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God Help the Child

For You

Suffer little children to come unto me,
and forbid them not

LUKE 18:16

PART I



Sweetness

It's not my fault. So you can't blame me. I didn't do it and have no idea how it happened. It didn't take more than an hour after they pulled her out from between my legs to realize something was wrong. Really wrong. She was so black she scared me. Midnight black, Sudanese black. I'm light-skinned, with good hair, what we call high yellow, and so is Lula Ann's father. Ain't nobody in my family anywhere near that color. Tar is the closest I can think of yet her hair don't go with the skin. It's different—straight but curly like those naked tribes in Australia. You might think she's a throwback, but throwback to what? You should've seen my grandmother; she passed for white and never said another word to any one of her children. Any letter she got from my mother or my aunts she sent right back, unopened. Finally they got the message of no message and let her be. Almost all mulatto types and quadroons did that back in the day—if they had the right kind of hair, that is. Can you imagine how many white folks have Negro blood running and hiding in their veins? Guess. Twenty percent, I heard. My own mother, Lula Mae, could have passed easy, but she chose not

TONI MORRISON

to. She told me the price she paid for that decision. When she and my father went to the courthouse to get married there were two Bibles and they had to put their hands on the one reserved for Negroes. The other one was for white people's hands. The Bible! Can you beat it? My mother was housekeeper for a rich white couple. They ate every meal she cooked and insisted she scrub their backs while they sat in the tub and God knows what other intimate things they made her do, but no touching of the same Bible.

Some of you probably think it's a bad thing to group ourselves according to skin color—the lighter, the better—in social clubs, neighborhoods, churches, sororities, even colored schools. But how else can we hold on to a little dignity? How else can you avoid being spit on in a drugstore, shoving elbows at the bus stop, walking in the gutter to let whites have the whole sidewalk, charged a nickel at the grocer's for a paper bag that's free to white shoppers? Let alone all the name-calling. I heard about all of that and much, much more. But because of my mother's skin color, she wasn't stopped from trying on hats in the department stores or using their ladies' room. And my father could try on shoes in the front part of the shoestore, not in a back room. Neither one would let themselves drink from a "colored only" fountain even if they were dying of thirst.

I hate to say it, but from the very beginning in the maternity ward the baby, Lula Ann, embarrassed me. Her birth

God Help the Child

skin was pale like all babies', even African ones, but it changed fast. I thought I was going crazy when she turned blue-black right before my eyes. I know I went crazy for a minute because once—just for a few seconds—I held a blanket over her face and pressed. But I couldn't do that, no matter how much I wished she hadn't been born with that terrible color. I even thought of giving her away to an orphanage someplace. And I was scared to be one of those mothers who put their babies on church steps. Recently I heard about a couple in Germany, white as snow, who had a dark-skinned baby nobody could explain. Twins, I believe—one white, one colored. But I don't know if it's true. All I know is that for me, nursing her was like having a pickaninny sucking my teat. I went to bottle-feeding soon as I got home.

My husband, Louis, is a porter and when he got back off the rails he looked at me like I really was crazy and looked at her like she was from the planet Jupiter. He wasn't a cussing man so when he said, "Goddamn! What the hell is this?" I knew we were in trouble. That's what did it—what caused the fights between me and him. It broke our marriage to pieces. We had three good years together but when she was born he blamed me and treated Lula Ann like she was a stranger—more than that, an enemy.

He never touched her. I never did convince him that I ain't never, ever fooled around with another man. He was

TONI MORRISON

dead sure I was lying. We argued and argued till I told him her blackness must be from his own family—not mine. That's when it got worse, so bad he just up and left and I had to look for another, cheaper place to live. I knew enough not to take her with me when I applied to landlords so I left her with a teenage cousin to babysit. I did the best I could and didn't take her outside much anyway because when I pushed her in the baby carriage, friends or strangers would lean down and peek in to say something nice and then give a start or jump back before frowning. That hurt. I could have been the babysitter if our skin colors were reversed. It was hard enough just being a colored woman—even a high-yellow one—trying to rent in a decent part of the city. Back in the nineties when Lula Ann was born, the law was against discriminating in who you could rent to, but not many landlords paid attention to it. They made up reasons to keep you out. But I got lucky with Mr. Leigh. I know he upped the rent seven dollars from what he advertised, and he has a fit if you a minute late with the money.

I told her to call me “Sweetness” instead of “Mother” or “Mama.” It was safer. Being that black and having what I think are too-thick lips calling me “Mama” would confuse people. Besides, she has funny-colored eyes, crow-black with a blue tint, something witchy about them too.

So it was just us two for a long while and I don't have to tell you how hard it is being an abandoned wife. I guess

God Help the Child

Louis felt a little bit bad after leaving us like that because a few months later on he found out where I moved to and started sending me money once a month, though I never asked him to and didn't go to court to get it. His fifty-dollar money orders and my night job at the hospital got me and Lula Ann off welfare. Which was a good thing. I wish they would stop calling it welfare and go back to the word they used when my mother was a girl. Then it was called "Relief." Sounds much better, like it's just a short-term breather while you get yourself together. Besides, those welfare clerks are mean as spit. When finally I got work and didn't need them anymore, I was making more money than they ever did. I guess meanness filled out their skimpy paychecks, which is why they treated us like beggars. More so when they looked at Lula Ann and back at me—like I was cheating or something. Things got better but I still had to be careful. Very careful in how I raised her. I had to be strict, very strict. Lula Ann needed to learn how to behave, how to keep her head down and not to make trouble. I don't care how many times she changes her name. Her color is a cross she will always carry. But it's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's not.

Bride

I'm scared. Something bad is happening to me. I feel like I'm melting away. I can't explain it to you but I do know when it started. It began after he said, "You not the woman I want."

"Neither am I."

I still don't know why I said that. It just popped out of my mouth. But when he heard my sassy answer he shot me a hateful look before putting on his jeans. Then he grabbed his boots and T-shirt and when I heard the door slam I wondered for a split second if he was not just ending our silly argument, but ending us, our relationship. Couldn't be. Any minute I would hear the key turn, the front door click open and close. But I didn't hear anything the whole night. Nothing at all. What? I'm not exciting enough? Or pretty enough? I can't have thoughts of my own? Do things he doesn't approve of? By morning soon as I woke up I was furious. Glad he was gone because clearly he was just using me since I had money and a crotch. I was so angry, if you had seen me you would have thought I had spent those six months with him in a holding cell without

God Help the Child

arraignment or a lawyer, and suddenly the judge called the whole thing off—dismissed the case or refused to hear it at all. Anyway I refused to whine, wail or accuse. He said one thing; I agreed. Fuck him. Besides, our affair wasn't all that spectacular—not even the mildly dangerous sex I used to let myself enjoy. Well, anyway it was nothing like those double-page spreads in fashion magazines, you know, couples standing half naked in surf, looking so fierce and downright mean, their sexuality like lightning and the sky going dark to show off the shine of their skin. I love those ads. But our affair didn't even measure up to any old R-&-B song—some tune with a beat arranged to generate fever. It wasn't even the sugary lyrics of a thirties blues song: “Baby, baby, why you treat me so? I do anything you say, go anywhere you want me to go.” Why I kept comparing us to magazine spreads and music I can't say, but it tickled me to settle on “I Wanna Dance with Somebody.”

It was raining the next day. Bullet taps on the windows followed by crystal lines of water. I avoided the temptation to glance through the panes at the sidewalk beneath my condo. Besides, I knew what was out there—nasty-looking palm trees lining the road, benches in that tacky little park, few if any pedestrians, a sliver of sea far beyond. I fought giving in to any wish that he was coming back. When a tiny ripple of missing him surfaced, I beat it back. Around noon I opened a bottle of Pinot Grigio and sank into the

TONI MORRISON

sofa, its suede and silk cushions as comfy as any arms. Almost. Because I have to admit he is one beautiful man, flawless even, except for a tiny scar on his upper lip and an ugly one on his shoulder—an orange-red blob with a tail. Otherwise, head to toe, he is one gorgeous man. I'm not so bad myself, so imagine how we looked as a couple. After a glass or two of the wine I was a little buzzed, and decided to call my friend Brooklyn, tell her all about it. How he hit me harder than a fist with six words: You not the woman I want. How they rattled me so I agreed with them. So stupid. But then I changed my mind about calling her. You know how it is. Nothing new. Just he walked out and I don't know why. Besides, too much was happening at the office for me to bother my best friend and colleague with gossip about another breakup. Especially now. I'm regional manager now and that's like being a captain so I have to maintain the right relationship with the crew. Our company, Sylvia, Inc., is a small cosmetics business, but it's beginning to blossom and make waves, finally, and shed its frumpy past. It used to be Sylph Corsets for Discriminating Women back in the forties, but changed its name and ownership to Sylvia Apparel, then to Sylvia, Inc., before going flat-out hip with six cool cosmetics lines, one of which is mine. I named it YOU, GIRL: Cosmetics for Your Personal Millennium. It's for girls and women of all complexions from ebony to lemonade to milk. And it's mine, all mine—the idea, the brand, the campaign.

God Help the Child

Wiggling my toes under the silk cushion I couldn't help smiling at the lipstick smile on my wineglass, thinking, "How about that, Lula Ann? Did you ever believe you would grow up to be this hot, or this successful?" Maybe *she* was the woman he wanted. But Lula Ann Bridewell is no longer available and she was never a woman. Lula Ann was a sixteen-year-old-me who dropped that dumb countryfied name as soon as I left high school. I was Ann Bride for two years until I interviewed for a sales job at Sylvia, Inc., and, on a hunch, shortened my name to Bride, with nothing anybody needs to say before or after that one memorable syllable. Customers and reps like it, but he ignored it. He called me "baby" most of the time. "Hey, baby"; "Come on, baby." And sometimes "You my girl," accent on the *my*. The only time he said "woman" was the day he split.

The more white wine the more I thought good ridance. No more dallying with a mystery man with no visible means of support. An ex-felon if ever there was one, though he laughed when I teased him about how he spent his time when I was at the office: Idle? Roaming? Or meeting someone? He said his Saturday afternoon trips downtown were not reports to a probation officer or drug rehab counselor. Yet he never told me what they were. I told him every single thing about myself; he confided nothing, so I just made stuff up with TV plots: he was an informant with a new identity, a disbarred lawyer. Whatever. I didn't really care.

TONI MORRISON

Actually the timing of his leaving was perfect for me. With him gone out of my life and out of my apartment I could concentrate on the launch of YOU, GIRL and, equally important, keep a promise I'd made to myself long before I met him—we fought about it the night he said "You not the woman. . . ." According to prisoninfo.org/paroleboard/calendar, it was time. I'd been planning this trip for a year, choosing carefully what a parolee would need: I saved up five thousand dollars in cash over the years, and bought a three-thousand-dollar Continental Airlines gift certificate. I put a promotional box of YOU, GIRL into a brand-new Louis Vuitton shopping bag, all of which could take her anywhere. Comfort her, anyway; help her forget and take the edge off bad luck, hopelessness and boredom. Well, maybe not boredom, no prison is a convent. He didn't understand why I was so set on going and the night when we quarreled about my promise, he ran off. I guess I threatened his ego by doing some Good Samaritan thing not directed at him. Selfish bastard. I paid the rent, not him, and the maid too. When we went to clubs and concerts we rode in my beautiful Jaguar or in cars I hired. I bought him beautiful shirts—although he never wore them—and did all the shopping. Besides, a promise is a promise, especially if it's to oneself.

It was when I got dressed for the drive I noticed the first peculiar thing. Every bit of my pubic hair was gone. Not

God Help the Child

gone as in shaved or waxed, but gone as in erased, as in never having been there in the first place. It scared me, so I threaded through the hair on my head to see if it was shedding, but it was as thick and slippery as it had always been. Allergy? Skin disease, maybe? It worried me but there was no time to do more than be anxious and plan to see a dermatologist. I had to be on my way to make it on time.

I suppose other people might like the scenery bordering this highway but it's so thick with lanes, exits, parallel roads, overpasses, cautionary signals and signs it's like being forced to read a newspaper while driving. Annoying. Along with amber alerts, silver and gold ones were springing up. I stayed in the right lane and slowed down because from past drives out this way I knew the Norristown exit was easy to miss and the prison had no sign of its existence in the world for a mile beyond the exit ramp. I guess they didn't want tourists to know that some of the reclaimed desert California is famous for holds evil women. Decagon Women's Correctional Center, right outside Norristown, owned by a private company, is worshipped by the locals for the work it provides: serving visitors, guards, clerical staff, cafeteria workers, health care folks and most of all construction laborers repairing the road and fences and adding wing after wing to house the increasing flood of violent, sinful women committing bloody female crimes. Lucky for the state, crime does pay.

TONI MORRISON

The couple of times I drove to Decagon before, I never tried to get inside on some pretext or other. Back then I just wanted to see where the lady monster—that's what they called her—had been caged for fifteen of her twenty-five-to-life sentence. This time was different. She has been granted parole and, according to penal review notices, Sofia Huxley is going to strut through the bars I pushed her behind.

You'd think with Decagon being all about corporate money that a Jaguar wouldn't stand out. But behind the curbside buses, old Toyotas and secondhand trucks, my car, sleek, rat gray with a vanity license, looked like a gun. But it was not as sinister as the white limousines I've seen parked there—engines snoring, chauffeurs leaning against gleaming fenders. Tell me, who would need a driver leaping to open the door and make a quick getaway? A grand madam impatient to get back to her designer linens in her tasteful high-rise brothel? Or maybe a teenage hookerette eager to get back to the patio of some sumptuous, degenerate private club where she could celebrate her release among friends by ripping up her prison-issue underwear. No Sylvia, Inc., products for her. Our line is sexy enough but not expensive enough. Like all sex trash, the little hookerette would think the higher the price, the better the quality. If she only knew. Still, she might buy some YOU, GIRL sparkle eye shadow or gold-flecked lip gloss.

God Help the Child

No limousines today, unless you count the Lincoln town car. Mostly just worn Toyotas and ancient Chevys, silent grown-ups and jittery children. An old man sitting at the bus stop is digging into a box of Cheerios, trying to find the last circle of sweet oat bran. He's wearing ancient wing-tip shoes and crisp new jeans. His baseball cap, his brown vest over a white shirt, scream Salvation Army store but his manner is superior, dainty, even. His legs are crossed and he examines the bit of dry cereal as though it were a choice grape picked especially for him by groundskeepers to the throne.

Four o'clock; it won't be long now. Huxley, Sofia, a.k.a. 0071140, won't be released during visiting hours. At exactly four-thirty only the town car is left, owned probably by a lawyer with an alligator briefcase full of papers, money and cigarettes. The cigarettes for his client, the money for witnesses, the papers to look like he's working.

"Are you okay, Lula Ann?" The prosecutor's voice was soft, encouraging, but I could barely hear her. "There's nothing to be afraid of. She can't hurt you."

No, she can't and, damn, here she is. Number 0071140. Even after fifteen years I could never mistake her simply because of her height, six feet at least. Nothing has shrunk the giant I remember who was taller than the bailiff, the judge, the lawyers and almost as tall as the police. Only her co-monster husband matched her height. Nobody doubted

TONI MORRISON

she was the filthy freak that parents shaking with anger called her. "Look at her eyes," they whispered. Everywhere in the courthouse, ladies' room, on benches lining the halls they whispered: "Cold, like the snake she is." "At twenty? How could a twenty-year-old do those things to children?" "Are you kidding? Just look at those eyes. Old as dirt." "My little boy will never get over it." "Devil." "Bitch."

Now those eyes are more like a rabbit's than a snake's but the height is the same. A whole lot else has changed. She is as thin as a rope. Size 1 panties; an A-cup bra, if any. And she could sure use some GlamGlo. Formalize Wrinkle Softener and Juicy Bronze would give color to the whey color of her skin.

When I step out of the Jaguar I don't wonder or care whether she recognizes me. I just walk over to her and say, "Need a lift?"

She throws me a quick, uninterested glance and turns her gaze to the road. "No. I don't."

Her mouth is trembly. It used to be hard, a straight razor sharpened to slice a kid. A little Botox and some Tango-Matte, not glitter, would have softened her lips and maybe influenced the jury in her favor except there was no YOU, GIRL back then.

"Somebody picking you up?" I smile.

"Taxi," she says.

Funny. She is answering a stranger dutifully like she's

God Help the Child

used to it. No “What’s it to you?” or even “Who the hell are you?” but going on to explain further. “Called a cab. I mean the desk did.”

When I come closer and reach out to touch her arm the cab rolls up and fast as a bullet she grabs the door handle, tosses in her little carrier bag and slams the door shut. I bang on the window shouting, “Wait! Wait!” Too late. The driver negotiates the U-turn like a NASCAR pro.

I rush to my car. Following them isn’t hard. I even pass the taxi to disguise the fact that I am tailing her. That turns out to be a mistake. Just as I’m about to enter the exit ramp, I see the taxi shoot ahead of me toward Norristown. Gravel pings my wheels as I brake, reverse and follow them. The road to Norristown is lined with neat, uniform houses built in the fifties and added on repeatedly—a closed side porch, a garage expanded for two cars, backyard patio. The road looks like a kindergarten drawing of light-blue, white or yellow houses with pine-green or beet-red doors sitting smugly on wide lawns. All that is missing is a pancake sun with ray sticks all around it. Beyond the houses, next to a mall as pale and sad as “lite” beer, a sign announces the beginning of the town. Next to it another, bigger sign for Eva Dean’s Motel and Restaurant. The taxi turns and stops by the entrance. She gets out and pays the driver. I follow and park a ways back near the restaurant. Only one other car is in the parking area—a black SUV. I am sure she is

TONI MORRISON

meeting someone, but after a few minutes at the check-in desk, she goes straight to the restaurant and takes a seat by the window. I can see her clearly and watch her study the menu like a remedial or English-as-a-second-language student—lip-reading, running her finger over the items. What a change. This is the teacher who had kindergartners cut apples into rings to shape the letter *O*, doled out pretzels as *B*'s, slit watermelon chunks into *Y*'s. All to spell *BOY*—who she liked best according to the women whispering in front of the sinks in the ladies' room. Fruit as bait was a big part of the trial's testimony.

Look at her eat. The waitress keeps placing plate after plate in front of her. Makes sense, sort of, this first out-of-prison meal. She's gobbling like a refugee, like somebody who's been floating at sea without food or water for weeks and just about to wonder what harm it would do to his dying boatmate to taste his flesh before it shrank. She never takes her eyes from the food, stabbing, slicing, scooping helter-skelter among the dishes. She drinks no water, butters no bread, as though nothing is allowed to delay her speed-eating. The whole thing is over in ten or twelve minutes. Then she pays, leaves and hurries down the walkway. Now what? Key in hand, tote bag on her shoulder, she stops and turns in to a break between two stucco walls. I get out of the car and walk-run behind her until I hear the retching sounds of vomit. So I hide behind the SUV until she comes out.

God Help the Child

3-A is painted on the door she unlocks. I'm ready. I make sure my knock is authoritative, strong but not threatening.

"Yes?" Her voice is shaky, the humble sound of someone trained to automatic obedience.

"Mrs. Huxley. Open the door, please."

There is silence then, "I uh. I'm sorta sick."

"I know," I say. A trace of judgment in my voice, hoping she thinks it's about the sick she left on the pavement. "Open the door."

She opens it and stands there barefoot with a towel in her hand. She wipes her mouth. "Yes?"

"We need to talk."

"Talk?" She blinks rapidly but doesn't ask the real question: "Who are you?"

I push past her, leading with the Louis Vuitton bag. "You're Sofia Huxley, right?"

She nods. A tiny flash of fear is in her eyes. I'm black as midnight and dressed in all white so maybe she thinks it's a uniform and I'm an authority of some sort. I want to calm her so I hold up the shopping bag and say, "Come on. Let's sit down. I have something for you." She doesn't look at the bag or my face; she stares at my shoes with their high lethal heels and dangerously pointed toes.

"What do you want me to do?" she asks.

Such a soft, accommodating voice. Knowing after fifteen years behind bars that nothing is free. Nobody gives away anything at no cost to the receiver. Whatever it is—

TONI MORRISON

cigarettes, magazines, tampons, stamps, Mars bars or a jar of peanut butter—it comes with strings tough as fishing line.

“Nothing. I don’t want you to do a thing.”

Now her eyes stray from my shoes to my face, opaque eyes without inquiry. So I answer the question a normal person would have posed. “I saw you leave Decagon. No one was there to meet you. I offered you a lift.”

“That was you?” She frowns.

“Me. Yes.”

“I know you?”

“My name is Bride.”

She squints. “That supposed to mean something to me?”

“No,” I say and smile. “Look what I brought you.” I can’t resist and place the bag on the bed. I reach inside and on top of the gift package of YOU, GIRL I lay two envelopes—the slim one with the airline gift certificate then the fat one with five thousand dollars. About two hundred dollars for each year if she had served her full sentence.

Sofia stares at the display as though the items might be infected. “What’s all that for?”

I wonder if prison has done something to her brain. “It’s okay,” I say. “Just a few things to help you.”

“Help me what?”

“Get a good start. You know, on your life.”

“My life?” Something is wrong. She sounds as if she needs an introduction to the word.

God Help the Child

"Yeah." I am still smiling. "Your new life."

"Why? Who sent you?" She looks interested now, not frightened.

"I guess you don't remember me." I shrug. "Why would you? Lula Ann. Lula Ann Bridewell. At the trial? I was one of the children who—"

I search through the blood with my tongue. My teeth are all there, but I can't seem to get up. I can feel my left eyelid shutting down and my right arm is dead. The door opens and all the gifts I brought are thrown at me, one by one, including the Vuitton bag. The door slams shut, then opens again. My black stiletto-heeled shoe lands on my back before rolling off next to my left arm. I reach for it and am relieved to learn that, unlike the right one, this one can move. I try to scream "help," but my mouth belongs to somebody else. I crawl a few feet and try to stand. My legs work, so I gather up the gifts, push them into the bag and, one shoe on, one left behind, limp to my car. I don't feel anything. I don't think anything. Not until I see my face in the side-view mirror. My mouth looks as though it's stuffed with raw liver; the whole side of my face is scraped of skin; my right eye is a mushroom. All I want to do is get away from here—no 911; it takes too long and I don't want some ignorant motel manager staring at me. Police. There have to be some in this town. Igniting, shifting, steering with a left hand, while the other one lies dead next to my thigh, takes concentration. All of it. So it's not until I get farther into

TONI MORRISON

Norristown and see a sign with an arrow pointing to the police station that it hits me—the cops will write a report, interview the accused and take a picture of my wrecked face as evidence. And what if the local newspaper gets the story along with my photograph? Embarrassment would be nothing next to the jokes directed at YOU, GIRL. From YOU, GIRL to BOO, GIRL.

Hammers of pain make it hard to get out my cellphone and dial Brooklyn, the one person I can trust. Completely.

Brooklyn

She's lying. We are sitting in this dump of a clinic after I've driven over two hours to find this hick town, then I have to locate her car parked in the rear of a closed-shut police station. Of course it's closed; it's Sunday, when only churches and Wal-Mart are open. She was hysterical when I found her bloody and crying out of one eye, the other one too swollen to shed water. Poor thing. Somebody ruined one of those eyes, the ones that spooked everybody with their strangeness—large, slanted, slightly hooded and funny-colored, considering how black her skin is. Alien eyes, I call them, but guys think they're gorgeous, of course.

Well, when I find this little emergency clinic facing the mall's parking lot I have to hold her up to help her walk. She hobbles, wearing one shoe. Finally we get a nurse's bug-eyed attention. She is startled at the pair of us: one white girl with blond dreads, one very black one with silky curls. It takes forever to sign stuff and show insurance cards. Then we sit down to wait for the on-call doctor who lives, I don't know, far off in some other crappy town. Bride doesn't say a word while I drive her here, but in the waiting room she starts the lie.

TONI MORRISON

"I'm ruined," she whispers.

I say, "No you're not. Give it time. Remember what Grace looked like after her face tuck?"

"A surgeon did her face," she answers. "A maniac did mine."

I press her. "So tell me. What happened, Bride? Who was he?"

"Who was who?" She touches her nose tenderly while breathing through her mouth.

"The guy who beat you half to death."

She coughs for some time and I hand her a tissue. "Did I say it was a guy? I don't remember saying it was a guy."

"Are you telling me a woman did this?"

"No," she says. "No. It was a guy."

"Was he trying to rape you?"

"I suppose. Somebody scared him off, I guess. He banged me around and took off."

See what I mean? Not even a good lie. I push a bit more. "He didn't take your purse, wallet, anything?"

She mumbles, "Boy Scout, I guess." Her lips are puffy and her tongue can't manage consonants but she tries to smile at her own stupid joke.

"Why didn't whoever scared him off stay and help you?"

"I don't know! I don't know! I don't know!"

She is shouting and fake-sobbing so I back off. Her single open eye isn't up to it and her mouth must hurt too

God Help the Child

much to keep it up. For five minutes I don't say a word, just flip through the pages of a *Reader's Digest*; then I try to make my voice sound as normal and conversational as I can. I decide not to ask why she called me instead of her lover man.

"What were you doing up here anyway?"

"I came to see a friend." She bends forward as though her stomach hurts.

"In Norristown? Your friend lives here?"

"No. Nearby."

"You find him?"

"Her. No. I never found her."

"Who is she?"

"Somebody from a long time ago. She wasn't there. Probably dead by now."

She knows I know she's lying. Why wouldn't an attacker take her money? Something has rattled her brainpan otherwise why would she tell me such fucked-up lies? I guess she doesn't give a damn what I think. When I stuffed her little white skirt and top into the shopping bag, I found a rubber band around fifty hundred-dollar bills, an airline gift certificate and samples of YOU, GIRL not yet launched. Okay? No species of would-be rapist would want Nude Skin Glo, but free cash? I decide to let it go and wait until she's seen the doctor.

Afterward, when Bride holds up my compact mirror to

TONI MORRISON

her face, I know what she sees will break her heart. A quarter of her face is fine; the rest is cratered. Ugly black stitches, puffy eye, bandages on her forehead, lips so Ubangi she can't pronounce the *r* in *raw*, which is what her skin looks like—all pink and blue-black. Worse than anything is her nose—nostrils wide as an orangutan's under gauze the size of half a bagel. Her beautiful unbruised eye seems to cower, bloodshot, practically dead.

I shouldn't be thinking this. But her position at Sylvia, Inc., might be up for grabs. How can she persuade women to improve their looks with products that can't improve her own? There isn't enough YOU, GIRL foundation in the world to hide eye scars, a broken nose and facial skin scraped down to pink hypodermis. Assuming much of the damage fades, she will still need plastic surgery, which means weeks and weeks of idleness, hiding behind glasses and floppy hats. I might be asked to take over. Temporarily, of course.

"I can't eat. I can't talk. I can't think."

Her voice is whiny and she is trembling.

I put my arm around her and whisper, "Hey, girlfriend, no pity party. Let's get out of this dump. They don't even have private rooms and that nurse had lettuce in her teeth and I doubt she's washed her hands since graduating from that online nursing course she took."

Bride stops shaking, adjusts the sling holding her right

God Help the Child

arm and asks me, "You don't think that doctor did a good job?"

"Who knows?" I say. "In this trailer park clinic? I'm driving you to a real hospital—with a toilet and sink in the room."

"Don't they have to release me?" She sounds like a ten-year-old.

"Please. We're leaving. Now. Look what I bought while you were being patched up. Sweats and flip-flops. No decent hospital in these parts but a very respectable Wal-Mart. Come on. Up. Lean on me. Where did Florence Nightingale put your things? We'll get some ice pops or slurries on the way. Or a milk shake. That's probably better medicine-wise—or some tomato juice, chicken broth, maybe."

I'm rambling, fussing with pills and clothes while she clutches that ugly flowered hospital gown. "Oh, Bride," I say, but my voice cracks. "Don't look like that—it's going to be all right."

I have to drive slowly; every bump or sudden lane switch makes her wince or grunt. I try to get her mind off her pain.

"I didn't know you were twenty-three. I thought you were my age, twenty-one. I saw it on your driver's license. You know, when I was looking for your insurance card."

She doesn't answer, so I keep on trying to get a smile out of her. "But your good eye looks twenty."

TONI MORRISON

It doesn't work. What the hell. I might as well be talking to myself. I decide to just get her home and settled. I'll take care of everything at work. Bride will be on sick leave for a long time, and somebody has to take on her responsibilities. And who knows how that might turn out?

Bride

She really was a freak. Sofia Huxley. The quick change from obedient ex-con to raging alligator. From slack-lipped to fangs. From slouch to hammer. I never saw the signal—no eye squint or grip of neck cords, no shoulder flex or raised lip showing teeth. Nothing announced her attack on me. I'll never forget it, and even if I tried to, the scars, let alone the shame, wouldn't let me.

Memory is the worst thing about healing. I lie around all day with nothing urgent to do. Brooklyn has taken care of explanations to the office staff: attempted rape, foiled, blah, blah. She is a true friend and doesn't annoy me like those fake ones who come here just to gaze and pity me. I can't watch television; it's so boring—mostly blood, lipstick, and the haunches of anchorgirls. What passes for news is either gossip or a lecture of lies. How can I take crime shows seriously where the female detectives track killers in Louboutin heels? As for reading, print makes me dizzy, and for some reason I don't like listening to music anymore. Vocals, both the beautiful and the mediocre, depress me, and instrumentals are worse. Plus something bad has been

TONI MORRISON

done to my tongue because my taste buds have disappeared. Everything tastes like lemons—except lemons, which taste like salt. Wine is a waste since Vicodin gives me a thicker, more comfortable fog.

The bitch didn't even hear me out. I wasn't the only witness, the only one who turned Sofia Huxley into 0071140. There was lots of other testimony about her molestations. At least four other kids were witnesses. I didn't hear what they said but they were shaking and crying when they left the courtroom. The social worker and psychologist who coached us put their arms around them, whispering, "You'll be fine. You did great." Neither one hugged me but they smiled at me. Apparently Sofia Huxley has no family. Well she has a husband who is in another prison and still unparoled after seven tries. No one was there to meet her. Nobody. So why didn't she just accept help instead of whatever check-out-counter or cleaning-woman job she might be given? Rich parolees don't end up cleaning toilets at Wendy's.

I was only eight years old, still little Lula Ann, when I lifted my arm and pointed my finger at her.

"Is the woman you saw here in this room?" The lawyer lady smells of tobacco.

I nod.

"You have to speak, Lula. Say 'yes' or 'no.'"

"Yes."

God Help the Child

"Can you show us where she is seated?"

I am afraid of knocking over the paper cup of water the lady lawyer gave me.

"Relax," says the prosecutor lady. "Take your time."

And I did take my time. My hand was in a fist until my arm was straight. Then I unfolded my forefinger. *Pow!* Like a cappistol. Mrs. Huxley stared at me then opened her mouth as though about to say something. She looked shocked, unbelieving. But my finger still pointed, pointed so long the lady prosecutor had to touch my hand and say, "Thank you, Lula," to get me to put my arm down. I glanced at Sweetness; she was smiling like I've never seen her smile before—with mouth and eyes. And that wasn't all. Outside the courtroom all the mothers smiled at me, and two actually touched and hugged me. Fathers gave me thumbs-up. Best of all was Sweetness. As we walked down the courthouse steps she held my hand, my hand. She never did that before and it surprised me as much as it pleased me because I always knew she didn't like touching me. I could tell. Dis-taste was all over her face when I was little and she had to bathe me. Rinse me, actually, after a halfhearted rub with a soapy washcloth. I used to pray she would slap my face or spank me just to feel her touch. I made little mistakes deliberately, but she had ways to punish me without touching the skin she hated—bed without supper, lock me in my room—but her screaming at me was the worst. When fear

TONI MORRISON

rules, obedience is the only survival choice. And I was good at it. I behaved and behaved and behaved. Frightened as I was to appear in court, I did what the teacher-psychologists expected of me. Brilliantly, I know, because after the trial Sweetness was kind of motherlike.

I don't know. Maybe I'm just mad more at myself than at Mrs. Huxley. I reverted to the Lula Ann who never fought back. Ever. I just lay there while she beat the shit out of me. I could have died on the floor of that motel room if her face hadn't gone apple-red with fatigue. I didn't make a sound, didn't even raise a hand to protect myself when she slapped my face then punched me in the ribs before smashing my jaw with her fist then butting my head with hers. She was panting when she dragged and threw me out the door. I can still feel her hard fingers clenching the hair at the back of my neck, her foot on my behind and I can still hear the crack of my bones hitting concrete. Elbow, jaw. I feel my arms sliding and grabbing for balance. Then my tongue searching through blood to locate my teeth. When the door slammed then opened again so she could throw out my shoe, like a whipped puppy I just crawled away afraid to even whimper.

Maybe he is right. I am not the woman. When he left I shook it off and pretended it didn't matter.

Foam spurting from an aerosol can made him chuckle, so he lathered with shaving soap and a brush, a handsome

God Help the Child

thing of boar's hair swelling from an ivory handle. I think it's in the trash along with his toothbrush, strop and straight razor. The things he left are too alive. It's time to throw all of it out. He left everything: toiletries, clothes and a cloth bag containing two books, one in a foreign language, the other a book of poems. I dump it all, then pick through the trash and take out his shaving brush and bone-handled razor. I put them both in the medicine cabinet and when I close the door I stare at my face in the mirror.

"You should always wear white, Bride. Only white and all white all the time." Jeri, calling himself a "total person" designer, insisted. Looking for a makeover for my second interview at Sylvia, Inc., I consulted him.

"Not only because of your name," he told me, "but because of what it does to your licorice skin," he said. "And black is the new black. Know what I mean? Wait. You're more Hershey's syrup than licorice. Makes people think of whipped cream and chocolate soufflé every time they see you."

That made me laugh. "Or Oreos?"

"Never. Something classy. Bonbons. Hand-dipped."

At first it was boring shopping for white-only clothes until I learned how many shades of white there were: ivory, oyster, alabaster, paper white, snow, cream, ecru, Champagne, ghost, bone. Shopping got even more interesting when I began choosing colors for accessories.

TONI MORRISON

Jeri, advising me, said, "Listen, Bride baby. If you must have a drop of color limit it to shoes and purses, but I'd keep both black when white simply won't do. And don't forget: no makeup. Not even lipstick or eyeliner. None."

I asked him about jewelry. Gold? Some diamonds? An emerald brooch?

"No. No." He threw his hands up. "No jewelry at all. Pearl dot earrings, maybe. No. Not even that. Just you, girl. All sable and ice. A panther in snow. And with your body? And those wolverine eyes? Please!"

I took his advice and it worked. Everywhere I went I got double takes but not like the faintly disgusted ones I used to get as a kid. These were adoring looks, stunned but hungry. Plus, unbeknownst to him, Jeri had given me the name for a product line. YOU, GIRL.

My face looks almost new in the mirror. My lips are back to normal; so are my nose and my eye. Only my rib area is still tender and, to my surprise, the scraped skin on my face has healed the quickest. I look almost beautiful again, so why am I still sad? On impulse I open the medicine cabinet and take out his shaving brush. I finger it. The silky hair is both tickly and soothing. I bring the brush to my chin, stroke it the way he used to. I move it to the underside of my jaw, then up to my earlobes. For some reason I feel faint. Soap. I need lather. I tear open a fancy box containing a tube of body foam "for the skin he loves." Then I squeeze

God Help the Child

it into the soap dish and wet his brush. Slathering the foam on my face I am breathless. I lather my cheeks, under my nose. This is crazy I'm sure but I stare at my face. My eyes look wider and starry. My nose is not only healed, it's perfect, and my lips between the white foam look so downright kissable I touch them with the tip of my little finger. I don't want to stop, but I have to. I clasp his razor. How did he hold it? Some finger arrangement I don't remember. I'll have to practice. Meantime I use the dull edge and carve dark chocolate lanes through swirls of white lather. I splash water and rinse my face. The satisfaction that follows is so so sweet.

This working from home isn't as bad as I thought it would be. I have authority still, although Brooklyn second-guesses me, even overrides a few of my decisions. I don't mind. I'm lucky she has my back. Besides, when I feel depressed the cure is tucked away in a little kit where his shaving equipment is. Lathering warm soapy water, I can hardly wait for the brushing and then the razor, the combination that both excites and soothes me. Lets me imagine without grief times when I was made fun of and hurt.

"She's sort of pretty under all that black." Neighbors and their daughters agreed. Sweetness never attended parent-teacher meetings or volleyball games. I was encouraged to take business courses not the college track, community college instead of four-year state universities. I didn't do any

TONI MORRISON

of that. After I don't know how many refusals, I finally got a job working stock—never sales where customers would see me. I wanted the cosmetics counter but didn't dare ask for it. I got to be a buyer only after rock-dumb white girls got promotions or screwed up so bad they settled for somebody who actually knew about stock. Even the interview at Sylvia, Inc., got off to a bad start. They questioned my style, my clothes and told me to come back later. That's when I consulted Jeri. Then walking down the hall toward the interviewer's office, I could see the effect I was having: wide admiring eyes, grins and whispers: "Whoa!" "Oh, baby." In no time I rocketed to regional manager. "See?" said Jeri. "Black sells. It's the hottest commodity in the civilized world. White girls, even brown girls have to strip naked to get that kind of attention."

True or not, it made me, remade me. I began to move differently—not a strut, not that pelvis-out rush of the runway—but a stride, slow and focused. Men leaped and I let myself be caught. For a while, anyway, until my sex life became sort of like Diet Coke—deceptively sweet minus nutrition. More like a PlayStation game imitating the safe glee of virtual violence and just as brief. All my boyfriends were typecast: would-be actors, rappers, professional athletes, players waiting for my crotch or my paycheck like an allowance; others, already having made it, treating me like a medal, a shiny quiet testimony to their prowess. Not

God Help the Child

one of them giving, helpful—none interested in what I thought, just what I looked like. Joking or baby-talking me through what I believed was serious conversation before they found more ego props elsewhere. I remember one date in particular, a medical student who persuaded me to join him on a visit to his parents' house up north. As soon as he introduced me it was clear I was there to terrorize his family, a means of threat to this nice old white couple.

"Isn't she beautiful?" he kept repeating. "Look at her, Mother? Dad?" His eyes were gleaming with malice.

But they outclassed him with their warmth—however faked—and charm. His disappointment was obvious, his anger thinly repressed. His parents even drove me to the train stop, probably so I wouldn't have to put up with his failed racist joke on them. I was relieved, even knowing what the mother did with my used teacup.

Such was the landscape of men.

Then him. Booker. Booker Starbern.

I don't want to think about him now. Or how empty, how trivial and lifeless everything seems now. I don't want to remember how handsome he is, perfect except for that ugly burn scar on his shoulder. I stroked every inch of his golden skin, sucked his earlobes. I know the quality of the hair in his armpit; I fingered the dimple in his upper lip; I poured red wine in his navel and drank its spill. There is no place on my body his lips did not turn into bolts of

TONI MORRISON

lightning. Oh, God. I have to stop reliving our lovemaking. I have to forget how new it felt every single time, both fresh and somehow eternal. I'm tone-deaf but fucking him made me sing and then, and then out of nowhere, "You not the woman . . ." before vanishing like a ghost.

Dismissed.

Erased.

Even Sofia Huxley, of all people, erased me. A convict. A convict! She could have said, "No thanks," or even "Get out!" No. She went postal. Maybe fistfighting is prison talk. Instead of words, broken bones and drawing blood is inmate conversation. I'm not sure which is worse, being dumped like trash or whipped like a slave.

We had lunch in my office the day before he split—lobster salad, Smartwater, peach slices in brandy. Oh, stop. I can't keep thinking about him. And I'm stir-crazy slouching around these rooms. Too much light, too much space, too lonely. I have to put on some clothes and get out of here. Do what Brooklyn keeps nagging me about: forget sunglasses and floppy hats, show myself, live life like it really is life. She should know; she's making Sylvia, Inc., her own.

I choose carefully: bone-white shorts and halter, high-wedged rope-and-straw sandals, beige canvas tote into which I drop the shaving brush in case I need it. *Elle* magazine and sunglasses too. Brooklyn would approve even though I'm just going two blocks to a park used mostly by

God Help the Child

dog walkers and seniors this time of day. Later on there will be joggers and skaters, but no mothers and children on a Saturday. Their weekends are for playdates, playrooms, playgrounds and play restaurants, all guarded by loving nannies with delicious accents.

I select a bench near an artificial pond where real ducks sail. And though I quickly block a memory of his describing the difference between wild drakes and yardbirds, my muscles remember his cool, massaging fingers. While I turn the pages of *Elle* and scan pictures of the young and eatable, I hear slow steps on gravel. I look up. The steps belong to a gray-haired couple strolling by, silent, holding hands. Their paunches are the exact same size, although his is lower down. Both wear colorless slacks and loose T-shirts imprinted with faded signs, front and back, about peace. The teenage dog walkers snigger and yank leashes for no reason, except perhaps envy of a long life of intimacy. The couple moves carefully, as though in a dream. Steps matching, looking straight ahead like people called to a spaceship where a door will slide open and a tongue of red carpet rolls out. They will ascend, hand in hand, into the arms of a benevolent Presence. They will hear music so beautiful it will bring you to tears.

That does it. The hand-holding couple, their silent music. I can't stop it now—I'm back in the packed stadium. The screaming audience is no match for the wild, sexy

TONI MORRISON

music. Crowds dance in the aisles; people stand on their bench seats and clap to the drums. My arms are in the air waving to the music. My hips and head sway on their own. Before I see his face, his arms are around my waist, my back to his chest, his chin in my hair. Then his hands are on my stomach and I am dropping mine to hold on to his while we dance back to front. When the music stops I turn around to look at him. He smiles. I am moist and shivering.

Before I leave the park, I finger the bristles of the shaving brush. They are soft and warm.

Sweetness

Oh, yeah, I feel bad sometimes about how I treated Lula Ann when she was little. But you have to understand: I had to protect her. She didn't know the world. There was no point in being tough or sassy even when you were right. Not in a world where you could be sent to a juvenile lockup for talking back or fighting in school, a world where you'd be the last one hired and the first one fired. She couldn't know any of that or how her black skin would scare white people or make them laugh and trick her. I once saw a girl nowhere near as dark as Lula Ann and who couldn't be more than ten years old tripped by one of a group of white boys and when she fell and tried to scramble up another one put his foot on her behind and knocked her flat again. Those boys held their stomachs and bent over with laughter. Long after she got away, they were still giggling, so proud of themselves. If I hadn't been watching through the bus window I would have helped her, pulled her away from that white trash. See if I hadn't trained Lula Ann properly she wouldn't have known to always cross the street and avoid white boys. But the lessons I taught her paid off because in the end she made

TONI MORRISON

me proud as a peacock. It was in that case with that gang of pervert teachers—three of them, a man and two women—that she knocked it out of the park. Young as she was, she behaved like a grown-up on the witness stand—so calm and sure of herself. Fixing her wild hair was always a trial, but I braided it down tight for the court appearance and bought her a blue and white sailor dress. I was nervous thinking she would stumble getting up to the stand, or stutter, or forget what the psychologists said and put me to shame. But no, thank God, she put the noose, so to speak, around at least one of those sinful teachers' neck. The things they were accused of would make you puke. How they got little kids to do nasty things. It was in the newspapers and on television. For weeks, crowds of people with and without children in the school yelled outside the courthouse. Some had homemade signs saying, KILL THE FREAKS and NO MERCY FOR DEVILS.

I sat through most of the days of the trial, not all, just the days when Lula Ann was scheduled to appear, because many witnesses were postponed or never showed. They got sick or changed their minds. She looked scared but she stayed quiet, not like the other child witnesses fidgeting and whining. Some were even crying. After Lula Ann's performance in that court and on the stand I was so proud of her, we walked the streets hand in hand. It's not often you see a little black girl take down some evil whites. I wanted her

God Help the Child

to know how pleased I was so I had her ears pierced and bought her a pair of earrings—tiny gold hoops. Even the landlord smiled when he saw us. No pictures were in the newspapers because of privacy laws for children, but the word got out. The drugstore owner, who always turned his mouth down when he saw us together, handed Lula Ann a Clark bar after he heard about her courage.

I wasn't a bad mother, you have to know that, but I may have done some hurtful things to my only child because I had to protect her. Had to. All because of skin privileges. At first I couldn't see past all that black to know who she was and just plain love her. But I do. I really do. I think she understands now. I think so.

Last two times I saw her she was, well, striking. Kind of bold and confident. Each time she came I forgot just how black she really was because she was using it to her advantage in beautiful white clothes.

Taught me a lesson I should have known all along. What you do to children matters. And they might never forget. She's got a big-time job in California but she don't call or visit anymore. She sends me money and stuff every now and then, but I ain't seen her in I don't know how long.

Bride

Brooklyn picks the restaurant. Pirate, it's called, a semi-chic, once-hot, now barely-hanging-on place for tourists and the decidedly uncool. The evening is too chilly for the sleeveless white shift I'm wearing, but I want to impress Brooklyn with my progress, my barely visible scars. She is dragging me out of what she says is classic post-rape depression. Her cure is this overdesigned watering hole where male waiters in red suspenders emphasizing their bare chests will do the trick. She is a good friend. No pressure, she says. Just a quiet dinner in a mostly empty restaurant with cute but harmless beef on display. I know why she likes this place; she loves showing off around men. Long ago, before I met her, she twisted her blond hair into dreadlocks and, pretty as she is, the locks add an allure she wouldn't otherwise have. At least the black guys she dates think so.

We talk office gossip through the appetizer but the giggling stops when the mahimahi arrives. It's the usual over-the-top recipe, swimming in coconut milk, smothered with ginger, sesame seeds, garlic and teeny flakes of green onion. Annoyed by the chef's efforts to make a bland fish thrilling,

God Help the Child

I scrape everything from the fillet and blurt out, "I want a vacation, to go somewhere. On a cruise ship."

Brooklyn grins. "Oooh. Where? Finally, some good news."

"But no kids," I say.

"That's easy. Fiji, maybe?"

"And no parties. I want to be with settled people with paunches. And play shuffleboard on a deck. Bingo too."

"Bride, you're scaring me." She dabs the napkin to a corner of her mouth and widens her eyes.

I put down my fork. "No, really. Just quiet. Nothing louder than waves lapping or ice melting in crystal glasses."

Brooklyn puts her elbow on the table and covers my hand with hers. "Aw, girl, you're still in shock. I'm not going to let you make any plans until this rape stuff wears off. You won't know what you want until then. Trust me, all right?"

I'm so tired of this. Next she'll be insisting I see a rape therapist or attend victim fests. I'm really sick of it because I need to be able to have an honest conversation with my closest friend. I bite the tip of an asparagus stalk then slowly cross my knife and fork.

"Look, I lied to you." I push my plate away so hard it knocks over what's left of my apple martini. I mop it up with my napkin carefully, trying to steady myself and make what I'm about to say sound normal. "I lied, girlfriend. I

TONI MORRISON

lied to you. Nobody tried to rape me and that was a woman beat the shit out of me. Somebody I was trying to help, for Christ's sake. I tried to help her and she would have killed me if she could."

Brooklyn stares open-mouthed then squints. "A woman? What woman? Who?"

"You don't know her."

"You don't either, obviously."

"I did once."

"Bride, don't give me scraps. Let me have the full plate, please." She pulls her locks behind her ears and fixes me with an intense glare.

It took maybe three minutes to tell it. How when I was a little girl in the second grade, a teacher in the kindergarten building next to the main building played dirty with her students.

"I can't hear this," says Brooklyn. She closes her eyes like a nun faced with porn.

"You asked for the full plate," I say.

"Okay, okay."

"Well, she was caught, tried, and sent away."

"Got it. So what's the problem?"

"I testified against her."

"Even better. So?"

"I pointed. I sat in the witness chair and pointed her out. Said I saw her do it."

God Help the Child

"And?"

"They put her in prison. Gave her a twenty-five-year sentence."

"Good. End of story, no?"

"Well, no, not really." I am fidgeting, adjusting my neckline as well as my face. "I thought about her on and off, you know?"

"Uh, uh. Tell me."

"Well, she was just twenty."

"So were the Manson girls."

"In a few years she'll be forty and I thought she probably has no friends."

"Poor thing. No kiddies to rape in the joint. What a drag."

"You're not hearing me."

"Damn straight I'm not listening to you." Brooklyn slaps the table. "You nuts? Who is this female alligator, besides being pond scum, I mean. Is she related to you? What?"

"No."

"Well?"

"I just thought she would be sad, lonely after all these years."

"She's breathing. That not good enough for her?"

This is going nowhere. How can I expect her to understand? I signal the waiter. "Again," I say and nod toward my empty glass.

TONI MORRISON

The waiter lifts his eyebrows and looks at Brooklyn.
“None for me, cookie. I need cold sobriety.”

He gives her a killer smile full of bright and bonded teeth.

“Look, Brooklyn, I don’t know why I went. What I do know is I kept thinking about her. All these years in Decagon.”

“You write to her? Visit?”

“No. I’ve seen her only twice. Once at the trial and then when this happened.” I point to my face.

“You dumb bitch!” She seems really disgusted with me.
“You put her behind bars! Of course she wants to mess you up.”

“She wasn’t like that before. She was gentle, funny, even, and kind.”

“Before? Before what? You said you saw her twice—at the trial and when she clocked you. But what about seeing her diddling kids? You said—”

The waiter leans in with my drink.

“Okay.” I’m irritable and it shows. “Three times.”

Brooklyn tongues the corner of her mouth. “Say, Bride, did she molest you too? You can tell me.”

Jesus. What does she think? That I’m a secret lesbian? In a company practically run by bi’s, straights, trannies, gays and anybody who took their looks seriously. What’s the point of closets these days?

“Oh, girl, don’t be stupid.” I shoot her the look Sweet-

God Help the Child

ness always put on when I spilled the Kool-Aid or tripped on the rug.

"Okay, okay." She waves her hand. "Waiter, honey, I've changed my mind. Belvedere. Rocks. Double it."

The waiter winks. "You got it," he says, hitting "got" with a slur that must have earned him a promising phone number in South Dakota.

"Look at me, girlfriend. Think about it. What made you feel so sorry for her? I mean, really."

"I don't know." I shake my head. "I guess I wanted to feel good about myself. Not so disposable. Sofia Huxley—that's her name—was all I could think of, someone who would appreciate some ... something friendly without strings."

"Now I get it." She looks relieved and smiles at me.

"Do you? Really?"

"Absolutely. The dude splits, you feel like cow flop, you try to get your mojo back, but it's a bust, right?"

"Right. Sorta. I guess."

"So we fix it."

"How?" If anybody knows what to do, it's Brooklyn. Hitting the floor, she always says, requires a choice—lie there or bounce. "How do we fix it?"

"Well, not with no bingo." She's excited.

"What then?"

"Blingo!" she shouts.

"You called?" asks the waiter.

TONI MORRISON

. . .

Two weeks later, just as she promised, Brooklyn organizes a celebration—a prelaunch party where I am the main attraction, the one who invented YOU, GIRL and helped create all the excitement about the brand. The location is a fancy hotel, I think. No, a smarty-pants museum. A crowd is waiting and so is a limousine. My hair, and dress are perfect: diamondlike jewels spangle the white lace of my gown, which is tight-fitting above the mermaidlike flounce at my ankles. It's transparent in interesting places but veiled in others—nipples and the naked triangle way below my navel.

All that's left is to choose earrings. I've lost my pearl dots, so I choose one-carat diamonds. Modest, nothing flashy, nothing to detract from what Jeri calls my black-coffee-and-whipped-cream palette. A panther in snow.

Christ. Now what? My earrings. They won't go in. The platinum stem keeps slipping away from my earlobe. I examine the earrings—nothing wrong. I peer at my lobes closely and discover the tiny holes are gone. Ridiculous. I've had pierced ears since I was eight years old. Sweetness gave me little circles of fake gold as a present after I testified against the Monster. Since then I've never worn clip-ons. Never. Pearl dots, usually, ignoring my “total person” designer, and sometimes, like now, diamonds. Wait. This

God Help the Child

is impossible. After all these years, I've got virgin earlobes, untouched by a needle, smooth as a baby's thumb? Maybe it's from the plastic surgery or side effects of the antibiotics? But that was weeks ago. I am trembling. I need the shaving brush. The phone is ringing. I get the brush out and stroke it lightly at my cleavage. It makes me dizzy. The phone keeps ringing. Okay, no jewelry, no earrings. I pick up the phone.

"Miss Bride, your driver is here."

If I pretend sleep maybe he will just get the hell out. Whoever he is I can't face him to chat or fake after-sex cuddle, especially since I don't remember any of it. He kisses my shoulder lightly, then fingers my hair. I murmur as though dreaming. I smile but keep my eyes closed. He moves the bedclothes and goes into the bathroom. I sneak a touch to my earlobes. Smooth. Still smooth. I am complimented constantly at the party—how beautiful, how pretty, so hot, so lovely, everyone says, but no one questions the absence of earrings. I find that strange, because all through the speeches, the award presentation, the dinner, the dancing, my baby thumb earlobes are so much on my mind I can't concentrate. So I deliver an incoherent thank-you speech, laugh too long at filthy jokes, stumble through conversations with coworkers, drink three, four times more than

TONI MORRISON

what I can gracefully hold. Do a single line, after which I flirt like a high school brat campaigning for prom queen, which is how I let whoever he is in my bed. I taste my tongue hoping the film is mine alone. God. Thank you. No handcuffs dangle from the bedposts.

He has finished showering and calls my name while putting his tuxedo back on. I don't answer; I don't look; I just pull the pillow over my head. That amuses him and I hear him chuckle. I listen to kitchen noises as he makes coffee. No, not coffee; I would smell it. He is pouring something—orange juice, V8, flat Champagne? That's all that's in the refrigerator. Silence, then footsteps. Please, please just leave. I hear a tick on the nightstand followed by the sound of my front door opening then closing. When I peep from under the pillow I see a folded square of paper next to the clock. Telephone number. *FABULOUS*. Then his name. I slump with relief. He is not an employee.

I rush to the bathroom and look in the wastebasket. Thank you, Jesus. A used condom. Traces of steam are on the shower glass near the medicine cabinet whose mirror is clear, sparkling, showing me what I saw last night—earlobes as chaste as the day I was born. So this is what insanity is. Not goofy behavior, but watching a sudden change in the world you used to know. I need the shaving brush, the soap. There is not a single hair in my armpit, but I lather it anyway. Now the other one. The lathering up, the shaving, calms me and I am so grateful I begin to

God Help the Child

think of other places that might need this little delight. My pudenda, perhaps. It's already hairless. Will it be too tricky using the straight razor down there? Tricky. Yes.

Calmed, I go back to bed and slide under the sheet. Minutes later my head explodes with throbbing pain. I get up and find two Vicodins to swallow. Waiting for the pills to work there is nothing to do but let my thoughts trail, track and bite one another.

What is happening to me?

My life is falling down. I'm sleeping with men whose names I don't know and not remembering any of it. What's going on? I'm young; I'm successful and pretty. Really pretty, so there! Sweetness. So why am I so miserable? Because he left me? I have what I've worked for and am good at it. I'm proud of myself, I really am, but it's the Vicodin and the hangover that make me keep remembering some not-so-proud junk in the past. I've gotten over all that and moved on. Even Booker thought so, didn't he? I spilled my guts to him, told him everything: every fear, every hurt, every accomplishment, however small. While talking to him certain things I had buried came up fresh as though I was seeing them for the first time—how Sweetness's bedroom always seemed unlit. I open the window next to her dresser. Her grown-up-woman stuff crowds her vanity: tweezers, cotton balls, that round box of Lucky Lady face powder, the blue bottle of Midnight in Paris cologne, hairpins in a tiny saucer, tissue, eyebrow pencils,

TONI MORRISON

Maybelline mascara, Tabu lipstick. It's deep red and I try some on. No wonder I'm in the cosmetics business. It must have been describing all that stuff on Sweetness's dresser that made me tell him about that other thing. All about it. Me hearing a cat's meow through the open window, how pained it sounded, frightened, even. I looked. Down below in the walled area that led to the building's basement I saw not a cat but a man. He was leaning over the short, fat legs of a child between his hairy white thighs. The boy's little hands were fists, opening and closing. His crying was soft, squeaky and loaded with pain. The man's trousers were down around his ankles. I leaned over the windowsill and stared. The man had the same red hair as Mr. Leigh, the landlord, but I knew it couldn't be him because he was stern but not dirty. He demanded the rent be paid in cash before noon on the first day of the month and charged a late fee if you knocked on his door five minutes late. Sweetness was so scared of him she made sure I delivered the money first thing in the morning. I know now what I didn't know then—that standing up to Mr. Leigh meant having to look for another apartment. And that it would be hard finding a location in another safe, meaning mixed, neighborhood. So when I told Sweetness what I'd seen, she was furious. Not about a little crying boy, but about spreading the story. She wasn't interested in tiny fists or big hairy thighs; she was interested in keeping our apartment. She said, "Don't you say a word about it. Not to anybody, you hear me, Lula?"

God Help the Child

Forget it. Not a single word." So I was afraid to tell her the rest—that although I didn't make a sound, I just hung over the windowsill and stared, something made the man look up. And it was Mr. Leigh. He was zipping his pants while the boy lay whimpering between his boots. The look on his face scared me but I couldn't move. That's when I heard him shout, "Hey, little nigger cunt! Close that window and get the fuck outta there!"

When I told Booker about it I laughed at first, pretending the whole thing was just silly. Then I felt my eyes burning. Even before the tears welled, he held my head in the crook of his arm and pressed his chin in my hair.

"You never told anybody?" he asked me.

"Never," I said. "Only you."

"Now five people know. The boy, the freak, your mother, you and now me. Five is better than two but it should be five thousand."

He turned my face up to his and kissed me. "Did you ever see that boy again?"

I said I didn't think so, that he was down on the ground and I couldn't see his face. "All I know is that he was a white kid with brown hair." Then thinking of how his little fingers spread then curled, spread wide then curled tight I couldn't help sobbing.

"Come on, baby, you're not responsible for other folks' evil."

"I know, but—"

TONI MORRISON

"No buts. Correct what you can; learn from what you can't."

"I don't always know what to correct."

"Yes you do. Think. No matter how hard we try to ignore it, the mind always knows truth and wants clarity."

That was one of the best talks we ever had. I felt such relief. No. More than that. I felt curried, safe, owned.

Not like now, twisting and turning between the most expensive cotton sheets in the world. Aching, waiting for another Vicodin to start up while fretting in my gorgeous bedroom, unable to stop scary thoughts. Truth. Clarity. What if it was the landlord my forefinger was really pointing at in that courtroom? What that teacher was accused of was sort of like what Mr. Leigh did. Was I pointing at the idea of him? His nastiness or the curse he threw at me? I was six years old and had never heard the words "nigger" or "cunt" before, but the hate and revulsion in them didn't need definition. Just like later in school when other curses—with mysterious definitions but clear meanings—were hissed or shouted at me. Coon. Topsy. Clinkertop. Sambo. Ooga booga. Ape sounds and scratching of the sides, imitating zoo monkeys. One day a girl and three boys heaped a bunch of bananas on my desk and did their monkey imitations. They treated me like a freak, strange, soiling like a spill of ink on white paper. I didn't complain to the teacher for the same reason Sweetness cautioned me about Mr. Leigh—I might get suspended or even expelled.

God Help the Child

So I let the name-calling, the bullying travel like poison, like lethal viruses through my veins, with no antibiotic available. Which, actually, was a good thing now I think of it, because I built up immunity so tough that not being a “nigger girl” was all I needed to win. I became a deep dark beauty who doesn’t need Botox for kissable lips or tanning spas to hide a deathlike pallor. And I don’t need silicon in my butt. I sold my elegant blackness to all those childhood ghosts and now they pay me for it. I have to say, forcing those tormentors—the real ones and others like them—to drool with envy when they see me is more than payback. It’s glory.

Today is Monday or is it Tuesday? Anyway, I’ve been in and out of bed for two days. I’ve stopped worrying about my earlobes; I can always get them pierced again. Brooklyn telephones and keeps me up to date on office matters. I asked for and got an extension on my leave. She is “acting” regional manager now. Good for her. She deserves it just for getting me out of that Decagon catastrophe, taking care of me for days, seeing to the return of my Jaguar, hiring a cleaning crew, choosing the plastic surgeon. She even fired Rose, my maid, for me when I could no longer stand the sight of her—fat, with cantaloupe breasts and watermelon behind. I couldn’t have healed without Brooklyn. Still, her calls are fewer and fewer.

Brooklyn

I thought he was a predator. I don't care how wild a dancing crowd is, you just don't grab somebody from behind like that unless you know them. But she didn't mind at all. She let him squeeze her, rub up against her and she didn't know a thing about him, still doesn't. But I do. I saw him with a bunch of raggedy losers at the subway entrance. Panhandling, for Christ's sake. And once I'm pretty sure I saw him sprawled on the steps of the library, pretending he was reading a book so the cops wouldn't tell him to move on. Another time I saw him sitting at a coffee shop table writing in a notebook, trying to look serious, like he had something important to do. It was surely him I saw walking aimlessly in neighborhoods far from Bride's apartment. What was he doing there? Seeing another woman? Bride never mentioned what he did, what, if any, job he had. Said she liked the mystery. Liar. She liked the sex. Addicted to it and believe me I know. When the three of us were together she was different somehow. Confident, not so needy or constantly, obviously soliciting praise. In his company she shimmered, but quietly kind of. I don't know. Yes, he was one

God Help the Child

good-looking man. So what? What else did he offer besides a rut between sheets? He didn't have a dime to his name.

I could have warned her. I'm not a bit surprised he left her like a skunk leaves a smell. If she knew what I knew she would have thrown him out. One day just for fun I flirted with him, tried to seduce him. In her own bedroom, mind you. I was bringing something to Bride, mock-ups of packaging. I have her key and just unlocked and opened the door. When I called her name, he answered saying, "She's not here." I went into her bedroom—there he was lying in her bed reading. Naked too, under a sheet that reached to his waist. On impulse, and it really was impulse, I dropped the package, kicked off my shoes and then like in a porn video the rest of my clothes slowly followed. He watched me closely while I stripped but didn't say a word so I knew he wanted me to stay. I never wear underthings so when I unzipped my jeans and kicked them away I simply stood there naked as a newborn. He just stared, but only at my face and so hard I blinked. I fingered my hair then joined him: slipped between the sheets; put my arm around his chest and planted light kisses there. He put his book away.

Between kisses, I whispered, "Don't you want another flower in your garden?"

He said, "Are you sure you know what makes a garden grow?"

"Sure do," I said. "Tenderness."

TONI MORRISON

"And dung," he answered.

I elbowed myself up and stared at him. Bastard. He wasn't smiling but he wasn't pushing me away either. I jumped off the bed and picked up my clothes as quickly as I could. He didn't even watch me get dressed, asshole. He went back to reading his book. If I'd wanted to I could have made him make love to me. I really could have. I probably shouldn't have come on so sudden. Maybe if I had eased up a bit, slowed down. Taken it easy.

Well, anyway, Bride doesn't know a thing about her used-to-be lover. But I do.

Bride

I don't get it. Who the hell is he? His duffel bag, which I am determined to trash like the other one, is stuffed with more books, one in German, two books of poetry, one by somebody named Hass and some paperback books by more writers I've never heard of.

Christ. I thought I knew him. I know he has degrees from some university. He owns T-shirts that say so, but I never thought about that part of his life because what was important in our relationship, other than our lovemaking and his complete understanding of me, was the fun we had. Dancing in the clubs, other couples watching us with envy, boat rides with friends, hanging out on the beach. Finding these books prove how little I know about him, that he was somebody else, somebody thinking things he never talked about. True, our conversations were mostly about me but they were not the joke-filled, sarcastic ones I usually had with other men. To them, anything besides my flirting or their pronouncements would lead to disagreements, arguments, breakups. I could never have described my childhood to them as I did to Booker. Well, there were

TONI MORRISON

times when he talked to me at length, but none of it was intimate—it was more like a lecture. Once when we were at the shore stretched out in beach chairs, he started talking to me about the history of water in California. A bit boring, yes, and I was sort of interested. Still, I fell asleep.

I have no idea what occupied him when I was at the office and I never asked. I thought he liked me especially because I never probed, nagged or asked him about his past. I left him his private life. I thought it showed how much I trusted him—that it was him I was attracted to, not what he did. Every girl I know introduces her boyfriend as a lawyer or artist or club owner or broker or whatever. The job, not the guy, is what the girlfriend adores. “Bride, come meet Steve. He’s a lawyer at—” “I’m dating this fabulous film producer—” “Joey is CFO at—” “My boyfriend got a part in that TV show—”

I shouldn’t have—trusted him, I mean. I spilled my heart to him; he told me nothing about himself. I talked; he listened. Then he split, left without a word. Mocking me, dumping me exactly as Sofia Huxley did. Neither of us had mentioned marriage, but I really thought I had found my guy. “You not the woman” is the last thing I expected to hear.

Days, weeks of mail fill the basket on the table near my door. After searching the refrigerator for something to nibble on, I decide to examine the pile—toss out the pleas for

God Help the Child

money from every charity in the world, the promises of gifts from banks, stores and failing businesses. There are just two first-class letters. One is from Sweetness. "Hi, Honey," then stuff about her doctors' advice before the usual hint for money. The other is addressed to Booker Starbern from Salvatore Ponti on Seventeenth Street. I tear it open and find a reminder invoice. Sixty-eight dollars overdue. I don't know whether to trash the invoice or go see what Mr. Ponti did for sixty-eight dollars. Before I can make up my mind, the telephone rings.

"Hey, how was it? Last night. Fab, huh? You were a knockout, as usual." Brooklyn is slurping something between words. A calorie-free, energy-filled, diet-supporting, fake-flavored, creamy, dye-colored something. "Wasn't that after-party the bomb?"

"Yeah," I answer.

"You don't sound sure. Did that guy you left with turn out to be Mr. Rogers or Superman? Who is he anyway?"

I go to my bedside table and look again at the note. "Phil something."

"How was he? I went to Rocco's with Billy and we—"

"Brooklyn, I have to get out of here. Away somewhere."

"What? You mean now?"

"Didn't we talk about a cruise somewhere?" My voice is whiny, I know.

"We did, sure, but after YOU, GIRL starts shipping.

TONI MORRISON

The sample gift bags are in and the ad guys have several really cool ideas for . . .”

She rattles on until I stop her. “Look, I’ll call you later. I’m a bit hung over.”

“No kidding.” Brooklyn giggles.

When I hang up I’ve already decided to check out Mr. Ponti’s.

Sofia

I am not allowed to be near children. Home care was my first job after I was paroled. It suited me because the lady I cared for was nice. Grateful, even, for my help. And I liked being away from noise and a lot of people. Decagon is loud, packed with mistreated women and take-no-shit guards. My first week in Brookhaven, before being moved to Decagon, I watched an inmate get smacked across the back of her head with a belt just because she knocked her plate of food on the floor. The guard made her get down on all fours and eat it. She tried but started vomiting, so they took her to the infirmary. The food wasn't all that bad—corn pudding and Spam. I think she was probably sick with flu or something. Decagon is better than Brookhaven, where they loved to strip-search us at every exit and entrance, or just because. But still, at the second place there was always some prisoner-guard drama and when there wasn't, when we worked at our jobs, the noise, quarrels, fights, laughter, shouts went on and on. Even lights out just toned it down from a roar to a bark. At least I thought so. Quiet is mostly what I liked about being a home-care helper. After one month, though,

TONI MORRISON

I had to quit because my patient's grandchildren visited her on weekends. My parole officer found me something similar but without children—a nursing home that didn't call itself a hospice but that is what it mostly was. At first I didn't like being around so many people in another institution, especially ones I had to answer to. But I got used to it since my superiors were not menacing me even though they wore uniforms. Anything that looked or felt like prison gave me a bad attitude.

Somehow I survived those fifteen years. Had it not been for weekend basketball games and Julie, my cellmate and only friend, I wonder if I would have made it. For the first two years we two, sentenced for child abuse, were avoided in the cafeteria. We were cursed and spit on, and the guards tossed our cell every now and then. After a while they mostly forgot about us. We were at the bottom of the heap of murderers, arsonists, drug dealers, bomb-throwing revolutionaries and the mentally ill. Hurting little children was their idea of the lowest of the low—which is a hoot since the drug dealers could care less about who they poison or how old they were and the arsonists didn't separate the children from the families they burned. And bomb throwers are not selective or known for precision. If anybody doubted their hatred of me and Julie all they had to do was notice how the love of children was posted everywhere—pictures of babies and kids were all over the cell walls. Anybody's kid would do.

God Help the Child

Julie was serving time for smothering her disabled daughter. The little girl's photograph was posted on the wall above her bed. Molly. Big head, slack mouth, the loveliest blue eyes in the world. Julie whispered to Molly's photo at night or whenever she could. Not asking for forgiveness, but telling her dead daughter stories—fairy tales, mostly, all about princesses. I never told her, but I liked those stories too—helped me sleep. We worked in the sewing shop, making uniforms for a medical company that paid us twelve cents an hour. When my fingers got too stiff to work the machine properly, I was moved to the kitchen where I dropped whatever food I didn't scorch and was sent back to the sewing machines. But Julie wasn't there. She was in the infirmary after trying to hang herself. She didn't know how. A few of the cruelest inmates offered to show her. When she returned to population she was different—quiet, sad and not much company. I guess it was the gang rape by four women, then later the loving enslavement she was in with one of the elderly women—a husband called Lover whom no one trifled with. Nobody, guards or inmates, liked me enough to want more than a casual hookup. I was a fighter and too tall, I guess, almost a giant in that place. Fine, I thought—the less licking the better.

In all those years I received exactly two letters from Jack, my husband. The first was a Dear Honey letter that turned into complaints like "I'm being [blacked-out word] here." Beaten? Fucked? Tortured? What other word would the

TONI MORRISON

prison mail censor deny? The second letter began, "What the hell were you thinking, bitch?" No blacked-out word there. I didn't answer. My parents sent me packages at Christmas and on my birthday: nutritious candy bars, tampons, religious pamphlets and socks. But they never wrote, called or visited. I wasn't surprised. They were always hard to please. The family Bible was placed on a stand right next to the piano, where my mother played hymns after supper. They never said so, but I suspect they were glad to be rid of me. In their world of God and Devil no innocent person is sentenced to prison.

I mostly did what I was told. And I read a lot. That was one good thing about Decagon—its library. Since real public libraries don't need or want books anymore, they send them to prisons and old-folks' homes. Anything other than religious tracts and the Bible were banned in my family's home. As a teacher I thought I was well read although in college, as an education major, I was not required to read any literature. Until I was in prison I'd never read *The Odyssey* or Jane Austen. None of it taught me much, but concentrating on escapes, deceptions, and who would marry whom was a welcome distraction.

In the taxicab on the first day of my parole I felt like a little kid seeing the world for the first time—houses surrounded by grass so green it hurt my eyes. The flowers seemed to be painted because I didn't remember roses that

God Help the Child

shade of lavender or sunflowers so blindingly bright. Everything seemed not just remodeled but brand-new. When I rolled down the window to smell the fresh air, the wind caught my hair—whipping it backward and sideways. That's when I knew I was free. Wind. Wind fingering, stroking, kissing my hair.

That same day one of the students who testified against me—all grown up now—knocked on the door. I was in a sleazy motel room desperate to eat and sleep in solitude for once. No petty arguments or sex grunts, loud sobs or snores from nearby cells. I don't think many people appreciate silence or realize that it is as close to music as you can get. Quiet makes some folks fidget or feel too lonely. After fifteen years of noise I was hungry for silence more than food. So I gobbled everything, puked it up and was just about to get some deep solitude when I heard banging on the door.

I didn't know who she was although something about her eyes seemed familiar. In another world her black skin would have been remarkable, but living all those years in Decagon it wasn't. After fifteen years of wearing ugly flat shoes, I was more interested in her fashionable ones—alligator or snakeskin, pointy toes and heels so high they were like the stilts of circus clowns. She spoke as if we were friends but I didn't know what she was talking about or what she wanted until she threw money at me. She was one of the students who testified against me, one of the

TONI MORRISON

ones who helped kill me, take my life away. How could she think cash would erase fifteen years of life as death? I blanked. My fists took over as I thought I was battling the Devil. Exactly the one my mother always talked about—seductive but evil. As soon as I threw her out and got rid of her Satan's disguise, I curled up into a ball on the bed and waited for the police. Waited and waited. None came. If they had bashed in the door they would have seen a woman finally broken down after fifteen years of staying strong. For the first time after all those years, I cried. Cried and cried and cried until I fell asleep. When I woke up I reminded myself that freedom is never free. You have to fight for it. Work for it and make sure you are able to handle it.

Now I think of it, that black girl did do me a favor. Not the foolish one she had in mind, not the money she offered, but the gift that neither of us planned: the release of tears unshed for fifteen years. No more bottling up. No more filth. Now I am clean and able.

PART II





A taxi was preferable because parking a Jaguar in that neighborhood was as dim-witted as it was risky. That Booker frequented this part of the city startled Bride. Why here? she wondered. There were music shops in unthreatening neighborhoods, places where tattooed men and young girls dressed like ghouls weren't huddled on corners or squatting on curbs.

Once the driver stopped at the address she'd given him, and after he told her, "Sorry, lady. I can't wait here for you," Bride stepped quickly toward the door of Salvatore Ponti's Pawn and Repair Palace. Inside it was clear that the word "Palace" was less a mistake than an insanity. Under dusty glass counters row after row of jewelry and watches crouched. A man, good-looking the way elderly men can be, moved down the counter toward her. His jeweler's eyes swept all he could take in of his customer.

"Mr. Ponti?"

"Call me Sally, sweetheart. What can I do you for?"

Bride waved the overdue notice and explained she'd come to settle the bill and pick up whatever had been

TONI MORRISON

repaired. Sally examined the notice. "Oh, yeah," he said. "Thumb ring. Mouthpiece. They're in back. Come on."

Together they went into a back room where guitars and horns hung on the walls and all sorts of metal pieces covered the cloth of a table. The man working there looked up from his magnifying glass to examine Bride and then the notice. He went to a cupboard and removed a trumpet wrapped in purple cloth.

"He didn't mention the pinkie ring," said the repairman, "but I gave him one anyway. Picky guy, real picky."

Bride took the horn thinking she didn't even know Booker owned one or played it. Had she been interested she would have known that that was what caused the dark dimple on his upper lip. She handed Sally the amount owed.

"Nice, though, and smart for a country boy," said the repairman.

"Country boy?" Bride frowned. "He's not from the country. He lives here."

"Oh, yeah? Told me he was from some hick town up north," said Sally.

"Whiskey," said the repairman.

"What are you talking about?" asked Bride.

"Funny, right? Who could forget a town called Whiskey? Nobody, that's who."

The men burst into snorts of laughter and started calling

God Help the Child

out other memorable names of towns: Intercourse, Pennsylvania; No Name, Colorado; Hell, Michigan; Elephant Butte, New Mexico; Pig, Kentucky; Tightwad, Missouri. Exhausted, finally, by their mutual amusement, they turned their attention back to the customer.

"Look here," said Sally. "He gave us another address. A forward." He flipped through his Rolodex. "Ha. Somebody named Olive. Q. Olive. Whiskey, California."

"No street address?"

"Come on, honey. Who says they have streets in a town called Whiskey?" Sally was having a good time keeping himself amused as well as keeping the pretty black girl in his shop. "Deer tracks maybe," he added.

Bride left the shop quickly, but realized just as quickly that there were no roaming cabs. She was forced to return and ask Sally to phone one for her.

Sofia

I ought to be sad. Daddy called my supervisor to say Mommy died. I asked for an advance to buy a ticket to fly out for the funeral, assuming my parole officer would let me. I remember every inch of the church where the funeral would be held. The wooden Bible holders on the backs of the pews, the greenish light from the window behind Reverend Walker's head. And the smell—perfume, tobacco and something more. Godliness, perhaps. Clean, upright and very good for you like the dining room corner in Mommy's house. The blue-and-white wallpaper I came to know better than my own face. Roses, lilacs, clematis all shades of blue against snowy white. I stood there, sometimes for two hours; a quiet scolding, a punishment for something I don't remember now or even then. I wet my underwear? I played "wrestle" with a neighbor's son? I couldn't wait to get out of Mommy's house and marry the first man who asked. Two years with him was the same—obedience, silence, a bigger blue-and-white corner. Teaching was the only pleasure I had.

I have to admit, though, that Mommy's rules, her strict

God Help the Child

discipline helped me survive in Decagon. Until the first day of my release, that is, when I blew. Really blew. I beat up that black girl who testified against me. Beating her, kicking and punching her freed me up more than being paroled. I felt I was ripping blue-and-white wallpaper, returning slaps and running the devil Mommy knew so well out of my life.

I wonder what happened to her. Why she didn't call the police. Her eyes, frozen with fear, delighted me then. The next morning with my face bloated from hours of sobbing, I opened the door. Thin streaks of blood were on the pavement and a pearl earring nearby. Maybe it belonged to her, maybe not. Anyway I kept it. It's still in my wallet as what? A kind of remembrance? When I tend to my patients—put their teeth back in their mouths, rub their behinds, their thighs to limit bed sores, or when I sponge their lacy skin before lotioning it, in my mind I am putting the black girl back together, healing her, thanking her. For the release.

Sorry Mommy.

The sun and the moon shared the horizon in a distant friendship, each unfazed by the other. Bride didn't notice the light, how carnival it made the sky. The shaving brush and razor were packed in the trumpet case and stowed in the trunk. She thought about both until she became distracted by the music on the Jaguar's radio. Nina Simone was too aggressive, making Bride think of something other than herself. She switched to soft jazz, more suitable for the car's leather interior as well as a soothing background for the anxiety she needed to tamp down. She had never done anything this reckless. The reason for this tracking was not love, she knew; it was more hurt than anger that made her drive into unknown territory to locate the one person she once trusted, who made her feel safe, colonized somehow. Without him the world was more than confusing—shallow, cold, deliberately hostile. Like the atmosphere in her mother's house where she never knew the right thing to do or say or remember what the rules were. Leave the spoon in the cereal bowl or place it next to the bowl; tie her shoelaces with a bow or a double knot; fold her socks down or pull them straight up to the calf? What were

read?

God Help the Child

the rules and when did they change? When she soiled the bedsheet with her first menstrual blood, Sweetness slapped her and then pushed her into a tub of cold water. Her shock was alleviated by the satisfaction of being touched, handled by a mother who avoided physical contact whenever possible.

How could he? Why would he leave her stripped of all comfort, emotional security? Yes, her quick response to his exit was silly, stupid. Like the taunt of a third grader who had no clue about life.

He was part of the pain—not a savior at all, and now her life was in shambles because of him. The pieces of it that she had stitched together: personal glamour, control in an exciting even creative profession, sexual freedom and most of all a shield that protected her from any overly intense feeling, be it rage, embarrassment or love. Her response to physical attack was no less cowardly than her reaction to a sudden, unexplained breakup. The first produced tears; the second a flip “Yeah, so?” Being beaten up by Sofia was like Sweetness’s slap without the pleasure of being touched. Both confirmed her helplessness in the presence of confounding cruelty.

Too weak, too scared to defy Sweetness, or the landlord, or Sofia Huxley, there was nothing in the world left to do but stand up for herself finally and confront the first man she had bared her soul to, unaware that he was mocking her. It would take courage though, something that, being

TONI MORRISON

successful in her career, she thought she had plenty of. That and exotic beauty.

According to the men at Sally's he was from a place called Whiskey. Maybe he had gone back there. Maybe not. He could be living with Miss Q. Olive, another woman he didn't want, or he might have moved on. Whatever the case, Bride would track him, force him to explain why she didn't deserve better treatment from him, and second, what did he mean by "not the woman"? Who? This here woman? This one driving a Jaguar in an oyster-white cashmere dress and boots of brushed rabbit fur the color of the moon? The beautiful one, according to everybody with two eyes, who runs a major department in a billion-dollar company? The one who was already imagining newer product lines—eyelashes, for example. In addition to breasts, every woman (his kind or not) wanted longer, thicker eyelashes. A woman could be cobra-thin and starving, but if she had grapefruit boobs and raccoon eyes, she was deliriously happy. Right. She would get right on it after this trip.

The highway became less and less crowded as she drove east and then north. Soon, she imagined, forests would edge the road watching her, as trees always did. In a few hours she would be in north valley country: logging camps, hamlets no older than she was, dirt roads as old as the Tribes. As long as she was on a state highway, she decided to look for a diner, eat and freshen up before driving into territory too sparse for comfort. A collection of signs on a

God Help the Child

single billboard advertised one brand of gas, four of food, two of lodging. Three miles on, Bride left the highway and turned in to the oasis. The diner she chose was spotless and empty. The smell of beer and tobacco was not recent, nor was the framed Confederate flag that nestled the official American one.

"Yeah?" The counter waitress's eyes were wide and roving. Bride was used to that look, as well as the open mouth that accompanied it. It reminded her of the reception she got on the first days of school. Shock, as though she had three eyes.

"May I have a white omelet, no cheese?"

"White? You mean no eggs?"

"No. No yolks."

Bride ate as much as she could of that redneck version of digestible food, then asked where the ladies' room was. She left a five-dollar bill on the counter in case the waitress thought she was skipping. In the bathroom she confirmed that there was still reason to be alarmed by her hairless pudenda. Then standing at the mirror over the sink, she noticed the neckline of her cashmere dress was askew, slanting down so much her left shoulder was bare. Adjusting it, she saw that the shoulder slide was due neither to poor posture nor to a manufacturing flaw. The top of the dress sagged as if instead of a size 2 she had purchased a 4 and just now noticed the difference. But the dress had fit her perfectly when she started this trip. Perhaps, she thought,

TONI MORRISON

there was a defect in the cloth or the design; otherwise she was losing weight—fast. Not a problem. No such thing as too thin in her business. She would simply choose clothes more carefully. A scary memory of altered earlobes shook her but she dared not connect it to other alterations to her body.

While collecting the change and deciding on the tip, Bride asked directions to Whiskey.

"Ain't all that far," said the bug-eyed, smirking waitress. "A hundred miles, maybe one fifty. You'll make it before dark."

Is that what backwoods trash called "not far"? wondered Bride. One hundred and fifty miles? She gassed up, had the tires checked and followed the loop away from the oasis back onto the highway. Contrary to the waitress's certainty, it was very dark by the time she saw the exit marked not by a number but a name—Whiskey Road.

At least it was paved, narrow and curvy but still paved. Perhaps that was the reason she trusted the high-beam headlights and accelerated. She never saw it coming. The automobile overshot a sharp bend in the road and crashed into what must have been the world's first and biggest tree, which was circled by bushes hiding its lower trunk. Bride fought the air bag, moving so fast and in such panic she did not notice her foot caught and twisted in the space between the brake pedal and the buckled door, until trying to free it flattened her with pain. She managed to unbuckle the seat belt but nothing else helped. She lay there awkwardly

God Help the Child

on the driver's seat, trying to ease her left foot out of the elegant rabbit-furred boot. Her efforts proved both painful and impossible. Stretching and twisting, she managed to get to her cellphone, but its face was blank except for the "no service" message. The likelihood of a passing car was dim in the dark but possible, so she pressed the car's horn, desperate for the honk, to do more than frighten owls. It frightened nothing because it made no sound. There was nothing she could do but lie there the rest of the night, by turns afraid, angry, in pain, weepy. The moon was a toothless grin and even the stars, seen through the tree limb that had fallen like a throttling arm across the windshield, frightened her. The piece of sky she could glimpse was a dark carpet of gleaming knives pointed at her and aching to be released. She felt world-hurt—an awareness of malign forces changing her from a courageous adventurer into a fugitive.

The sun merely hinted at its rise, an apricot slice teasing the sky with a promise of revealing its whole self. Bride, whipped by body cramp and leg pain, felt a tingle of hope along with the dawn. A helmetless motorcyclist, a truck full of loggers, a serial rapist, a boy on a bike, a bear hunter—was there no one to lend a hand? While imagining who or what might rescue her, a small bone-white face appeared at the passenger's side window. A girl, very young, carrying a black kitten, stared at her with the greenest eyes Bride had ever seen.

TONI MORRISON

"Help me. Please. Help me." Bride would have screamed but she didn't have the strength.

The girl watched her for a long, long time, then turned away and disappeared.

"Oh, God," Bride whispered. Was she hallucinating? If not, surely the girl had gone for help. Nobody, not the mentally disabled or the genetically violent, would leave her there. Would they? Suddenly, as they hadn't in the dark, the surrounding trees coming alive in the dawn really scared her, and the silence was terrifying. She decided to turn on the ignition, shift into reverse and blast the Jaguar out of there—foot or no foot. Just as she turned the ignition key to the withering sound of a dead battery a man appeared. Bearded with long blond hair and slit black eyes. Rape? Murder? Bride trembled, watching him squint at her through the window. Then he left. What seemed to Bride like hours were only a few minutes before he returned with a saw and a crowbar. Swallowing and stiff with fear she watched him saw the branch from the hood then, taking a vise from his back pocket, pry and yank the door open. Bride's scream of pain startled the green-eyed girl standing by who watched the scene with her mouth open. Carefully the man eased Bride's foot from under the brake pedal and away from the car's smashed door. His hair hung forward as he lifted her out of the car seat. Silently, asking no questions and offering no verbal comfort, he positioned

God Help the Child

her in his arms. With the emerald-eyed girl tagging along, he carried Bride half a mile down a sandy path leading to a warehouse-looking structure that might serve a killer as a house. Enclosed in his arms and in unrelenting pain, she said, "Don't hurt me, please don't hurt me," over and over before fainting.

"Why is her skin so black?"

"For the same reason yours is so white."

"Oh. You mean like my kitten?"

"Right. Born that way."

Bride sucked her teeth. What an easy conversation between mother and daughter. She was faking sleep, eavesdropping under a Navajo blanket, her ankle propped on a pillow, throbbing with pain in its furry boot. The rescuing man had brought Bride to this sort-of house, and instead of raping and torturing her, asked his wife to look after her while he took the truck. He wasn't sure, he said, but there was a chance it wasn't too early for the only doctor in the area to be found. He didn't think it was just a sprain, the bearded man said. The ankle might be broken. Without phone service, he had no choice but to get in his truck and drive into the village for the doctor.

"My name is Evelyn," said the wife. "My husband's is Steve. Yours?"

TONI MORRISON

"Bride. Just Bride." For the first time her concocted name didn't sound hip. It sounded Hollywood, teenagey. That is until Evelyn motioned to the emerald-eyed girl. "Bride, this is Raisin. Actually we named her Rain because that is where we found her, but she prefers to call herself Raisin."

"Thank you, Raisin. You saved my life. Really." Bride, grateful for another vanity name, let a tear sting its way down her cheek. Evelyn gave her one of her husband's plaid, lumberjack shirts after helping her undress.

"Can I fix you some breakfast? Oatmeal?" she asked. "Or some warm bread and butter. You must have been trapped in there all night."

Bride declined, sweetly, she hoped. She just wanted to take a nap.

Evelyn tucked the blanket around her guest, mindful of the propped-up leg, and did not trouble to whisper the black or white kitten conversation as she moved toward the sink. She was a tall woman with unfashionable hips and a long chestnut braid swinging down her back. She reminded Bride of someone she had seen in the movies, not a recent one but something made in the forties or fifties when film stars had distinguishing faces unlike now, when hairstyles alone separated one star from another. But she could not put a name to the memory—actress or film. Little Raisin, on the other hand, resembled no one Bride had ever seen—milk-white skin, ebony hair, neon eyes, undetermined age.

God Help the Child

What had Evelyn said? "That is where we found her"? In the rain.

Steve and Evelyn's house seemed to be a converted studio or machine shop: one large space, containing table, chairs, sink, wood-burning cook stove and the scratchy couch Bride lay on. Against a wall stood a loom with small baskets of yarn nearby. Above was a skylight that needed a good power-cleaning. All over the room, light, unaided by electricity, moved like water—a shadow here could be gone in an instant, a shaft hitting a copper pot might take minutes to dissolve. An open door to the rear revealed a room where two beds, one of rope, another of iron, stood. Something meaty, like chicken, roasted in the oven while Evelyn and the girl chopped mushrooms and green peppers at the rough home-made table. Without warning they began to sing some dumb old hippie song.

"This land is your land, this land is my land . . ."

Bride quickly dashed a bright memory of Sweetness humming some blues song while washing panty hose in the sink, little Lula Ann hiding behind the door to hear her. How nice it would have been if mother and daughter could have sung together. Embracing that dream, she did fall into a deep sleep, only to be awakened around noon by booming male voices. Steve, accompanied by a very old, rumpled doctor, clumped into the house.

"This is Walt," said Steve. He stood near the couch, showing something close to a smile.

TONI MORRISON

"Dr. Muskie," said the doctor. "Walter Muskie, MD, PhD, LLD, DDT, OMB."

Steve laughed. "He's joking."

"Hello," said Bride, looking back and forth from her foot to the doctor's face. "I hope it's not too bad."

"We'll see," answered Dr. Muskie.

Bride sucked air through clenched teeth as the doctor sliced through her elegant white boot. Expertly and without empathy he examined her ankle and announced it fractured at the least and unfixable here in Steve's house—she needed to go to the clinic for an X-ray, cast and so on. All he could do, or would do, is clean and bind it so its swell wouldn't worsen.

Bride refused to go. She was suddenly so hungry it made her angry. She wanted to bathe and then eat before being driven to another tacky rural clinic. Meantime she asked Dr. Muskie for painkillers.

"No," said Steve. "No way. First things first. Besides, we don't have all day."

Steve carried her to his truck, squeezed her between himself and the doctor and took off. Two hours later as the two of them drove back from the clinic she had to admit the splint had eased her pain, as had the pills. Whiskey Clinic was across the street from a post office on the first floor of a charming sea-blue clapboard house, which also contained a barbershop. Windows on the second floor advertised used clothes. Quaint, thought Bride, expecting to be helped into

God Help the Child

an equally quaint examination room. To her surprise the equipment was as cutting edge as her plastic surgeon's.

Dr. Muskie smiled at her astonishment. "Loggers are like soldiers," he said. "They have the worst wounds and need the best and quickest care."

After examining the screen-shot from a sonogram, Dr. Muskie told her she would live but she would probably need a month at the least to heal—maybe six weeks. "Syndesmosis," he said to his uncomprehending patient. "Between the fibula and the tibia. Maybe surgery—probably not, if you do what I say."

Break!

He put her ankle in a splint, saying he would give her a cast when the swelling decreased. And she would have to come back to his office for it.

An hour later she was back in the truck sitting next to a silent Steve with her left leg sticking as straight under the dashboard as the splint allowed. After being carried back to the house, Bride found that her earlier hunger had dissipated as the awareness of being unwashed and sour-smelling overwhelmed her.

"I'd like to take a bath, please," she said.

"We don't have a bathroom," said Evelyn. "I can sponge you for now. When your ankle is ready, I'll heat water for the washtub."

Slop jar, outhouse toilet, metal washtub, broke-down scratchy couch for a month? Bride started to cry, and they let her while Rain and Evelyn went on preparing a meal.

TONI MORRISON

Later, after the family finished eating, Bride tried to overcome her embarrassment and accepted a basin of cold water to rinse her face and armpits. Then she roused herself enough to smile and take the plate Evelyn held before her. Quail, as it turned out, not chicken, with thick mushroom gravy. Following the meal, Bride felt more than embarrassed; she was ashamed—crying every minute, petulant, childish and unwilling to help herself or accept aid gracefully from others. Here she was among people living the barest life, putting themselves out for her without hesitation, asking nothing in return. Yet, as was often the case, her gratitude and embarrassment were short-lived. They were treating her like a stray cat or a dog with a broken leg that they felt sorry for. Sullen and picking at her fingernails, she asked Evelyn whether she had a nail file or any nail polish. Evelyn grinned and held up her own hands without speaking. Point taken—Evelyn's hands were less for holding the stem of a wineglass and more for chopping kindling and wringing the necks of chickens. Who are these people, wondered Bride, and where did they come from? They hadn't asked her where she was from or where she was going. They simply tended her, fed her, arranged for her car to be towed for repair. It was too hard, too strange for her to understand the kind of care they offered—free, without judgment or even a passing interest in who she was or where she was going. She wondered on occasion if they were planning something. Something bad.

God Help the Child

I must be sick, dying, she thought. She plastered the wet towel above the place where her breasts had once upon a time announced themselves and risen to the lips of moaning lovers. Fighting panic she called out to Evelyn.

"Please, do you have something I can wear?"

"Sure," said Evelyn, and after a few minutes brought Bride a T-shirt and a pair of her own jeans. She said nothing about Bride's chest or the wet towel. She simply left her to get dressed in private. When Bride called her back saying the jeans were too large to stay on her hips, Evelyn exchanged them for a pair of Rain's, which fit Bride perfectly. When did I get so small? she wondered.

She meant to lie down just for a minute, to quiet the terror, collect her thoughts and figure out what was happening to her shrinking body, but without any drowsiness or warning she fell asleep. There out of that dark void sprang a vivid, fully felt dream. Booker's hand was moving between her thighs, and when her arms flew up and closed over his back he extracted his fingers, and slid between her legs what they called the pride and wealth of nations. She started to whisper or moan but his lips were pressing hers. She wrapped her legs around his rocking hips as though to slow them or help them or keep them there. Bride woke up moist and humming. Yet when she touched the place where her breasts used to be the humming changed to sobs. That's when she understood that the

TONI MORRISON

body changes began not simply after he left, but because he left.

Stay still, she thought; her brain was wobbly but she would straighten it, go about as if everything was normal. No one must know and no one must see. Her conversation and activity must be routine, like an after-bath washing of hair. Limping to the kitchen sink she poured water from the standing pitcher into a bowl, soaped then rinsed her hair. As she looked around for a dry towel Evelyn came in.

"Ooh, Bride," she said, smiling. "You got too much hair for a dish towel. Come on, let's sit outside and we can dry it in sunlight and fresh air."

"Okay, sure," said Bride. Acting normal was important, she thought. It might even restore the body changes—or halt them. She followed Evelyn to a rusty iron bench sitting in the yard bathed in bright platinum light. Next to it was a side table where a tin of marijuana and a bottle of unlabeled liquor sat. Toweling Bride's hair, Evelyn chatted away in typical beauty-parlor mode. How happy living here under stars with a perfect man made her, how much she had learned traveling, housekeeping without modern amenities, which she called trash-ready junk since none of it lasted, and how Rain had improved their lives.

When Bride asked her when and where Rain came from, Evelyn sat down and poured some of the liquor into a cup.

"It took a while to get the whole story," she said. Bride listened intently. Anything. Anything to stop thinking