



Chapter 9: Save-Marie

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Citation Information

Morrison, Toni. 1931-
Chapter 9: Save-Marie
1 folder (partial)

Contact Information

Download Information

Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 12:57:36 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/p5547w95h>

Rev 8/28

CHAPTER NINE

SAVE-MARIE

"This is why we are here: in this single moment of aching sadness--in contemplating the short life and the unacceptable incomprehensible death of a child--we confirm, defer or lose our faith. Here in the tick tock of this moment, in this place all our questions, all our fear, our outrage, confusion, desolation seem to merge, snatch away the earth and we feel as though we are falling. Here, we might say, it is time to halt, reject platitudes about sparrows falling under His eye; about the good dying young (this child didn't have a choice about being good); or about death being the only democracy. This is the time to ask the questions that are really on our minds. Who could do this to a child? Who could permit this for a child? And why?

Sweetie Fleetwood wouldn't discuss it. Her child would not be laid to rest on Steward Morgan's land. It was a brand new problem: the subject of burial sites had not come up in Ruby for twenty years and there was astonishment as well as sadness when the task became necessary. When Save-Marie, the youngest of Sweetie and Jeff's children, died, people assumed the rest of them, Noah, Esther and Ming, would quickly follow. The first was given a strong name for a strong son and the name of his great grandfather. The second was named Esther for the grandmother who loved and cared for the first so selflessly. The third had a name Jeff insisted upon--something having to do with the war. This last child's name was a plea (or a demand): Save-Marie, and who was to say that perhaps after eight years the call had been answered. Thus the tense discussion of a formal cemetery was not only because of Sweetie's wishes and the expectation of more funerals, but a sense that, for complicated reasons, the reaper was no longer barred entry from Ruby. Richard Misner was therefore presiding over consecrated ground and launching a new institution. But whether to use the ad hoc cemetery on Steward's ranch--where Ruby Smith lay--was a question out of the question for Sweetie. Under the influence of her brother, Luther, and

blaming Steward for the trouble he got her husband and father-in-law into, said she would rather do what Roger Best had done (dug a grave on his own property) and she couldn't care less that twenty-two years had passed since that quick and poorly attended backyard burial took place.

Most people understood why she was making such a fuss (grief plus blame was a heady brew) but Pat Best believed that her stubbornness was more calculated. Rejecting a Morgan offer, casting doubt on Morgan righteousness might squeeze some favors from Morgan pockets. And if Pat's 8-rock theory were correct, Sweetie's vindictiveness put the 8-rocks in the awkward position of deciding to have a real and formal cemetery in a town full of immortals. Something seismic had happened since July. So here they were, on a mild November day, gathered east of the stream, a mile or so beyond the last Ruby house, which was, of course, Morgan land, but nobody had the heart to tell Sweetie so. Standing among the crowd surrounding the bereaved Fleetwoods, Pat regained something close to stability. Earlier at the funeral service the absence of a eulogy had made her cry. Now she was her familiar dispassionately amused self. At least she hoped she was dispassionate, and hoped

amusement was what she was feeling. She knew there were other views about her attitude, some of which Richard Misner had expressed ("Sad. Sad and cold."), but she was a scholar not a doubter and steeled herself against Misner's graveside words.

He and Anna Flood had returned two days after the Convent assault and it took four days for him to learn what happened. Pat gave him the two editions of the official story 1)--that nine men had gone to talk to and persuade the Convent women to leave or mend their ways; there had been a fight; the women took other shapes and disappeared into thin air. And 2) (The Fleetwood/Jury Version) that five men had gone to evict the women; that four others--the authors--had gone to restrain or stop them; these four were attacked by the Convent women but had succeeded in driving them out and they took off in their Cadillac; that unfortunately, some of the five had lost their heads and killed the old woman. What Pat withheld from Richard was her own interpretation. That nine 8-rocks murdered five harmless women because a) the women were impure (not 8-rock), b) the women were unholy (fornicators at the least, abortionists at most) and c) because they *could*--which was what being an 8-rock meant to them and was also what the "deal" required.

Richard didn't believe either of the gospelized stories, and spoke to Simon Cary and Senior Pulliam who clarified other parts of the tale. But because neither had decided on the meaning of the ending and, therefore, had not been able to formulate a credible sermonizeable account of it, they could not assuage Richard's dissatisfaction. It was Lone who provided him with the vivid details that several people were quick to discredit because Lone, they said, was not reliable. Except for her, no one else overheard the men at the Oven and who knew what they really said?; like the rest of the witnesses she arrived after the shooting took place; besides she and Dovey could be wrong about whether the two women in the house were dead or wounded and, finally, she didn't see anybody outside the house, living or dead.

As for Lone, at first she went rigid at the way the story was being retold; how people were changing it to make themselves look good. Other than Deacon Morgan, who had nothing to say, every one of the assaulting men had a different tale and their families and friends (who had been nowhere near the Convent) supported them, enhancing, recasting, inventing misinformation. Although the DuPres, Beauchamps, Sands and the Floods backed up her version even their

reputation for precision and integrity could not prevent the alteration of the truth in other quarters. If there were no victims the story of the crime was play for anybody's tongue. So Lone shutup and kept what she knew folded in her brain: God had given Ruby a second chance. Had made Himself so visible and unarguable a presence even the outrageously prideful (like Steward) and the uncorrectibly stupid (like his lying nephew) ought to be able to see it. He had actually swept away His servants in broad daylight, for goodness sake! right before their very eyes, for Christ's sake! Since they were calling her a liar, she decided to keep quiet and watch the hand of God work the disbelievers and the false witnesses. Would they know they'd been spoken to? Or would they drift further from His ways? One thing, for sure, they could see the Oven; they couldn't misread or misspeak that, so they had better hurry up and fix its slide before it was too late--which it might already be for the young people had changed its words again. No longer were they calling themselves Be the Furrow of His Brow. The graffitti on the hood of the Oven was We Are the Furrow of His Brow.

However sharp the divisions about what really took place, Pat knew the big and agreed upon fact was that everyone who had been

there left the premises certain that law men would be happily swarming all over town (they'd killed a white woman, after all)--arresting virtually all of Ruby's businessmen. When they learned there were no dead to report, transport or bury, relief was so great, they began to forget what they'd done or seen. Had it not been for Luther Beauchamp--who told the most damning story-- and Pious, Deed Sands and Aaron--who corroborated much of Lone's version--the whole thing might have been sanitized out of existence. Yet even they could not bring themselves to report unnatural deaths in a house with no bodies which might lead to the discovery of natural deaths in an automobile full of bodies. Though not privy to many people's confidence, Pat gathered from talks with her father, Kate and from deliberate eavesdropping that four months later they were still chewing the problem, asking God for guidance if they were wrong; if white law should, contrary to everything they knew and believed, be permitted to deal with matters heretofore handled among and by them. The difficulties churned and entangled everybody: distribution of blame, pleas for understanding and forgiveness; arrogant self-defense; outright lies and a host of unanswered questions which Richard Misner kept putting to them. So

the funeral came as a pause but not a conclusion.

Maybe they were right about this place all along, Pat thought, surveying the mourners. Maybe Ruby is lucky. No, she corrected herself. This luck is superficial. Although the evidence of the assault was invisible, the consequences were not. There was Jeff, his arm around his wife, both looking properly sorrowful, but slightly majestic too for Jeff was now entire owner of his father's furniture and appliance store. Arnold, suddenly a very old man with a persistent headache, and enjoying his own bedroom now that Arnette had moved out, stood with bowed head and roaming eyes that traveled everywhere but the coffin. Sargeant Person looked as smug as ever : he had no landlord expecting a field fee and unless and until the county auditor got interested in a tiny hamlet of quiet Godfearing black folk, his avarice would go unabated. Harper Jury, uncontrite, was wearing a dark blue suit and a head wound that like a medal gave him leave to assume the position of bloodied but unbowed warrior against evil. Menus was the most unfortunate. He had no customers at Anna's anymore in part because his ruined shoulder restricted his facility with barber tools but also because his drinking had extended itself to many more days of the week. His dissipation was rapidly

coming to its own conclusion. Wisdom Poole had the toughest row to hoe. Seventy family members held him accountable just as they had his brothers, Brood and Apollo, giving him no peace or status, reprimanding him daily until he fell on his knees and wept before the entire congregation of Holy Redeemer. After that publicly private testifying, re-committed and renewed, he began tentative conversations with Brood and Apollo. Arnette and K.D. were building a new house on Steward's property. She is pregnant again and they both hope to get in a position to make life unpleasant for the Poole's, the DuPres, the Sands and the Beauchamps, especially Luther who takes every opportunity to insult K.D. The most interesting development was with the Morgan brothers. Their distinguishing features were eroding: tobacco choices (they gave up cigar and chaw at the same time), shoes, clothes, facial hair. Pat thought they looked more alike than they probably had at birth. But the inside difference was too deep for anyone to miss. Steward, insolent and unapologetic, took K.D. under his wing, concentrating on making him (and his children) rich (thus the new house) while waiting for Dovey to come around, which she seemed to be doing because there was a marked coolness between her and Soane. It was Deacon Morgan who had

changed the most. It was as though he had looked in his brother's face and did not like himself anymore. To everyone's surprise he had formed a friendship (well, a relationship, anyway) with somebody other than his brother, the cause, reason and basis of which were a mystery. Richard Misner wasn't talking, so all anyone knew was the barefoot walk that took place in public.

It was September then and still hot when Deacon Morgan walked toward Central. Chrysanthemums on the right, chrysanthemums to the left of the brick path leading from his imposing white house. He wore his hat, business suit, vest and a clean white shirt. No shoes. No socks. He entered St. John where he had planted trees fifty feet apart so great was his optimism twenty years ago. He turned right on Central. It had been ten years at least since the soles of his shoes, let alone his bare feet, had traveled that much concrete. Just past Arnold Fleetwood's house, near the corner of St. Luke, a couple said "Morning, Deek." He lifted his hand in greeting, his eyes straight ahead. Liza Cary hello-ed from the porch of her house near Cross Mark but he did not turn his head. "Car broke down?" she asked staring at his feet. At Harper Jury's drugstore, on the corner of Central and St. Matthew he felt rather than saw watchful eyes

traveling alongside him. He didn't turn to see nor did he glance through the window of the Morgan Saving and Loan Bank as he approached St. Peter. At Cross Peter he crossed and made his way to Richard Misner's house. The last time he was here, eight years ago, he was angry, suspicious but certain he would prevail. What he felt now was exotic to a twin--an incompleteness, a muffled solitude that took away appetite, sleep and sound. Since July other people seemed to him to be speaking in whispers, or shouting from long distances. Soane watched him but, mercifully, did not initiate conversation. It was as though she understood that had she done so, what he said to her would draw the life from their life. He might tell her that green springtime had been sapped away; that outside of that loss, she was grand, more beautiful than he believed a woman could be; that her untameable hair framed a face of planes so sharp he wanted to touch; that after she spoke the smile that followed made the sun look like a fool. He might tell his wife that he thought at first she was speaking to him --"You're back"--but knew now it wasn't so. And that instantly he longed to know what she saw, but Steward, who saw nothing or everything, stopped them dead lest they know another realm.

Earlier that September morning he had bathed and dressed carefully but could not bring himself to cover his feet. He handled the dark socks, the shiney black shoes for a long while, then put them aside.

He knocked on the door and removed his hat when the young man answered.

"I need to speak to you, Reverend."

"Come on in."

Deacon Morgan had never consulted with or taken into his confidence any man. All of his intimate conversations had been wordless ones with his brother or brandishing ones with male companions. He spoke to his wife in the opaque manner he thought appropriate. None had required him to translate into speech the raw matter he exposed to Reverend Misner. His words came out like ingots pulled from the fire by an apprentice blacksmith--hot, misshapen, resembling themselves only in their glow. He spoke of a wall in Ravenna, Italy, white in the late afternoon sun with wine colored shadows pressing its edge. Of two children on a beach offering him a shell formed like an S--how open their faces, how loud the bells. Of saltwater burning his face on a troop ship. Of colored

girls in slacks waving from the door of a canning factory. Then he told him of his grandfather who walked barefoot for two hundred miles rather than dance.

Richard listened intently, interrupting once to offer cool water. Although he did not understand what Deacon was talking about, he could see that the man's life was uninhabitable. Deacon began to speak of a woman he had used; how he had turned up his nose at her because her loose and easy ways gave him the license to drop and despise her. That while the adultery preyed on him for a short while (very short) his long remorse was at having become what the Old Fathers cursed: the kind of man who set himself up to judge, rout and even destroy the needy, the defenseless, the different.

"Who is this woman?" Richard asked him.

Deacon did not answer. He ran his finger around the inside of his shirt collar, then started on another story. It seemed his grandfather, Zechariah, was subject to personal taunts as well as newspaper articles describing his malfeasance in office. He was an embarrassment to Negroes and both a threat and a joke to whites. No one, black or white, could or would help him find other work. He was even passed up for a teaching job at a poor country elementary

school. The Negroes in a position to help were few (the depression of 73 was severe), but they took Zechariah's dignified manner for coldness and his studied speech for arrogance, mockery or both. The family lost the nice house and were living (all six of them) with a sister's family. Mindy, his wife found work sewing at home and the children did odd jobs. Few knew and fewer remembered that Zechariah had a twin and before he changed his name, they were known as Coffee and Tea. When Coffee got the state house job, Tea seemed as pleased as everybody else. And when his brother was thrown out of office, he was equally affronted and humiliated. One day, years later, when he and his twin were walking near a saloon, some whitemen, amused by the double faces, encouraged the brothers to dance. Since the encouragement took the form of a pistol, Tea, quite reasonably accommodated the whitemen, even though he was a grown man, older than they were. Coffee took a bullet in his foot instead. From that moment they weren't brothers anymore. Coffee began to plan a new life elsewhere. He contacted other men, other former legislators who had the same misfortune as his-- Juvenal DuPres and Drum Blackhorse. They were the three who formed the nucleus of the Old Fathers. Needless to say, Coffee didn't

ask Tea to join them on their journey to Oklahoma.

"I always thought Coffee--Zechariah-- was wrong," said Deacon Morgan. "Wrong in what he did to his brother. Tea was his twin, after all. Now I'm less sure. I'm thinking Coffee was right because he saw something in Tea that wasn't just going along with some drunken whiteboys. He saw something that shamed him. The way his brother thought about things; the choices he made when up against it. Coffee couldn't take it. Not because he was ashamed of his twin, but because the shame was in himself. It scared him. So he went off and never spoke to his brother again. Know what I mean?"

"It must have been hard," said Richard.

"I'm saying he never said another word to him and wouldn't allow anybody else to call his name."

"Lack of words," Richard said. "Lack of forgiveness. Lack of love. To lose a brother is a hard thing. To choose to lose one, well, that's worse than the original shame wouldn't you say?"

Deacon looked down at his feet for a long time. Richard stayed quiet with him. Finally he raised his head and said,

"I got a long way to go, Reverend."

"You'll make it," said Richard Misner. "No doubt about it."

Richard and Anna doubted the convenient mass disappearance of the victims and, as soon as they got back, went to look for themselves. Other than a sparkling white crib in a bedroom with the word DIVINE taped to the door, and foodstuff, there was nothing recently lived-in about the place. The chickens were wilding or half eaten by four-footed prowlers. Pepper bushes were in full flower, but the rest of the garden was lost. Sargeant's cornfield the only human touch. Richard barely glanced at the cellar floor. Anna however, examining it as closely as her lamp permitted, saw the terribleness K.D. reported, but it wasn't the pornography he had seen nor was it Satan's scrawl. She saw instead the turbulence of females trying to bridle, without being trampled, the monsters that slavered them. On the drive back from the Convent, Richard was silent and uneasy. Anna said,

"Listen. One of them or maybe more wasn't dead. Nobody actually looked--they just assumed. Then between the time folks left and Roger arrived, they got the hell out of there. Taking the killed ones with them. Simple, right?"

"Right," said Misner, but he didn't sound convinced.

"It's been weeks now and nobody has come around asking questions. They must not have reported it, so why should we?"

"Whose baby was in there? That crib is new."

"I don't know but it sure wasn't Arnette's."

He said it again, "Right," with the same level of doubt. Then, "I don't like mysteries."

"You're a preacher. Your whole life's belief is a mystery."

"Belief is mysterious; faith is mysterious. But God is not a mystery. We are."

The wind picked up a bit but not enough to make anyone uncomfortable that November day. Thoughts of death were mingled with plans for Thanksgiving just six days away. Richard thought about the girl whose hands he had once been permitted to hold. Now he concluded his remarks before the coffin was lowered.

"May I suggest, those are not the questions. Or rather those are the questions of pain but not of intelligence. And God, being intelligence, has given us Mind to know subtlety. To know elegance. Purity. tk

Billie Marie walked slowly away from the other mourners. She had stood with her mother and grandfather and smiled encouragingly at Arnette. She was perhaps the only one who was not puzzled by where the women were or concerned about how they disappeared. She had another question: when will they return? Will they re-appear with blazing eyes, war paint and huge hands to rip up and stomp down this hateful prison calling itself a town. A town that had broken her grandfather, impaled her mother and grossly misjudged herself. A backward no-place ruled by men whose power to control was out of control and who had the nerve to say who could live and who not and where; who having seen in lively, free, unarmed females the mutiny of the mares and so got rid of them. She hoped with all her heart that the women were out there, darkly burnished, biding their time, sharpening their nails--but out there. Which is to say she hoped for a miracle. Not so unreasonable a wish since a mini-miracle had already occurred: Brood and Apollo had reconciled, agreeing to wait for her to make up her mind. She knew, as they did, that she never could and that the threesome would end only when they did. The Convent women would roar at that. She could see their pointy teeth.

Grace spread two towels on the grass, the radio in between. The nights were killing the lake making it harder and harder for the sun to warm it the next day. In this part of the lake it was Okay to swim nude. Oklahoma was lake country: verdian water, upright trees and, in places where no boats or fishermen came--a privacy royals would envy. With a third towel she dried her hair. Less than an inch had grown, but she loved how wind and water and fingers and toes rippled in it. She took a bottle of aloe and began to rub her skin.

The reprieve took years but it came. Jack Gibson would die in a ward with others like himself rather than strapped to a chair with no kin looking on. It was a good thing. A great thing. He got to go outside and now he was part of the work crew at the tk bridge. The lake was so blue. The Kentucky Fried chicken lunch so fine. Maybe he could run.

tk

The fifteenth painting, like the first, needed more. Trying to remember the chin had Dee Dee frustrated in her first attempt, but when she decided to skip the jawline and just shadow the lower part of her daughter's face, she found the eyes all wrong. Canvas fifteen got it better, but still there was something missing. The head was fine, but the body, bleak and uninteresting, seemed to need another shape--at the hips or elbow. Never having experienced a compulsion that was not sensual, she was puzzled by the energy she could summon at will to freshen or begin the figure anew. The eyes kept coming up accusatory; the skin tone eluded her and the hair was invariably a hat.

Dee Dee sat down on the floor rolling the brush handle in her fingers while she examined the work she had done. With a long puff of air she got up and went into the living room. It was when she had taken the first sip of the marguerite that she saw her. Coming across the yard, a knapsack or something tied to her chest. But she had no hair. No hair at all and the baby's head lay just under the chin. As eh got closes, Dee Dee could see two fat legs, brown as doughnuts, poking out of the knapsack thing on its mother's chest. She put down the marguerite and pressed her face to the picture window. No

mistake. It was Pallas. One hand on the knapsack bottom, the other carrying a sword. A sword? The smile on Pallas' face was beatific. And her dress--rose madder and umber--swirled about her ankles with every step. Dee Dee waved and called out her name. Or tried to. While she thought "Pallas", formed it in her mind, it came out different, like "urg" then "neh neh." Something was wrong with her tongue. Pallas was moving quickly but not coming toward the front door. She was moving past the house, to the side. Dee Dee in a panic, ran into the studio, grabbed the fifteenth canvas and rushed to the patio holding it up and shouting "Urg. Urg. Neh!" Pallas turned, narrowed her eyes and paused as if trying to determine where the sound came from and, failing, continued on her way. Dee Dee stopped thinking maybe it was someone else. But that was her face with or without hair, wasn't it? She of all people knew her own daughter's face didn't she? As well as she knew her own.

Dee Dee saw Pallas a second time. In the guest bedroom (where Carlos--the motherfucker--used to sleep Pallas was searching under the bed. As Dee Dee watched, not speaking for fear the awful glug would escape her mouth, Pallas raised up. With a satisfied grunt she held aloft a pair of shoes she'd left there on her last, and first, visit to

see her mother. Huraches, but expensive leather ones, not that plastic or straw stuff. Pallas didn't turn; she left through the sliding glass door. Dee followed to see her get into a beat up car waiting on the road. Other people are in the car but the sun is setting and Dee Dee can't tell if they are men or women. They drive off into a violet so ultra it breaks her heart.

Sally Albright, walking north on Calumet, stopped suddenly in front of the plate glass window of Jennie's Country Inn. She was sure, almost that the woman sitting by herself at a table for four was her mother. Sally moved closer to peep under the woman's straw hat. Almost sure. She couldn't quite see the face but there was something in the hands holding the menu that was indisputable. She went inside the restaurant. A lady near the cash register said, "May I help You?" Everyplace Sally went now, she gave folks pause. All because of her hair color. "No," she told the lady. "I'm looking for-- Oh, there she is." and, faking assuredness, sauntered over to the table for four. If she was wrong, she'd say "Scuse me, I thought you were somebody else." She slipped into the chair and said, "Mom?"

Mavis looked up. "Oh, my," she said smiling. "Look at you."

"I wasn't sure, the hat and all, but God, look it is you."

Mavis laughed.

"Been a long time, Mom."

"I know. Have you eaten?"

"Yeah. Just finished. I'm on my lunch hour. I work at---"

The waitress raised her order pad. "Have you all decided yet?"

"Yes," said Mavis. "Orange juice, double grits and two eggs over medium."

"Bacon?" asked the waitress.

"No, thanks."

"We got good sausage--link and patty."

"No thanks. You serve gravey with the biscuits?"

"Sure do. Poured or on the side?"

"On the side, please."

"Sure thing. And you?" She turned to Sally.

"Just coffee."

"Oh come on," said Mavis. "Have something. My treat."

"I can't Mom."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

The waitress left. **"That's what I like about this place. They let you choose. Gravey poured or on the side see?"**

"Mom."

"But you never did have much of an appetite."

"Where have you been, Mom?"

"Well I couldn't come back, could I?"

"You mean that warrant mess?"

"Everything. How about you? You been all right?"

"Mostly. Frankie's fine. Gets all A's. But Billy James ain't so hot."

"Oh. Why?"

"Hangs out with some real scarey little shits ."

"Oh no."

"You should go see him, Ma. Talk to him."

"I will."

"Will you?"

"Can I have my lunch first?"

Sally laughed. **"It's good seeing you, Ma. You cut your hair off."**

Looks nice, I bet. You like mine?"

"Umm, cute."

"No it ain't. Thought I'd like blonde tips, but I'm tired of it now. Maybe I'll cut mine too."

The waitress arrived and she arranged the plates neatly. Mavis salted her grits and swirled the pat of butter on top. She shipped her orange juice and said "Um. Fresh."

"I was so scared all the time, Ma. All the time. But when you left it got worse. I mean I was scared to fall asleep."

"Taste this, honey." Mavis offered a bit of gravy soaked biscuit.

"Daddy was, shit, I don't know how you stood it. He'd get drunk and try to bother me, Ma."

"Oh, baby?"

"I fought him though. Told him when he passed out I was gonna cut his throat open. Would have too."

"I'm so sorry," said Mavis. "I didn't know what else to do. You were always stronger than me."

"Did you never think about us?"

"All the time. And I sneaked back to get a peep at you all."

"No shit?" Sally grinned. "Where?"

"At the school, mostly. I was scared to go by the house."

"You wouldn't know it now. Daddy married a woman who kicks his butt if he don't act right and keep the yard clean and stuff. She keeps a gun, too."

Mavis laughed. "Good for her."

"But I moved out. Me and Charmaine got us a place together over on Auburn."

"You sure you don't want something? It's realy good, Sal."

Sally picked up a fork , slipped in into her mother's plate scooping uup a buttery dollop of grits. When the fork was in her mouth their eyes met. Sally felt the nicest thing, then. Something long and deep and slow and bright.

"You gonna leave again, Mama?"

"I have to , Sal."

"You coming back?"

"Sure."

"But you'll try and talk to Billy James won't you? And Frankie'd love it."

"I'll talk to Billy and tell Frankie I love him."

"I'm sorry about everything Ma. I was just so scared all the time."

"Me too."

They were standing outside. The lunch crowd thickened with shoppers and their kids.

"Gimme a hug, baby."

Sally put her arms around her mother's waist and began to cry.

"Uh uh," said Mavis. NOne of that.

Sally squeezed.

"Ouch," said Mavis, laughing.

"What?"

"Nothing. That side hurts a bit."

"You okay?"

"I'm perfect, Sal."

"I don't know what you think about me, but I always loved, always, even when."

"I know that, Sal. Know it now, anyway. " Mavis pushed a shank of black and yellow hair behind her daughter's ear and kissed her cheek. "Count on me, Sal."

"See you again, won't I?"

"Bye, Sal. Bye."

Sally watched her mother disappear into the crowd. She ran her finger under her nose, then held the cheek that had been kissed. Did they pay? When did they pay the cashier? Sally touched her eyelids. One minute they were sopping biscuits; the next they were kissing in the street.

Several years ago she had checked out the foster home and saw the mother--a cheerful, no-nonsense woman the kids seemed to like. So fine. That was it. Fine. She could go on with her life. And did. Until 19 when her gaze was drawn to girls with huge chocolate eyes. Seneca would be on her own now, years old, but she checked with Mrs. tk to see if she had kept in touch.

"Who are you again?"

"Her cousin, Jean tk."

"Well she was only here for a short while--a few months, really."

"Do you know where---"

"No, honey. I don't know a thing."

After that she was unexpectedly distracted in malls, theatre ti

cket lines, busses. In 19 she was certain she spotted her at a Little Richard Concert, but the press of the crowd prevented a closer look. Jean was discrete about this subversive search. Jack didn't know she had a child before (at fourteen) and it was after marriage when she had his child that she began the search for the eyes. The sightings came at such odd moments and in such strange places--once she believed the girl climbing out of the back of a pick-up truck was her daughter--that when she finally bumped into her in 1976 she wanted to call an aaaambulance. Jean and Jack were crossing the stadium parking lot under blazing klieg lights. A girl was standing in front of a car, blood running from her hands. Jean saw the blood first and then the hot chocolate eyes.

"Seneca!" she screamed and ran toward her. As she approached she was intercepted by another girl, who, holding a bottle of beer and a cloth, began to clean away the blood.

"Seneca?" Jean shouted over the second girl's head.

"Yes?"

"What happened? It's me.!"

"Some glass," said the second girl. "She fell on some glass. I'm taking care of her."

"Jean! Come on! " Jack was several cars down. " Where the hell are you?"

"Coming. Just a minute, okay?"

The girl wiping Seneca's hands looked up from time to time to frown at Jean. "Any glass get in?"

Seneca stroked her palms, first one then the other. "No. I don't think so."

"Jean! Traffic's gonna be hell, babe."

"Dont you remember me?"

Seneca looked up, the bright lights turning her eyes black.

"Should I? From where?"

"On Woodlawn. We used to live in those apartments on Woodlawn."

Seneca shook her head. "I lived on Beacon. Next to the tk."

"But your name is Seneca, right?"

"Yes."

"Well I'm Jean."

"Lady, your old man's calling you." The girlfriend wrung out the cloth and poured the rest of the beer over Seneca's hands.

"Ow," Seneca said to her friend. "It burns. She waved her

hands in the air.

"Guess I made a mistake," said Jean. "I thought you were someone I knew from Woodlawn."

Seneca smiled. "That's okay. Everybody makes mistakes."

The friend said, "It's okay now. Look."

Seneca and Jean both looked. Her hands were clean, no blood. Just a few lines that might or might not leave marks.

"Great!."

"Let's go."

"Well, bye."

"Jean!"

"Bye."

Later in the car, Jack said, "Who was that?"

"Some girl I thought I knew from before. When I lived in those apartments on Woodlawn. The housing project there."

"What housing project?"

"On Woodlawn."

"Never any projects on Woodlawn," said Jack. "That was Beacon. Torn down now, but it was never on Woodlawn. Beacon is where it was."

"You sure about that?"

"Sure I'm sure. You losing it, woman."