, they insisted, and not (ever) be moved. Let no insult or slight knock her off her ground. Or, as they were fond of misquoting, "Gather up your loins, daughter. Find your talent and drive it."

7.

COLD. MORE THAN FREEZING. KOREA COLD, HURTING
AND CLINGING LIKE GLUE WITH NO WAY TO PEEL IT BACK.
BATTLE IS SCAREY, YEAH, BUT IT'S ALIVE. ORDERS, GUT,
PROTECTING BUDDIES, AGRESSION—NO THINKING REQUIRED.
WAITING IS THE HARD PART. DAYS AND DAYS PASS WITH
BUDDIES DOING WHATEVER WE COULD TO CUT THROUGH
THE BOREDOM. WORST OF ALL IS SOLITARY GUARD DUTY

WHILE WAITING. HOW MANY TIMES CAN YOU TAKE OFF YOUR GLOVES TO EXAMINE WHETHER YOUR FINGERNAILS ARE BLUE OR SHIFT YOUR BROWNING. MY EYES ARE TRAINED TO SEE MOVEMENT OF THE DEADLY MONGOLIANS WHO ARE MORE LETHAL THAN THE KOREANS. THE MONGOLS NEVER QUIT; NEVER STOP. WHEN YOU THINK THEY ARE DEAD THEY TURN OVER AND SHOOT YOU IN THE GUT. EVEN IF YOU ARE WRONG AND THEY ARE TRULY DEAD IT'S WORTH THE WASTE OF AMMO TO MAKE SURE. I SPENT DAYS LEANING ON A MAKESHIFT WALL. A TINY VILLAGE BELOW, HILLS BEYOND, A TIGHT CLUSTER OF BAMBOO PROTECTING MY LEFT. I STAYED ALERT FOR ANY HOSTILE ACTIVITY. NOTHING MOVED. ONCE IN A WHILE I HEARD CRACKLING IN THE BAMBOO STANDS. I WAS CERTAIN IT WAS NOT THE ENEMY—THEY NEVER CAME SINGLY—SO I GUESSED IT WAS A TIGER. THEY WERE SUPPOSED TO RANGE UP IN THE HILLS BUT NO ONE HAD SEEN ONE. BUT THEN I SAW A SMALL FIGURE MOVING THROUGH

BRAKES SO TINY IT HAD TO BE A DOG. THEN I SAW A LITTLE HAND STICKING OUT AND PATTING THE GROUND. I WAS GRATEFUL FOR THE HARMLESS DISTRACTION, AND SHE CAME ALMOST EVERY DAY, THIS CHILD CRAWLING THROUGH BAMBOO TO SCAVENGE OUR TRASH. I ONLY SAW HER FACE ONCE. MOSTLY I WATCHED HER HAND MOVING BETWEEN THE STALKS TO PAW GARBAGE. EACH TIME SHE CAME IT WAS AS WELCOME AS WATCHING A BIRD FEED HER YOUNG OR A HEN SCRATCHING, SCRATCHING GRAY DIRT FOR THE WORM SHE KNEW WAS BURIED THERE.

SOMETIMES HER HAND WAS INSTANTLY SUCCESSFUL AND SNATCHED A PIECE OF GARBAGE IN A WINK. OTHER TIMES JUST THE FINGERS STRETCHED, PATTING, SEARCHING FOR SOMETHING, ANYTHING, TO DIGEST. LIKE A TINY STARFISH—LEFT HANDED, LIKE ME. I'VE WATCHED RACOONS MORE CHOOSY WHEN RUMMAGING TRASH CANS. SHE WASN'T PICKY. ANYTHING NOT METAL, GLASS OR PAPER WAS FOOD

TO HER. SHE RELIED NOT ON HER EYES, BUT HER FINGERTIPS ALONE TO IDENTIFY NOURISHMENT. K RATION REFUSE, SCRAPS FROM PACKAGES SENT WITH LOVE FROM MOM FULL OF CRUMBLING CUP CAKES, FRUIT. AN ORANGE, SOFT NOW AND BLACKENED WITH ROT LIES JUST BEYOND HER FINGERS. SHE FUMBLES FOR IT. MY RELIEF GUARD COMES OVER, SEES HER HAND AND SHAKES HIS HEAD, SMILING. AS HE APPROACHES HER SHE RAISES UP AND IN WHAT LOOKED LIKE A HURRIED EVEN AUTOMATIC GESTURE SHE MOUTHED THE ONLY ENGLISH SHE'D BEEN TAUGHT: YUM YUM. SHE SMILES, REACHES FOR THE GUARD'S CROTCH, TOUCHES IT. HIS ANGER AND REVULSION SURPRISES HIM. YUM YUM? AS SOON AS I LOOK AWAY FROM HER HAND TO HER FACE, SEE THE TWO MISSING TEETH, THE FALL OF BLACK HAIR ABOVE EAGER EYES, HE BLOWS IT AWAY. ONLY THE HAND REMAINS, CLUTCHING ITS LIFE-SAVING TREASURE. EVERY CIVILIAN I EVER MET IN THAT COUNTRY WOULD (AND DID) DIE TO DEFEND THEIR

CHILDREN. STILL I KNEW THERE WERE A FEW WHO WOULD
MARKET THEM. THINKING BACK ON IT NOW, I THINK THE
RELIEF GUARD FELT MORE THAN REVULSION. I THINK HE FELT
TEMPTED AND THAT IS WHAT HE HAD TO KILL.

YUM YUM.

8.

He held Mike in his arms while he bled and jerked, whispering, "Stay here, man. Come on. Stay with me." When Mike opened his mouth to speak, Frank leant in close and heard his friend say "I'm a tell Mama." Later when Stuff asked what he said, Frank lied. "He said see ya later." By the time medics got there, the urine on Mike's pants had frozen. It changed him. What died was more than a friend it was his memory. It was not only the sharing of women and Lucky Strikes; they were Lotus boys who had known each other before they were toilet trained; escaped Texas the same way, smelling the same smoke from houses torched with unbelievable malignance. As children they had cchased after straying cows, made themselves a ball park in the woods, fumbled their way into sex. Argued, fought, laughed, mocked and loved one another without ever having to say so.

Frank had not been brave before. He did what he was told and what was necessary. Now he was reckless, lunatic, firing, dodging the scattered parts of men. The begging, the howling for help he could not hear clearly until a tk plane dropped its load on the enemies' nest. In the post blast silence the screams wafted as though from a pen of lambs smelling their blood-soaked future. Now he was brave, whatever that meant. There were not enough dead gooks or chinks in the world to satisfy him. And that was before Red was pulverized and all of Stuff's blood emptied out from his blown away arm. There was too little left of Red to warrant a stretcher. Frank mused through the remains to find his tags and a boot. Stuff got a stretcher, though, lay on it and died before the agony got to his brain.