



Chapter 2: Mavis

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-

Chapter 2: Mavis

1 folder (partial)

Contact Information

Download Information

Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 12:57:19 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/q524jt347>

CHAPTER TWO

MAVIS

Rev
x/b

The neighbors seemed pleased when the babies smothered. Probably because the mint green Cadillac in which they died had annoyed them for some time. They did all the right things of course: brought food, telephoned their sorrow, got up a collection, but the shine of excitement in their eyes was clear.

When the journalist came, Mavis sat in the corner of the sofa not sure whether to scrape the potato chip crumbs from the seams of the plastic cover or tuck them further in. But the journalist wanted the photo taken first, so the photographer ordered Mavis to the middle of the sofa with the surviving children on either side of their distraught and grieving mother. ^{She} Of course ~~they~~ asked for the ^{father too} husband. Jim? is it Jim Albright? But Mavis said he wasn't feeling so good, couldn't come out, they'd have to go ahead without him. The journalist and the photographer exchanged looks and Mavis thought they probably knew anyway that Frank--not Jim--was sitting on the edge of the bathtub drinking Seagrams without a glass.

Mavis moved to the center of the sofa and cleaned her fingernails of potato chip dust until the other children joined her. "The other children" is what they would always be now. Sal put her arm around her mother's waist. Frankie and Billy James were squished together on her right. Sal pinched her, hard. Mavis knew instantly that her daughter wasn't nervous before the camera and all, because the pinch grew long, pointed. Sal's fingernails were diving for blood.

"This must be terrible for you." Her name, she said, was June.

"Yes, mam. It's terrible for all of us."

"Is there something you want to say? Something you want other mothers to know?"

"Mam?"

June crossed her knees and Mavis saw that this was the first time she had worn the white high heeled shoes. The soles were barely smudged. "You know. Something to warn them, caution them, about negligence."

"Well." Mavis took a deep breath. "I can't think of any. I guess. I."

The photographer squatted, cocking his head as he examined the

possibilities.

"So some good can come out of this awful tragedy?" June's smile was sad.

Mavis straightened against the success of Sal's fingernails. The camera clicked. June moved her felt tipped pen into place. It was a fine thing. Mavis had never seen anything like it--made ink on the paper but dry, not all blotty. "I don't have nothing to say to strangers right now."

For the second time the photographer adjusted the front window shade and walked back to the sofa holding a black box to Mavis' face.

"I understand," said June. Her eyes went soft, but the shine was like ^{that} those of the neighbors. "And I do hate to put you through this, but maybe you could just tell me what happened? Our readers are ^{simply} just appalled. Twins and all. Oh, and they want you to know you are in their prayers every single day." She let her glance sweep the boys and Sal. "And you all, too. They are praying for each and every one of you."

Frankie and Billy James looked down at their bare feet. Sal rested her head on her mother's shoulder while she clenched the flesh

at Mavis' waist.

"So could you tell us?" June smiled a smile that meant "do me this favor."

"Well." Mavis frowned. She wanted to get it right this time. "He didn't want the Spam. I mean the kids like it but he don't so. In this heat you can't keep much meat. I had a whole chucksteak go green on me once so I went and took the car, just some weenies, and I thought, well, Merle and Pearl. I was against it at first but he said..."

"M. E. R. L. E.?"

"Yes, mam."

"Go on."

"They wasn't crying or nothing but he said his head hurt. I understood. I did. You can't expect a man to come home from that kind of work and have to watch over babies while I go get something decent to put in front of him I know that ain't right."

"So you took the twins. Why didn't you take the other children along?"

"It's a weasel out back," said Frankie.

"Groundhog," said Billy James.

"Shut!" Sal leaned over Mavis' stomach and pointed at her brothers.

June smiled. 'Wouldn't it have been safer,' she continued, "with the other children in the car? I mean, they're older."

Mavis slid her thumb under her bra strap pulling it back over her shoulder. "I wasn't expecting no danger. Higgledy Piggledy is just yonder. I could of went to the Convenience but their stuff sits too long for me."

"So you left the newborns in the car and went in to buy some chucksteak..."

"No mam. Weenies."

"Right. Weiners." June was writing quickly but didn't seem to be crossing out anything. "But what I want to ask is why did it take so long? To buy one item."

"It didn't. Take long. I couldn't of been in there more than five minutes, tops."

"Your babies suffocated, Mrs. Albright. In a hot car with the windows closed. No air. It's hard to see that happening in five minutes."

It could be sweat, but it hurt enough to be blood. She didn't

dare swat Sal's hand away or acknowledge the pain even slightly. Instead she scratched the corner of her mouth and said, "I've punished myself over that, but that's pretty near the most it could of been. I walked in there straight to the dairy section and picked up two packs of Amours which is high you know but I didn't even look for the price. Some of them is cheaper but just as good. But I was hurrying so I didn't look."

"You were hurrying?"

"Oh, yes mam. He was fit to be tied. Spam ain't nothing for a working man to eat."

"And weiners are?"

"I thought about chops. I thought about chops."

"Didn't you know your husband was coming home for supper, Mrs. Albright? Doesn't he come home for supper every day?"

She's a really nice person, Mavis thought. Polite. She didn't look around the room, or at the boys' feet, or jump at the crashing noise from the rear of the house followed by a flushing toilet.

The sound of the photographer snapping his cases was loud when the toilet stopped. "Got it," he said. "Real nice meeting you mam." He leaned in to shake Mavis' hand. His hair was the same

color as the reporter's.

"Get enough of the Cadillac?" asked June.

"Plenty," he ^{grinned} smiled and made an O with thumb and forefinger.

"You all be nice, hear?"

Sal left off squeezing her mother's waist. She leaned forward and concentrated on swinging her foot, only occasionally hitting Mavis' shin.

From where they sat no one in the room could see the Cadillac parked in front of the house. But it had been seen for months by everybody in the neighborhood and would now be seen by everybody in Hopewell, Maryland, since the photographer had taken more shots of it than he had of them. Mint green. Lettuce green. Cool. But the color wouldn't show in the newspaper. What would show would be the size, the flashiness of the place where babies had died. Babies forever unseen now because the mother did not even have a snap shot of their trusting faces.

Sal jumped up and screamed, "Ow! Look! A beetle!" and stomped on her mother's foot.

Mavis had said, "Yes, mam. He come home for supper every day," and wondered what that would be like: to have a husband who

came home everyday. For anything. After the reporter left she wanted to go look at the damage Sal had done to her side, but Frank was still in the bathroom, asleep probably, and it wasn't a good idea to bother him. She thought to clean the potato chip crumbs from the seams of the plastic covers, but where she wanted to be was in the Cadillac. It wasn't hers; it was his, yet Mavis loved it maybe more than he did and lied to him about losing the second set of keys. It was what she talked about last as June left, saying, "It ain't new, though. It's three years old. A '65." If she could, she would have slept out there, in the back seat, snuggled in the place where the twins had been, the only ones who enjoyed her company and weren't a trial. She couldn't, of course. Frank told her she better not touch let alone drive the Cadillac as long as she lived. So she was as surprised as anybody when she stole it.

"You all right?" Frank was already under the sheet and Mavis woke with a start of terror which dissolved quickly into familiar fright.

"I'm OK." She searched the darkness for a sign, trying to feel, smell his mood in advance. But he was a blank just the way he had

been at supper the evening of the newspaper interview. The perfect meatloaf (not too loose, not too tight--two eggs made the difference) must have pleased him. Either that or he had reached balance: enough in, enough at hand. In any case, he'd been easy, even playful at the table while the other children were downright bold. Sal had Frank's old shaving razor unfolded by her plate and asked her father a series of questions all starting with "Is it sharp enough to cut...?" And Frank would answer, "Cut anything from chin hair to gristle," or "Cut the eyelashes off a bedbug," eliciting peals of laughter from Sal. When Billy James spit Kool-Aid into Mavis' plate, his father said, "Hand me that catsup, Frankie, and Billy you stop playing in your mother's food, you hear?"

She didn't think it would take them long, and seeing how they were at supper, enjoying each other's jokes and all, she knew Frank would let the children do it. The newspaper people would think of something catchy, and June, "the only lady journalist the Hopewell Courier had," would do the human interest.

Mavis tried not to stiffen as Frank made settling down noises on the mattress. Did he have his shorts on? If she knew that she would know whether he was looking to have sex, but she couldn't find out

without touching him. As if to satisfy her curiosity, Frank snapped the waistband of his boxers. Mavis relaxed, permitted herself a sigh that she hoped sounded like a snore. The sheet was off before she could complete it. When he pulled her nightgown up he threw it over her face and she let that mercy be. She had misjudged, again. He was going to do this first and then the rest. The other children would be behind the door, snickering; Sal's eyes as cold and unforgiving as they were when told of the accident. Before Frank came to bed, Mavis had been dreaming of something important she was supposed to do, but couldn't remember what it was. Just as it came to her, Frank had asked her was she all right. Now she supposed she ^{really} was all right because the important thing she'd forgotten would never need doing anymore.

Would it be quick like most always? or long, wandering, collapsing in wordless fatigue?

It was neither. He didn't penetrate--just rubbed himself to climax while chewing a clump of her hair through the nightgown that covered her face. She could have been a life-size Raggedy-Ann.

Afterwards he spoke to her in the dark. "I don't know Mave. I just don't know."

Should she say, What? What you mean? What don't you know? Or keep quiet? Mavis chose silence because suddenly she understood that he was not talking to her but to the other children snickering behind the door.

"Maybe," he said. "Maybe we can fix it. Maybe not. I just don't know." He let out a deep yawn, then "Don't see how, though."

It was, she knew, the signal--to Sal, to Frankie, to Billy James.

The rest of the night she waited, not closing her eyes for a second. Frank's sleep was sound and she would have slipped out of bed (as soon as he had not smothered or strangled her) and opened the door except for the breathing beyond it. She was sure Sal squatted there--ready to pounce or grab her legs. Her upper lip would be raised showing eleven-year-old teeth too big for her snarling mouth. Dawn, Mavis thought, would be critical. The trap would be agreed upon but maybe not laid yet. Her sharpest concentration would be needed to locate it before it sprung.

At the first hint of gray light Mavis eased out of the bed. If Frank woke it was all over. Clutching a pair of red pedal pushers and a Daffy Duck sweat shirt, she made it to the bathroom. She took a soiled brassiere from the hamper and got dressed fast. No panties

and she couldn't go back in the bedroom for her shoes. The big thing was to get past the other children's room. The door stood open and, although there was no sound coming out, Mavis chilled at the thought of approaching it. Down the hall to the left was the little kitchen/dining room; the living room to the right. She would have to decide which way she was headed before she ran past that door. They would probably expect her to go straight to the kitchen as usual, so maybe she should shoot for the living room. Or maybe they counted on her changing a habit and the trap was not in the kitchen at all.

Suddenly she remembered her purse was in the living room, perched on the television cabinet that, when the set broke, had become a catch-all. And the spare keys were pinned under a tear in the purse's lining. Holding her breath, eyes wide to the darkness, Mavis padded quickly past the other children's open door. With her back exposed to that much danger she felt feverish--sweaty and cold together.

Not only was her purse where she remembered, Sal's galoshes were lying at the front door. Mavis grabbed the purse, stuck her feet in her daughter's yellow boots and escaped onto the front porch. She

did not look toward the kitchen and never saw it again.

Getting out of the house had been so intense, she was pulling the Cadillac away from the curb when she realized she had no idea of what to do next. She drove toward Peg's, a woman she didn't know all that well, but whose tears at the funeral impressed her. She had always wanted to know her better, but Frank found ways to prevent acquaintance from becoming friendship.

The one street light seemed miles away and the sun reluctant to rise, so she had a little trouble finding Peg's house. When, finally, she did, she parked across the street ^{to} and ^Twaited for stronger skylight before knocking on the door. Peg's house was dark, the shade of the picture window still down. Complete quiet. The wooden girl in the petunias, her face hidden by a fresh blue bonnet, tilted a watering can--a family of carved ducks lined at her heels. The lawn, edged and close-cut, looked like a carpet sample of expensive wool. Nothing moved, neither the tiny windmill nor the ivy surrounding it. At the side of the house, however, a rose of sharon, taller than Peg's roof and older, was shaking. Stirred by the air conditioner's exhaust it danced, roughing blossoms and buds to the grass. Wild, it looked, wild and Mavis' pulse raced with it. According to the Cadillac's clock it

wasn't five-thirty yet. Mavis decided to drive around for a while and return at a respectable hour. Six maybe. But they would be up, too, by then and Frank would see that the Caddie was gone. He would call the police for sure.

Mavis swung away from the curb sad and frightened by how dumb she was. Not only was the whole neighborhood familiar with the car, a photograph of it would be in today's paper. When Frank bought it and drove it home the men on the street had slapped the hood and grinned, leaned in to sniff the interior, hit the horn and laughed. Laughed and laughed some more because its owner had to borrow a lawn mower every couple of weeks; because its owner had no screens in his windows and no working television; because two of his six porch posts had been painted white three months ago--the rest still flaking yellow; because its owner sometimes slept behind the wheel of the car he'd traded in--all night--in front of his own house. And the women, who saw Mavis driving the children to *White Castle's* ~~Wendy's~~ wearing sunglasses on cloudy days, flat out stared before shaking their heads. As though they knew from the start that the Cadillac would someday be notorious.

Creeping ⁺ a twenty miles per hour, Mavis entered route 121

thankful for the little bit of darkness left. As she passed Harlan County Hospital, a silent ambulance glided out of the driveway. A green cross in a field of white slid from brilliant emergency light into shadow. Fifteen times she had been a patient there--four times for childbirth. During the next to last admission, when the twins were due, Mavis' mother came from New Jersey to help out. She kept house and minded the other children for three days. When the twins were delivered, she went back to Patterson--a three hour drive, thought Mavis. She could be there before The Secret Storm which she had missed all summer long.

a Qwik Ego
At an ~~Eagle~~ gas station, Mavis checked her wallet before she answered the attendant. Three ten dollar bills were folded behind her driver's license.

"Ten," she said.

"Gallons or dollars, mam?"

"Gallons."

In the adjacent lot Mavis noticed the window of a breakfast diner reflecting coral in the early light.

"Is that there place open?" she shouted over highway truck roar.

"Yes, mam."

Tripping occasionally on gravel, she walked toward the diner. Inside the waitress was eating crabcakes and grits behind the counter. She covered her plate with a cloth and touched the corners of her mouth before wishing Mavis a good morning and taking her order. When Mavis left, carrying a paper cup of coffee and two honey dips in a napkin, she caught the waitress's ^{wide smile} ~~face smiling broadly~~ in the Hines Root Beer mirror by the exit. The grin bothered her all the way back to the gas station until, stepping into the car, she saw her canary yellow feet.

Away from the pump, parked behind the diner, she put her breakfast on the dashboard while rummaging in the glove compartment. She found an unopened pint of Early Times, another bottle with an inch or so of scotch whiskey, paper napkins, a teething ring, several rubber bands, a pair of dirty socks, a battery-dead flashlight, a tube of lipstick, a Florida map, rolls of breath mints and a few traffic tickets. She dropped the teething ring into her purse, twisted her hair into a pitiful little pony tail that stuck out from the rubber band like hen feathers, and smeared the stranger's lipstick on her mouth. Then she sat back and sipped the coffee. Too nervous to

ask for milk or sugar, she'd ordered it black and could not force herself to take a third swallow. The stranger's lipstick smirked sloppily from the cardboard rim.

Patterson was ^{five} four hours, not three, and she had four dollars and seventy-six cents when she saw its sign. The Cadillac needed to drink ten gallons of gasoline every ninety miles. The fuel gauge touched E. Mavis wondered whether to call her mother or simply arrive. The latter seemed smarter. Frank may have called his mother-in-law by now or might do so any minute. Better if her mother could say truthfully "I don't know where she is."

Eighteenth Street looked narrower than she remembered and the stores were different. Early September and the northern leaves were already starting to turn. Driving underneath them, in the dappled hall they made, she felt as though the pavement slid forward instead of retreating. The faster she traveled, the more road appeared ahead.

The Cadillac shut down a block from her mother's house but Mavis managed to coast across the intersection and incline the automobile against the curb.

It was too soon. Her mother wouldn't be home from the pre-

school till the afternoon children had been picked up. The door key was no longer under the reindeer, so Mavis sat on the back porch and struggled out of the yellow boots. Her feet looked as though they belonged to somebody else.

Frank had already called. At five-thirty a.m. when Mavis was staring at Peg's rose of sharon. Birdie Goodroe told Mavis she had hung up on him after telling him she couldn't think what the hell he was talking about and who the hell did he think he was dragging her out of her sleep? She was not pleased. Not then and not later when her daughter tapped on the kitchen window looking like a bat out of hell which is what she said as soon as she opened the door. "Girl you look like a bat out of hell what you doing up here in little kiddie boots?"

"Ma. Let me come in."

Birdie Goodroe had just enough calf liver for two. Mother and daughter ate in the kitchen, Mavis presentable now--washed, combed, aspirined and swimming a little in Birdie's housedress.

"Well, let me have it. Not that I need to be told."

Mavis wanted some more of the baby peas and tipped the bowl to see if any were left.

"I could see this coming, you know. Anybody could," *Birdie continued.*

There were a few. A couple of tablespoons. Mavis scraped them onto her plate wondering if there was to be any dessert. Quite a bit of the fried potatoes were still in her mother's plate. "You going to eat those?" *Ma*

Birdie pushed her plate toward Mavis. There was a tiny square of liver too and some onions. Mavis scraped it all onto her plate.

"You still have children. Children need a mother. I know what you've been through, honey, but you do have other children."

The liver was a miracle. Her mother always got every particle of the ~~tight~~ *membrane* tissue off.

Ma "Ma. *Mavis wiped her lips with a paper napkin.* Why couldn't you make it to the funeral?"

Birdie straightened. "You didn't get the money order? And the flowers?"

"We got them."

"Then you know why. I had to choose--help bury them or pay for a trip. I couldn't afford to do both. I told you all that. I asked you all straight out, which thing would be the best and you both said the money, both of you said so, both."

"They're going to kill me, Ma."

**"Are you going to hold that over my head for the rest of my life?
All I've done for you and those children?"**

"They already tried but I got away."

**"You're all I have now your brothers gone and got themselves
shot up like...." Birdie slapped the table. "Does the government give
a shit?"**

"They got no right to kill me."

"What?"

"He's making the other children do it."

"What? Do what? Speak up so I can hear what you saying."

"I'm saying they are going to kill me."

"They? Who? Frank? What they?"

"All of them. The kids too."

"Kill you? Your children?"

**Mavis nodded. Birdie Goodroe widened her eyes first, then
looked into her lap as she held her forehead in the palm of her hand.**

**They didn't talk anymore for a while, but later at the sink, Birdie
asked, "Were the twins trying to kill you too?"**

**Mavis stared at her mother. "No! Oh, no Ma! Are you crazy?
They're babies!"**

"All right. All right. Just asking. It's unusual, you know, to think little children..."

"Unusual? It's, it's evil! But they'll do what he says. And now they'll do anything. They already tried, Ma!"

"Tried how? What did they do?"

"Sal had a razor and they was laughing and watching me. Every minute watching me."

"What did Sal do with the razor?"

"She had it next to her plate and she was looking at me. They all was."

Neither woman spoke about it again because Birdie told Mavis she could stay if and only if she never talked that way again. That she wouldn't tell Frank if he called back, or anybody else that she was there, but if she said one more word about killing she would call him right away.

In a week Mavis was on the road, but this time she had a plan. Days before she heard her mother talking low into the mouthpiece of the telephone, saying "You better get up here fast and I mean pronto," Mavis had walked around the house, while Birdie was at the Play-Skool, thinking : money, aspirin, paint, underwear; money,

aspirin, paint, underwear. She took all she could find of the first two, including two brown government envelopes propped against the photograph of one of her killed-in-action brothers. She took a pair of rhinestone clips from Birdie's jewelry box and stole back the car keys her mother thought she had hidden so well; poured two gallons of lawnmower gasoline into the Cadillac's tank and drove away for more. In Newark she found an Earl Scheib paint shop and waited two days in the Y dormitory until it was sprayed magenta. The twenty-nine dollars advertised turned out to be for a standard size car only. Sixty-nine dollars is what they made her pay for the Cadillac. The underwear and thong sandals she bought at Woolworth's. At a Goodwill she bought a pale blue pantsuit and a white cotton turtleneck. Just right, she thought, for California. Just right.

With a crisp new Mobile map beside her on the seat, she sped out of Newark looking for route 70. As more and more of the East was behind her, the happier she became. Only once had she felt this kind of happiness. On the Rocket ride she took as a kid. When the rocket zoomed on the downward swing the rush made her giddy with pleasure; when it slowed just before turning her upside down through the high arc of its circle the thrill was intense but calm. She squealed

with the other passengers but inside was the stable excitement of facing danger while safely strapped in strong metal. Sal hated it; so did the boys when ^{later on} she took them to the amusement park. Now, in flight to California, the memory of the Rocket ride and its feeling were with her at will.

According to the map the way was straight. All she had to do was find 70, stay on it until Utah, make a right on down to Los Angeles. Later she remembered traveling like that--straight. One state, then the next just as the map promised. But, other than the first and the last, she could not remember the order of the girls. Picking up girls was easiest. They were company, safe ~~she hoped~~, and they helped with gas, food and sometimes invited her to a place where they could crash. They dappled primary routes, intersections, ramps to bridges, the verges of gas stations and motels in hole-y jeans low on the hips and flared at the bottom. Flat hair swinging or picked out in Afro's. The white ones were the friendliest; the colored girls slow to melt. But all of them told her about the world before California. Underneath the knowing talk, the bell-chime laughter, the silences, the world they described was just like her own pre-California existence--sad, scarey, all wrong. High schools were

dumps, parents stupid, Johnson a creep, cops pigs, men rats, boys
-holes
asses.

The first girl was outside Zanesville. That's where, sitting in a roadside diner, counting her money, the run-away appeared. Mavis had noticed her going into the ladies room then, quite a bit later, come out dressed in different clothes: jeans, this time, and a flowing blouse that touched her thighs. Outside in the parking lot the girl ran to the Cadillac's passenger's window and asked for a lift. Smiling happily she jerked open the door when Mavis shrugged then nodded. The girl said her name--Sandra but call me Dusty--and talked for thirty-two miles. Not interested in anything about Mavis, ^{Dusty} ~~Sandy~~ ate two Mallo Bars and chattered, mostly about the owners of the six dog tags that hung from her neck. Boys in her highschool class or whom she had known in junior high. She'd got two from when they dated; the rest she begged from their families--souvenirs. All dead or missing.

Mavis agreed to drive through Columbus and drop Dusty at her girlfriend's house. They arrived in a soft rain. Someone had done the last mowing of the season. Dusty's hair matted in brown licks; the glorified scent of newly cut grass in rain, the clink of dog tags, half a

Mallo. That was Mavis' memory of her first detour with a ^{hitch-hiker} ~~run-away~~.

Except for the last, the others were out of sequence. Was it in Colorado where she saw a man sitting on a bench under pines in a rest area? He ate slowly, very slowly while he read a newspaper. Or before? It was sunny, cold. Anyway somewhere around that place she picked up the girl who stole her rhinestone clips. But earlier, near St. Louis was it? she opened the passenger door to two girls shivering on route 70. Wind beaten, their army jackets closed tight around their chins, leather clogs, thick gray socks--they wiped their noses while their hands were still pocketed.

Not far, they said. A place just a few miles out, they said. The place, a sparkling green cemetery, was anything but quiet. Lines of cars necklaced the entrance. Groups of people, solitary strollers, all patient in the wind, mixed with boys from a military school. The girls thanked Mavis and got out, running a little to join a set of graveside mourners. Mavis lingered, amazed by the unnatural brightness of the green. What she thought were military students turned out to be real soldiers--but young, so young and as fresh-looking as the headstones they stood before.

It must have been after that when Mavis picked up Bennie--the ^{last one} ~~and the~~

one she liked best and who stole her raincoat and Sal's boots. Bennie was glad to know that, like her, Mavis was going all the way to L.A. She, Bennie, was heading for San Diego. Not a talker, small or big, Bennie sang. Songs of true love, false love, redemption; songs of unreasonable joy. Some drew tears, others were deliberately silly. Mavis sang along once in a while but mostly she listened and in one hundred and seventy-two miles never got tired of hearing her. Mile after mile rolled by urged and eased by Bennie's beautiful aching voice.

She didn't like to eat at highway stops; ^{they were} if there because Mavis insisted on it Bennie drank only water while Mavis wolfed down cheese melts and fries. Twice Bennie directed them through towns searching for colored neighborhoods where they could eat "healthy," she said. At those places ^{Bennie} she ate slowly, steadily, with repeat orders, side dishes and always something to go. She was careful with her money but didn't seem worried about it, and shared the cost at every single gas pump.

Mavis never learned what she planned to do, or who meet in L.A. (well, San Diego). "To get it on," was her single answer to Mavis' inquiry. Nevertheless in [tk] she disappeared along with Mavis' clear

plastic raincoat and Sal's yellow boots. Odd, because there was a five dollar bill attached to the gear shift with a rubber band. They had finished the barbecue and potato salad in a tacky restaurant named Hickey's. Bennie's "to go" order was wrapped and sitting on the table. "I'll take care of this," she said nodding toward the check. "You go on to the toilet before we hit the road." When Mavis came out, Bennie and her "ribs-to-go" were gone.

"How the hell I know," was what the waitress said. "She didn't leave even a penny tip."

and placed it on the counter. She

Mavis fished out a quarter [^] and waited a few minutes in the car before trying to find her way back to sweet 70.

The silence Bennie left in the Cadillac was unbearable. Mavis kept the radio on constantly and if one of Bennie's songs came on, she sang too, mourning the inferior rendition.

Panic struck in an ESSO station.

Returning the restroom key Mavis looked through the plate glass window. Beyond, under the ^{fluorescent pump} ESSO lights Frank was leaning into the Cadillac window. Could he have grown that much hair in two weeks? And his clothes. Black leather jacket, shirt opened almost to his navel, gold chains. Mavis buckled and when the attendant stared ^{at her} she

As though
'd
tried to make it look like she stumbled. There was nowhere to run. She rummaged the Colorado maps in the rack. She looked again. He was gone. Parked close by, she thought, waiting for her to emerge.

I'll scream, she told herself, pretend I don't know him, fight him, call the police. The car was no longer mint green--but, Oh God the license plate was the same. She had the reg. Suppose he brought the title papers; was there a bulletin out? She could not stand still. There was no retreat. Mavis went forward. Not running. Not tripping. Head down, searching her purse calmly for a twenty dollar bill.

Once back in the car, waiting for the attendant to collect the money, she examined her surroundings in the rear and side view windows. Nothing. She paid, ^{got the change} and turned on the ignition. Right then the black jacketed, open shirt torso appeared in the right hand mirror. Gold links catching ^o fluorescent light. Hard as she tried to control it the Cadillac lurched out of the gas lane. Scared now, she forgot what to look for. Junction what. Turn right to go south. No, west. Leave 70 at what. But this was east. Exit ramp goes where.

An hour later she was travelling ^a road already driven twice before. Exiting as soon as possible, she found herself on a narrow bridge and a street lined with warehouses. Secondary routes, she

decided, would be better anyway. Fewer police, fewer street lights. Trembling at every traffic light, she made it out of town. She was on US tk. when night came and drove on and on until there was nothing but fumes to fuel the engine. The Cadillac neither sighed nor coughed. It simply stopped in a well of darkness, headlights picking out thirty feet of tarmac. Mavis switched off the lights and locked the doors. A little courage, she whispered. Like the girls running ^{from} ~~away~~; running toward. If they could roam around, jump in cars, hitch-hike to burials, search strange neighborhoods for food, make their own way alone or with only each other for protection, certainly she could wait in darkness for morning to come. She had done it all of her adult life, was able to sleep ^{best} ~~well~~ only in daylight. Besides and after all, she was not a teenager; she was a twenty-seven year old mother of--

Early Times didn't help. The tears wet her chin, crept down her neck anyway. What it did eventually was knock her out.

Mavis woke felt-mouthed, ugly, unfocussed and knew she was ravenous because the sun, watermelon red, looked edible. The screaming blue horizon that surrounded her was minus invitation or reproach, and supported by a billion miles of not one thing.

There was no choice; she relieved herself as Dusty had taught

her, got back in the car to wait for another one to pass by. Bennie was smart; she never left anywhere without a dripping box of food. Mavis felt her stupidity close in on her head like a dry sack. A grown woman who could not cross the country. Could not make a plan that accommodated more than twenty minutes. Had to be taught how to dry herself in the weeds. Too rattle-minded to open a car's window so babies could breathe. She did not know now why she had run from the gold links coming toward her. Frank was right. From the very beginning he had been absolutely right about her: *She was the dumbest bitch on earth.*

During the wait, in which no car or truck or bus approached, she dozed, woke to awful thoughts, dozed again. Suddenly she sat up, wide awake, and decided not to starve--not by herself anyway. Would the road girls just sit there? Would Dusty? Bennie? Mavis looked closely at the surroundings. The billion miles of not-one-thing had trees in the distance. Was this grass or a crop of some kind? Every road went somewhere, didn't it? Mavis collected her purse, looked for her raincoat and discovered it was gone. "Christ!" she shouted and slammed the door.

The rest of the morning she stayed on the same road. When the sun was highest, she turned into a narrower one because it offered

shade. Still tarmac, but not enough room for two automobiles to pass each other without using the shoulder.

at the same time. When the road ran out of trees, she saw ahead to the left a house. It looked small but close and it took a while for her to discover it was neither. She had to negotiate acres of corn to arrive. Either the house was backwards or it had no driveway. As she drew closer she saw it was stone, sandstone, maybe, but dark with age. There seemed at first to be no windows but then she made out the beginning of a porch and saw the reflection of huge windows on the ground floor. Circling to the right she glimpsed a driveway leading not to the front door but around to the side. Mavis turned left. The grass near the porch was tended. (over) Mavis climbed the stairs and knocked on the door. No answer. She walked around to the driveway side and saw a dark woman sitting in a red wooden chair at the edge of a vegetable garden.

"Excuse me," Mavis called, her hands funnelling around her mouth.

The woman faced her, but Mavis couldn't tell if she was looking at her. She was wearing sunglasses.

"Excuse me," Mavis moved closer. No need to shout now. "I broke down a ways back. Can anybody help? Is there someone I can place

Claws gripped the ~~face~~^{fingals} on
either side of the stone steps

call?"

The woman stood up, gathering the hem of her apron in both hands, and came forward. The sun was beating hard; a cool wind kicked up, turning the brim of the woman's hat back.

"No telephone out here," she said. "Come inside."

Mavis followed her into the kitchen where the woman dumped pecans from her apron into a box by the stove and removed her filthy hat. Then she slid out of her horrible shoes, propped open the door with a brick and removed her sunglasses. The kitchen was big, full of smells and a woman's solitary mess. Her back turned to Mavis she asked her "You a drinking woman?"

Mavis didn't know if a drink was being offered or solicited.

"No, I'm not."

"Lies not allowed in this place. In this place every true thing is okay."

fix Startled, Mavis breathed into her palm. *ch.* "I drank some of my husband's liquor a while ago, but I'm not what you'd call a drinking woman. I was just, well, wrung out. Driving so long and then running out of gas."

The woman busied herself lighting the stove.

"I forgot to ask your name. Mine's Mavis Albright."

"They call me Connie."

"I'd appreciate some coffee, Connie, if you got any."

Connie nodded without turning around.

"You work here?"

"I work here." Connie lifted her two Hiawatha braids from her chest and dropped them behind her shoulders.

"Is any of the family here? Seem like I knocked for the longest time."

"No family. Just her upstairs. She couldn't answer the door if she wanted to and she don't want to."

"I'm headed out by California. You think you can help me get some gas back to my car? Show me the way out of here?"

The woman sighed at the stove, but didn't reply.

"Connie?"

"I'm thinking."

Mavis looked around the kitchen which seemed to her as large as her junior high school cafeteria, including the swinging wooden doors. She imagined rooms full of rooms outside that door.

"You all ain't scared out here by yourselves? Don't seem like

there's nothing for miles outside."

Connie laughed. "Scarey things not always outside. Most scarey things is inside." She turned from the stove with a bowl and placed it before Mavis who looked in despair at the steaming potatoes over which a pat of butter melted. The Early Times drunk left her nauseous--not hungry--but she said thank you and accepted the fork in Connie's hand. Anyway, she could smell the coffee.

Connie sat down next to her. "Maybe I go with you," she said.

Mavis looked up. It was the first time she saw the woman's face without the sunglasses. Quickly she looked back at the food and poked the fork into the bowl.

"What you say me and you go to California?"

Mavis felt, but could not face, the woman's smile. Had she washed her hands before warming up the potatoes? Her smell was walnuts, not pecans. "What about your job here?" Mavis forced herself to taste a tiny bit of potato. Salty.

"It's by the sea, California?"

"Yeah. Right on the coast."

"Be nice to see water again." Connie kept her eyes on Mavis' face. "Wave after wave after wave. Big water. Blue, blue, blue,

yes?"

"That's what they say. Sunny California, beaches, oranges..."

"Maybe too sunny for me." Connie got up abruptly and went to the stove.

"Can't be sunnier than here." The butter, salt and pepper mashed into the potatoes weren't all that bad. Mavis was eating rapidly. "Go for miles and don't see a speck of shade."

"True," said Connie. She placed two cups of coffee and a pot of honey on the table. "Too much sunshine in the world. Uex me. Can't take it no more."

A breeze swept through the kitchen door displacing the food smell with a sweeter one. Mavis thought she would gulp the coffee when it arrived, but the satisfaction of the hot salty potatoes made her patient. Following Connie's example she spooned honey into her cup, stirring slowly.

"Did you think up anything about how I can get me some gasoline?"

"Wait a while. Today maybe, tomorrow maybe. People be out to buy."

"Buy? Buy what?"

"Garden things. Things I cook up. Things they don't want to grow themselves."

"And one of them can take me to get some gas?"

"Sure."

"Suppose nobody comes?"

"Always come. Somebody always come. Every day. This morning already I sold forty-eight ears of corn and a whole pound of peppers." She patted her apron pocket.

Blowing gently into her cup, Mavis went to the kitchen door and looked out. When she first arrived she was so happy to find someone at home, she had not looked closely at the garden. Now, behind the red chair, she saw flowers mixed in with or parallel to rows of vegetables. In some places staked plants grew in a circle, not a line, in high mounds of soil. Chickens clucked out of sight. One part of the garden she originally thought gone to weed became, on closer inspection, a patch of melons. An empire of corn beyond.

"You didn't do all that by yourself, did you?"

"Except the corn," said Connie.

"Wow."

Connie put the breakfast bowl in the sink. "You want to clean

yourself up a bit?"

The rooms full of rooms Mavis imagined to be lying through the swinging doors had kept her from asking to go to a bathroom. Here in the kitchen she felt safe; the thought of leaving it disturbed her. "I'll wait to see who comes by. Then I'll try to get myself together. I know I look a sight." She smiled hoping the refusal did not signal her apprehension.

"Suit yourself," said Connie and, sunglasses in place, patted Mavis' shoulder as she stepped into her shoes and on out to the yard.

Left alone Mavis expected the big big kitchen to lose its comfort. It didn't. In fact she had an outer rim sensation that the kitchen was crowded with children--laughing? singing?--two of whom were Merle and Pearl. Squeezing her eyes shut to dissipate the impression only strengthened it. When she opened her eyes, Connie was there dragging a thirty-two quart basket over the floor.

"Come on," she said. "Make yourself useful."

Mavis frowned at the pecans and shook her head at the nut crackers, picks and bowls Connie was assembling. "No," she said, "think of something else I can do to help. Shelling that stuff would make me crazy."

"No it wouldn't. Try it."

"Uh uh. Not me." Mavis watched as she organized the tools.

"Shouldn't you put some newspaper down? Be easier to clean up."

"No newspapers in this house. No radio either. Any news we get have to be from somebody telling it face to face."

"Just as well," Mavis said. "All the news these days is bad as can be. Can't do nothing about it anyway."

"You give in too quick. Look at your nails. Strong, curved like a bird's, perfect pecan hands. Fingernails like that take the meat out whole every time. Beautiful hands yet you say you can't. ~~Make you~~ crazy. Make me crazy to see good nails go to waste."

Later, watching her suddenly beautiful hands moving at the task, Mavis was reminded of her sixth grade teacher opening a book: lifting the corner of the binding, stroking the edge to touch the bookmark, caressing the page, letting the tips of her fingers trail down the lines of print. The melty-thigh feeling she got watching her. Now, working pecans, she tried to economize her gestures without sacrificing their grace. Connie, having launched her into the chore, was gone, saying she had to "see about Mother." Sitting at the table smelling the pleasure the wind brought through the door, Mavis

woman's absence seemed much too long, Mavis heard a car crunching gravel. Then braking. A door slap.

"Hey, old lady." A woman's voice, light, loose.

Mavis turned and saw a dark-skinned woman, limber and moving quickly, mount the steps and halt when she didn't see what she expected.

"Oh, excuse me."

"That's okay," said Mavis. "She's upstairs. Connie."

"I see."

Mavis thought the woman was looking very carefully at her clothes.

"Oh, lovely," she said, coming to the table. "Just lovely." She stuck her fingers into the bowl of pecans and gathered a few. Mavis expected her to eat some, but she let them fall back to the heap.

"What's Thanksgiving without pecan pie? Not a thing."

Neither one of them heard the bare feet plopping and, since the swinging doors had no sound, Connie's entrance was like an apparition.

"There you are!" The ^{black}woman opened her arms. Connie entered them for a long swaying hug. "I scared this girl to death. Never saw

wondered how old Connie's mother was. Judging by the age of her daughter, she would have to be in her nineties. Also, how long before a customer would come? Had anybody bothered the Cadillac yet? At whatever gas station she got to would there be a map showing the way back to sweet 70, or better still, to X? With luck she'd be on her way by supertime. With no luck, she'd be ready to leave in the morning. She would be back on concrete, listening to the car radio that had got her through the silence Bennie left, hours of non-stop driving--two fingers impatiently punching or twirling for the better song, the nicer voice. Now the radio was across a field, down one road then another. Off. In the space where its sound ought to be was--nothing. Just an absence which she did not think she could occupy properly without the framing bliss of the radio. From the table where she sat admiring her busy hands the radio-absence spread out. A quiet, secret fire breathing itself and exhaling the sounds of its increase: the crack of shells, the tick of nut meat tossed in the bowl, cooking utensils in eternal adjustment, insect-whisper, the argue of long grass, the far away cough of cornstalks.

It was peaceful, but she wished Connie would return lest she start up again--imagining babies singing. Just as the length of the

stranger side
a visitor in here before."

"Our first," said Connie. "Mavis Albright this is Soane Morgan."

"Hi, hon."

"Morgan. Mrs. Morgan."

Mavis' face warmed, but she smiled anyway and said, "Sorry. Mrs. Morgan," while taking note of the woman's expensive oxford shoes, sheer stockings, wool cardigan and the cut of her dress: summer weight crepe, light blue.

Soane opened a black crocheted purse. "I brought some more, Connie," she said and held up a pair of aviator style sunglasses.

"Good. I got just one pair left."

Soane glanced at Mavis. "She eats sunglasses."

"Not me. This house eats them." Fitting the stems behind her ears, Connie tested the dark lenses at the doorway. She turned her face directly to the sun and the "hah!" she shouted was full of defiance.

"Somebody order shelled pecans or is this your idea?"

"My idea."

"Make a lot of pies."

"Make more than pie." Connie rinsed the sunglasses under the

sink tap and peeled away the sticker.

"I don't want to hear so don't tell me. I came for the you-know-what."

Connie nodded. "Can you get this girl some gasoline for her automobile? Take her and bring her back?" She was drying and polishing the new glasses, checking for spots and lint from the towel.

"Where is your car?" asked Soane. There was wonder in her voice, as though she doubted anyone in thongs, wrinkled slacks and a child's dirty shirt could have a car.

"Route ¹⁸X," Mavis told her. "Took me hours to walk here, but in a car..."

Soane nodded. "Happy to. ^{But I'll have to get somebody else to drive you back. I would} ~~I'd drive you back here as well,~~ but I've got too much to do. Both my boys due on furlough." Proudly, she looked at Connie. "House'll be full before I know it." Then, "How's Mother?"

"Can't last."

"You sure Demby or Middletown's not a better idea?"

Connie slipped the aviator glasses into her apron pocket and headed for the pantry. "She wouldn't draw but one breath in a hospital. The second one would be her last."

placed in a basket for
The packet Connie ~~had given~~ to Soane Morgan could have been a
grenade. Positioned on the seat of the Impala between them it
emanated tension. The easy talk in the kitchen disappeared. ~~Olive~~,^{Soane}
suddenly formal, said very little, answered Mavis' questions with the
least information and asked none of her own.

"Connie's nice, isn't she?"

Soane looked at her. "Yes. She is."

For twenty minutes they travelled. Soane cautious at every rise
or turn of the road, however slight. She seemed to be on the lookout
for something. Occasionally she touched the ~~packet~~^{basket}. They stopped at
a one-pump gas station in the middle of nowhere and asked the man
who limped to the window for five gallons to carry. There was an
argument, peppered with long silences, about the five gallon can. He
wanted Mavis to pay for it; she said she would return it when she
came back to fill her tank. He doubted it. Finally they settled for a
two dollar deposit. Soane and Mavis drove away, turned into another
road heading east for what seemed like an hour. Pointing toward a
fancy wooden sign, Soane said "Here we are." The sign read Ruby pop.
360 on top and Lodge 16 at the bottom.

Mavis' immediate impression of the little town was how still it was, as though no one lived there. Except for a feed store ^{and a Savings bank} it had no recognizable business district. They drove down a wide street past enormous lawns cut to dazzle in front of pastel-colored houses.

Soane turned into a side street of flower gardens ^{wider} larger than the houses and snowed with butterflies.

The odor of the five-gallon can had been fierce in Soane's car. But in the boy's truck, propped between Mavis' feet, it was indistinguishable from the others. The glue-y, oily, metal-y combination might have made her retch if he had not done voluntarily what Mavis had been unable to ask of ^{Soane:} ~~Olive~~. Turn on the radio. The disc jockey announced the tunes as though they were made by his family or best friends: King Solomon, Brother Otis, Dinah baby, Ike and Tina girl, Sister Dakota, the Temps.

As they bounced along Mavis, cheerful now, enjoyed the music and the shaved part in the boy's hair. Although he was pleasanter than Soane he didn't have much more to say. They were several miles away from Ruby pop. 360 and listening to the seventh of Jet Magazine's top twenty when Mavis realized that, other than the gas

station guy, she had not seen a single white.

"Any white people in your town?"

"Not to live, they ain't. Come on business sometime."

When they ^{glanced} ~~passed~~ ^{mentioned in the distance} the ~~house~~ on the way to the Cadillac, he asked, "What's it like in there?"

"I only been in the kitchen," Mavis answered.

"Two old ^{women} ~~folks~~ in that big of a place. Don't seem right."

The Cadillac was unmolested but so hot the boy licked his fingers before and after he unscrewed the gas cap. And he was nice enough to start the engine for her, and tell her to leave the doors open for a while before she got in. Mavis did not have to struggle to get him to accept money--Soane had been horrified--and he drove off to the sound of Marvin Gaye. [?]

Behind the wheel, cooling in the air conditioned air, Mavis regretted not having noticed the radio station's number on the dashboard of the boy's truck. She fiddled the dial constantly as she drove the Cadillac back to Connie's house. She parked and the Cadillac, dark red, like old blood, stayed there for two years.

It was already sunset when the boy started the engine. Also she had forgotten to ask him for directions. Also she couldn't remember

where the gas station was and didn't want to search for it in the dark. Also Connie had stuffed and roasted a chicken. But her decision to spend the night was mostly because of Mother.

The whiteness at the center was blinding. It took a moment for Mavis to see the shape articulated among the pillows and the bone white sheets, and she might have remained sightless longer had not an authoritative voice said, "Don't stare, child."

Connie bent over the foot of the bed and reached under the sheet. With her right hand she raised Mother's heels and with her left fluffed the pillows underneath them. Muttering "Toe nails like razors," she resettled the feet gently.

When her eyes grew accustomed to dark and light, Mavis saw a bedshape far too small for a sick woman--almost a child's bed--and a variety of tables and chairs in the rim of black that surrounded it. Connie selected something from one of the tables and leaned into the light that ringed the patient. Mavis, following her movements, was startled to see her apply vaseline to lips in a face paler than the white cloth wrapped around the sick woman's head.

"There must be something that tastes better than this," said Mother, trailing the tip of her tongue over her oiled lips.

"Food," said Connie. "How about some of that?"

"No."

"Just a bit of chicken?"

"No. Who is this you brought in here? Why did you bring somebody in here?"

"I told you. Woman with a car need help."

"That was yesterday."

"No it wasn't. This morning I told you."

"Well, hours ago then, but who invited her into my privacy? Who did that?"

"Guess. You that's who. Want your scalp massaged?"

"Not now. What is your name, child?"

Mavis whispered it from the dark she stood in.

"Step closer. I can't see anything unless it's right up on me. Like living in an eggshell."

"Disregard her," Connie told Mavis. "She sees everything in the universe." Drawing a chair bedside, ^{Connie} ~~she~~ sat down, took the woman's hand and one by one stroked back the cuticles on each crooked finger.

Mavis moved closer, into the circle of light, resting her hand on the metal foot of the bed.

"Are you all right now? Is your automobile working?"

"Yes, mam. It's fine. Thank you."

"Where are your children?"

Mavis could not speak.

"There used to be a lot of children here. This was a school once.

A beautiful school. For girls. Indian girls."

Mavis looked at Connie, but when she returned her glance, Mavis quickly lowered her eyes.

The woman in the bed laughed lightly. "It's hard, isn't it," she said, "looking in those eyes. When she came here they were green as grass."

"And yours was blue," said Connie.

"Still are."

"So you say."

"What color, then?"

"Same as me--old lady wash-out color."

"Hand me a mirror, child."

"Give her nothing."

"I'm still in charge here."

"Sure. Sure."

All three watched the ^{brown} ~~black~~ fingers gentling the white ones. The woman in the bed sighed. "Look at me. Can't sit up by myself and arrogant to the end. God must be laughing His head off."

"God don't laugh and He don't play."

"Yes, well, you know all about Him, I'm sure. Next time you see Him, tell Him to let the girls in. They bunch around the door, but they don't come in. I don't mind in the daytime but they worry my sleep at night. You're feeding them properly? They're always so hungry. There's plenty, isn't there? Not those frycake things they like but good hot food the winters are so bad we need coal a sin to burn trees on the prairie yesterday the snow sifted in under the door Sister Roberta ^{is peeling} ~~has~~ the onions..."

Connie folded Mother's hands on the sheet and stood, signalling Mavis to follow her to the door.

"I thought she was your mother. I mean the way you talked, I thought she was your own mother." They were descending the wide central stairs.

"She is my mother. Your mother too. Whose mother you?"

Mavis did not answer partly because she couldn't speak of it but also because she was trying to remember where, in a house with

no electricity, the light in Mother's room came from.

After the roast chicken supper, Connie showed Mavis to a large bedroom. From the four cots in it, she chose the one closest to the window where she knelt looking out. Two milky moons, instead of the one hanging there, would have been just like Connie's eyes. Beneath them a swept world. Unjudgemental. Tidy. Ample. Forever.

California, which way?

Maryland, which way?

Merle? Pearl?

The lion cub that ate her up that night had blue eyes instead of brown and he did not have to hold her down this time. When he circled her shoulders with his left paw, she willingly let her head fall back, clearing the way to her throat. Nor did she fight herself out of the dream. The bite was juicy, but she slept through that as well as other things until the singing woke her.

Mavis Albright left the Convent off and on but always she came back, so she was there in 1976.

On that July day she had been aware for months of the sourness between the Convent and the town and she might have anticipated the truckload of men prowling the mist. But other things distracted

her. Cigarette smoke, for example. But weary from the stress of the evening before, she let herself sleep on. An hour later, shooing pullets out of the schoolroom, she heard footsteps and smelled the merest trace of spearmint.