

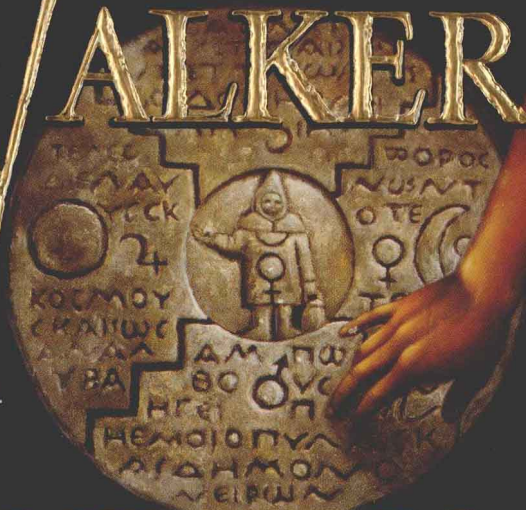
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POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY

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ALICE
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POSSESSING
THE SECRET
OF JOY



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**This Book is Dedicated
With Tenderness and Respect
To the Blameless
Vulva**

There are those who believe Black people possess the secret of joy and that it is this that will sustain them through any spiritual or moral or physical devastation.

The children stood up with us in a simple church ceremony in London. And it was that night, after the wedding dinner, when we were all getting ready for bed, that Olivia told me what has been troubling her brother. He is missing Tashi.

But he's also very angry with her, she said, because when we left, she was planning to scar her face.

I didn't know about this. One of the things we thought we'd helped stop was the scarring or cutting of tribal marks on the faces of young women.

It is a way the Olinka can show they still have their own ways, said Olivia, even though the white man has taken everything else. Tashi didn't want to do it, but to make her people feel better, she's resigned. She's going to have the female initiation ceremony too, she said.

Oh, no, I said. That's so dangerous. Suppose she becomes infected?

I know, said Olivia. I told her nobody in America or Europe cuts off pieces of themselves. And anyway, she should have had it when she was eleven, if she was going to have it. She's too old for it now.

Well, some men are circumcised, but that's just the removal of a bit of skin.

Tashi was happy that the initiation ceremony isn't done in Europe or America, said Olivia. That makes it even more valuable to her.

I see, I said.

The Color Purple, 1982

When the axe came into the forest, the trees said the handle is one of us.

Bumper sticker

PART ONE

T a s h i

I did not realize for a long time that I was dead.

And that reminds me of a story: There was once a beautiful young panther who had a co-wife and a husband. Her name was Lara and she was unhappy because her husband and her co-wife were really in love; being nice to her was merely a duty panther society imposed on them. They had not even wanted to take her into their marriage as co-wife, since they were already perfectly happy. But she was an “extra” female in the group and that would not do. Her husband sometimes sniffed her breath and other emanations. He even, sometimes, made love to her. But whenever this happened, the co-wife, whose name was Lala, became upset. She and the husband, Baba, would argue, then fight, snarling and biting and whipping at each other’s eyes with their tails. Pretty soon they’d become sick of this and would lie clutched in each other’s paws, weeping.

I am *supposed* to make love to her, Baba would say to Lala, his heartchosen mate. She is my wife just as

Alice Walker

you are. I did not plan things this way. This is the arrangement that came down to me.

I know it, dearest, said Lara, through her tears. And this pain that I feel is what has come down to me. Surely it can't be right?

These two sat on a rock in the forest and were miserable enough. But Lara, the unwanted, pregnant by now and ill, was devastated. Everyone knew she was unloved, and no other female panther wanted to share her own husband with her. Days went by when the only voice she heard was her inner one.

Soon, she began to listen to it.

Lara, it said, sit here, where the sun may kiss you. And she did.

Lara, it said, lie here, where the moon can make love to you all night long. And she did.

Lara, it said, one bright morning when she knew herself to have been well kissed and well loved: sit here on this stone and look at your beautiful self in the still waters of this stream.

Calmed by the guidance offered by her inner voice, Lara sat down on the stone and leaned over the water. She took in her smooth, aubergine little snout, her delicate, pointed ears, her sleek, gleaming black fur. She *was* beautiful! And she was well kissed by the sun and well made love to by the moon.

For one whole day, Lara was content. When her co-wife asked her fearfully why she was smiling, Lara only opened her mouth wider, in a grin. The poor co-wife ran trembling off and found their husband, Baba, and dragged him back to look at Lara.

When Baba saw the smiling, well kissed, well made love to Lara, of course he could hardly wait to

POSSESSING THE SECRET OF JOY

get his paws on her! He could tell she was in love with someone else, and this aroused all his passion.

While Lala wept, Baba possessed Lara, who was looking over his shoulder at the moon.

Each day it seemed to Lara that the Lara in the stream was the only Lara worth having—so beautiful, so well kissed, and so well made love to. And her inner voice assured her this was true.

So, one hot day when she could not tolerate the shrieks and groans of Baba and Lala as they tried to tear each other's ears off because of her, Lara, who by now was quite indifferent to them both, leaned over and kissed her own serene reflection in the water, and held the kiss all the way to the bottom of the stream.

Olivia

This is the way Tashi expressed herself.

The way she talked and evaded the issue, even as a child. Her mother, Catherine, whose tribal name was Nafa, used to send her to the village shop for matches, which were a penny each. Tashi would be given three pennies. She would lose at least one of them. The story she would tell about the lost penny might go like this: That a giant bird, noticing the shimmer of the coin in the glass of water in which she'd temporarily stored the pennies for safekeeping and for aesthetic enjoyment, had swooped down from the sky, flapped its wings so boldly that the glass of water fell from her hand, and when next she looked, having hidden her face from the creature for fear of its large beak and outspread wings, why—dash! No more penny!

Her mother would scold, or she'd put her hands on her hips, shake her head sadly and make a self-pitying cry to the neighbors about this incorrigible little liar, her daughter.