

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE
MORE THAN FIVE MILLION COPIES IN PRINT

ALICE WALKER

WOP
WINDINGTON
SQUARE PRESS



THE COLOR PURPLE

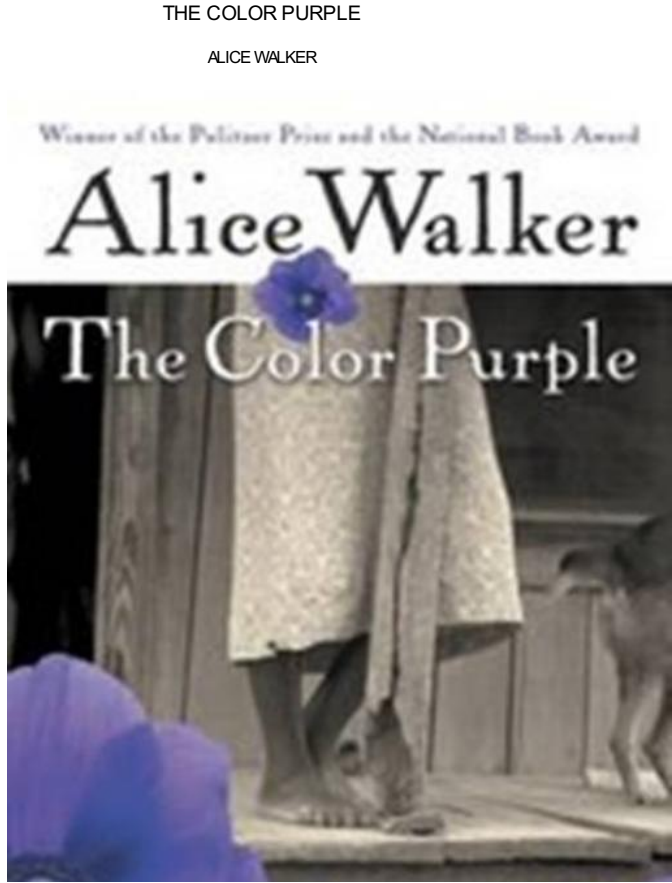
THE COLOR PURPLE

ALICE WALKER

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award

Alice Walker

The Color Purple





PUBLISHED BY POCKET BOOKS NEW YORK

i POCKET BOOKS, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N. Y. 10020

Copyright © 1982 by Alice Walker Cover art courtesy
Warner Bros.

Published by arrangement with Harcourt Brace Jbvanovich
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 81-48242

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this
book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever.

fatinformation address

Harcourt Brace Jbvanovich Inc.,

1250 Sixth Avenue , San Diego , Cal.
92101

ISBN: 0-671-61702-8

First Pocket Books mass-market printing December, 1985

10 9 8 7 6

POCKET and colophon are registered trademarks of

Simon. & Schuster, Inc.

Printed in the U.S.A.

ii To the Spirit:

Without whose assistance

Neither this book

Nor I

Would have been Written.

iii Show me how to do like you Show me how to do it.

?Stevie Wonder

1 You better not never tell nobody but God. Ifd killyour.
mammy.

Dear God,

I am fourteen years old. I-aa I have always been a good girl.
Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is
happening to
me.

Last spring after little Lucious come I heard them fussing.
He was pulling on her arm. She say It too soon, Fonso, I
ain't well.

Finally he leave her alone. A week go by, he pulling on her
arm again. She say Naw, I ain't gonna. Can't you see I'm
already half
dead, an all of these children.

She went to visit her sister doctor over Macon. Left me to

see after the others. He never had a kine word to say
to.me. Just say
You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't. First he put his
thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he
grab hold
my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When
that

2 hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up
and git used to it.

But I don't never git used to it. And now I feels sick every
time I be the one to cook. My mama she fuss at me an look
at me. She
happy, cause he good to her now. But too sick to last long.

3

My mama dead. She die screaming and cussing. She
scream at me. She cuss at me. I'm big. I can't move fast
enough. By time I git
back from the well, the water be warm. By time I git the tray
ready the food be cold. By time I git all the children ready
for
school it be dinner time. He don't say nothing. He set there
by the bed holding her hand an cryin, talking bout don't
leave me,
don't go.

She ast me bout the first one Whose it is? I say God's. I
don't know no other man or what else to say. When I start to
hurt and
then my stomach start moving and then that little baby come
out my pussy chewing on it fist you could have knock me
over with
a feather.

I'm sick of her too, say Kate, letting out her breath. And you right about Celie, here. Good housekeeper, good with children, good cook. Brother couldn't have done better if he tried.

I think about how he tried.

This time Kate come by herself. She maybe twenty-five. Old-maid. She look younger than me. Healthy. Eyes bright. Tongue sharp.

Buy Celie some clothes. She say to Mr. ???.

She need clothes? he ast.

Well look at her.

He look at me. It like he looking at the earth. It need somethin? his eyes say.

She go with me in the store. I think what color Shug 21

22 Avery would wear. She like a queen to me so I say to Kate, Somethin purple, maybe little red in it too. But us look an look

and no purple. Plenty red but she say, Naw, he won't want to pay for red. Too happy lookin. We got choice of brown, maroon or navy blue. I say blue.

I can't remember being the first one in my own dress. Now to have one made just for me. I try to tell Kate what it mean. I git hot in the face and stutter.

She say. It's all right, Celie. You deserve more than this.

Maybe so. I think.

Harpo, she say. Harpo the oldest boy. Harpo, don't let Celie be the one bring in all the water. You a big boy now. Time for you to help out some.

Women work, he say.

What? she say.

Women work. I'm a man.

You're a trifling nigger, she say. You git that bucket and bring it back full.

He cut his eye at me. Stumble out. I hear him mutter somethin to Mr. ??? sitting on the porch. Mr. ??? call his sister. She stay out on the porch talking a little while, then she come back in, shaking.

Got to go, Celie, she say.

She so mad tears be flying every which way while she pack.

You got to fight them, Celie, she say. I can't do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself.

I don't say nothing. I think bout Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do? I don't fight, I stay where I'm told.
But I'm alive.

Harpo ast his daddy why he beat me. Mr. ___ say, Cause she my wife. Plus, she stubborn. All women good for? he don't finish. He just tuck his chin over the paper like he do. Remind me of Pa.

Harpo ast me, How come you stubborn? He don't ast How come you his wife? Nobody ast that.

I say, Just bom that way, I reckon.

He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them. He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man.

Harpo say, I love Somebody.

I say, Huh?

He say, A Girl.

I say, You do?

He say, Yeah. Us plan to marry.

Marry, I say. You not old enough to marry.

I is, he say. I'm seventeen. She fifteen. Old enough.

24 What her mama say, I ast.

Ain't talk to her mama.

What her daddy say?

Ain't talk to him neither.

Well, what shesay?

Us ain't never spoke. He duck his head. He ain't so bad looking. Tall and skinny, black like his mama, with great big bug eyes.

Where yall see each other? I ast. I see her in church, he say. She see me outdoors.

She like you?

I don't know. I wink at her. She act like she scared to look.

Where her daddy at while all this going on?

Amen corner, he say.

25

Shug Avery is coming to town! She coming with her orkestra. She going to sing in the Lucky Star out on Coalman road. Mr. ??? going to hear her. He dress all up in front the glass, look at himself, then undress and dress all over again. He slick back his hair with pomade, then wash it out again. He been spitting on his shoes and hitting it with a quick rag.

He tell me, Wash this. Iron that. Look for this. Look for that. Find this. Find that. He groan over holes in his sock.

I move round darning and ironing, finding hanskens. Anything happening? I ast.

What you mean? he say, like he mad. Just trying to git some of the hick farmer off myself. Any other woman be glad.

I'm is glad, I say.

What you mean? he ast.

You looks nice, I say. Any woman be proud.

You think so? he say.

First time he ast me. I'm so surprise, by time I say 25

26 Yeah, he out on the porch, trying to shave where the light better.

I walk round all day with the announcement burning a hole in my pocket. It pink. The trees tween the turn off to our road and the store is lit up with them. He got bout five dozen in his trunk.

Shug Avery standing upside a piano, elbow crook, hand on her hip. She wearing a hat like Indian Chiefs. Her mouth open showing all her teef and don't nothing seem to be troubling her mind. Come one, come all, it say. The Queen Honeybee is back in town.

Lord, I wants to go so bad. Not to dance. Not to drink. Not to play card. Not even to hear Shug Avery sing. I just be thankful to lay eyes on her.

Mr. ??? be gone all night Saturday, all night Sunday and most all day Monday. Shug Avery in town for the week-end. He stagger in, throw himself on the bed. He tired. He sad. He weak. He cry. Then he sleep the rest of the day and all night.

He wake up while I'm in the field. I been chopping cotton three hours by time he come. Us don't say nothing to each other.

But I got a million question to ast. What she wear? Is she still the same old Shug, like in my picture? How her hair is? What kind lipstick? Wig? She stout? She skinny? She sound well? Tired? Sick? Where you all children at while she singing all over the place? Do she miss 'em? Questions be running back and forth through my mind. Peel like snakes. I pray for strength, bite the insides of my jaws.

Mr. ??? pick up a hoe and start to chop. He chop bout three chops then he don't chop again. He drop the hoe in the furrow, turn right back on his heel, walk back to the house, go git him a cool drink of Water, git

28 his pipe, sit on the porch and stare. I follow cause I think he sick. Then he say, You better git on back to the field. Don't wait for me.

28

29

Harpo no better at fighting his daddy back than me. Every

day his daddy git up, sit on the porch, look out at nothing.
Sometime
look at the trees out front the house. Look at a butterfly if it
light on the rail. Drink a little water in the day. A little
wine in the evening. But mostly never move.

Harpo complain bout all the plowing he have to do.

His daddy say, You gonna do it.

Harpo nearly big as his daddy. He strong in body but weak
in will. He scared.

Me and him out in the field all day. Us sweat, chopping and
plowing. I'm roasted coffee bean color now. He black as the
inside
of a chimney. His eyes be sad and thoughtful. His face
begin to look like a woman face.

Why you don't work no more? he ast his daddy.

No reason for me to. His daddy say. You here, ain't you?
He say this nasty. Harpos feeling be hurt.

Plus, he still in love.

30

Harpo girl daddy say Harpo not good enough for. her.
Harpo been courting the girl a while. He say he sit in the
parlor with her,
the daddy sit right there in the corner till everybody feel
terrible. Then he go sit on the porch in front the open door
where
he can hear everything. Nine o'clock come, he bring Harpo
his hat.

Why I'm not good enough? Harpo ast Mr. ????. Mr. ??? say,
Your mammy.

Harpo say, What wrong with my mammy?

Mr. ??? say, Somebody kill her.

Harpo be trouble with nightmares. He see his mama
running cross the pasture trying to git home. Mr. ____, the
man they say her boyfriend,
catch up with her. She got Harpo by the hand. They both
running and running. He grab hold of her shoulder, say, You
can't quit
me now. You mine. She say, No I ain't. My place is with my
children. He say, Whore, you ain't got no place. He shoot
her in the
stomach. She fall down. The man run. Harpo grab her in his
arms, put her head in his lap.

31 He start to call, Mama, Mama. It wake me up. The other
children, too. They cry like they mama just die. Harpo come
to, shaking.

I light the lamp and stand over him, patting his back.

It not her fault somebody kill her, he say. It not! It not!

Naw, I say. It not.

Everybody say how good I is to Mr. ??? children. I be good
to them. But I don't feel nothing for them. Patting Harpo
back not even
like patting a dog. It more like patting another piece of
wood. Not a living tree, but a table, a chifferobe. Anyhow,
they don't
love me neither, no matter how good I is.

They don't mind. Cept for Harpo they won't work. The girls
face always to the road. Bub be out all times of night
drinking with
boys twice his age. They daddy puff on his pipe.

Harpo tell me all his love business now. His mind on Sofia
Butler day and night.

She pretty, he tell me. Bright.

Smart?

Naw. Bright skin. She smart too though, I think. Sometime
us can git her away from her daddy.

I know right then the next thing I hear, she be big.

If she so smart how come she big? I ast.

Harpo shrug. She can't git out the house no other way, he
say. Mr. ??? won't let us marry. Say I'm not good enough to
come in his
parlor. But if she big I got a right to be with her, good
enough or no.

Where yall gon stay?

They got a big place, he say. When us marry I'll be just like
one of the family.

32 Humph, I say. Mr. ??? didn't like you before she big, he
ain't gonna like you causeshe big.

Harpo look trouble.

Talk to Mr. ???, I say. He your daddy. Maybe he got some
good advice.

Maybe not. I think.

Harpo bring her over to meet his daddy. Mr. ___?say he want to have a look at her. I see 'em coming way off up the road. They be just marching, hand in hand, like going to war. She in front a little. They come up on the porch, I speak and move some chairs closer to the railing. She sit down and start to fan herself with a hanker. It sure is hot, she say. Mr. ??? don't say nothing.

He just look her up and down. She bout seven or eight months pregnant, bout to bust out her dress. Harpo so black he think she bright, but she ain't that bright. Gear medium brown skin, gleam on it like on good furniture. Hair notty but a lot of it, tied up on her head in a mass of plaits. She not quite as tall as Harpo but much bigger, and strong and ruddy looking, like her mama brought her up on pork.

She say, How you, Mr. ????

He don't answer the question. He say, Look like you done got yourself in trouble.

Naw suh, she say. I ain't in no trouble. Big, though.

She smooth the wrinkles over her stomach with the flats of her hands.

Who the father? he ast.

She look surprise. Harpo, she say.

How he know that?

He know. She say.

Young womens no good these days, he say. Got they legs open to every Tom, Dick and Harry.

33 Harpo look at his daddy like he never seen him before. But he don't say nothing.

Mr. ??? say, No need to think I'm gon let my boy marry you just cause you in the family way. He young and limited. Pretty gal like you could put anything over on him.

Harpo still don't say nothing.

Sofia face git more ruddy. The skin move back on her forehead. Her ears raise.

But she laugh. She glance at Harpo sitting there with his head down and his hands tween his knees.

She say, What 1 need to marry Harpo for? He still living here with you. What food and clothes he git, you buy.

He say, Your daddy done throwed you out. Ready to live in the street I guess.

She say, Naw. I ain't living in the street. I'm living with my sister and her husband. They say I can live with them for the rest of my life. She stand up, big, strong, healthy girl, and she say, Well, nice visiting. I'm going home.

Harpo get up to come too. She say, Naw, Harpo, you stay here. When you free, me and the baby be waiting.

He sort of hang there between them a while, then he sit down again. I look at her face real quick then, and seem like a shadow go cross it. Then she say to me, Mrs. ???, I'd thank you for a glass of water before I go, if you don't mind.

The bucket on the shelf right there on the porch. I git a clean glass out the safe and dip her up some water. She drink it down, almost in one swallow. Then she run her hands over her belly again and she take off. Look like the army change direction, and she heading off to catchup.

34 Harpo never git up from his chair. Him and his daddy sit there and sit there and sit there. They never talk. They never move.

Finally I have supper and go to bed. I git up in the morning it feel like they still sitting there. But Harpo be in the outhouse, Mr. ??? be shaving.

34

35

Harpo went and brought Sofia and the baby home. They got married in Sofia sister house. Sister's husband stand up with Harpo. Other sister sneak way from home to stand up with Sofia. Another sister come to hold the baby. Say he cry right through the service, his mama stop everything to nurse him. Finish saying I do with a big ole nursing boy hi her arms.

Harpo fix up the little creek house for him and his family. Mr. ??? daddy used it for a shed. But it sound. Got windows

now, a
porch, back door. Plus it cool and green down by the creek.

He ast me to make some curtains and I make some out of
flower sack. It not big, but it homey. Got a bed, a dresser, a
looking glass,
and some chairs. Cookstove for cooking and heating, too.
Harpo daddy give him wages for working now. He say
Harpo wasn't working
hard like he should. Maybe little money goose his interest.

Harpo told me, Miss Celie, I'm going on strike.

On what?

I ain't going to work.

36 And he don't. He come to the field, pull two ears of corn,
let the birds and weevil eat two hundred. Us don't make
nothing much
this year.

But now Sofia coming, he always busy. He chop, he
hammer, he plow. He sing and whistle.

Sofia look half her size. But she still a big strong girl. Arms
got muscle. Legs, too. She swing that baby about like it
nothing.
She got a little pot on her now and give you the feeling she
all there. Solid. Like if she sit down on something, it be
mash.

She tell Harpo, Hold the baby, while she come back in the
house with me to git some thread. She making some
sheets. He take the
baby, give it a kiss, chuck it under the chin. Grin, look up on
the porch at his daddy.

Mr. ??? blow smoke, look down at him, and say, Yeah, I see now she going to switch the traces on you.

37

Harpo want to know what to do to make Sofia! mind. He sit out on the porch with Mr. ???. He say, I tell her one thing, she do another.

Never do what I say. Always backtalk.

To tell the truth, he sound a little proud of this to me.

Mr. ??? don't say nothing. Blow smoke.

I tell her she can't be all the time going to visit her sister. Us married now, I tell her. Your place is here with the children. She say, Til take the children with me. I say, Your place is with me. She say, You want to come? She keep primping in front of the glass, getting the children ready at the same time.

You ever hit her? Mr. ??? ast.

Harpo look down at his hands. Naw sub, he say low, embarrass.

Well how you spect to make her mind? Wives is like children. You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating.

He puff on bis pipe.

38 Sofia think too much of herself anyway, he say. She need to be taken down a peg.

I like Sofia, but she don't act like me at all. If she talking when Harpo and Mr. ??? come in the room, she keep right on. If they ast her where something at, she say she don't know. Keep talking.

I think bout this when Harpo ast me what he ought to do to her to make her mind. I don't mention how happy he is now. How three years pass and he still whistle and sing. I think bout how every time I jump when Mr. _??? call me, she look surprise. And like she pity me.

Beat her. I say.

Next time us see Harpo his face a mess of bruises. His lip cut. One of his eyes shut like a fist. He walk stiff and say his teef ache.

I say, What happen to you, Harpo?

He say, Oh, me and that mule. She fractious, you know. She went crazy in the field the other day. By time I got her to head for home I was all banged up. Then when I got home, I walked smack dab into the crib door. Hit my eye and scratch my chin. Then when that storm come up last night I shet the window down on my hand.

Well, I say, After all that, I don't spect you had a chance to see if you could make Sofia mind.

Nome, he say.

But he keep trying.

39

Just when I was bout to call out that I was coming in the yard, I hear something crash. It come from inside the house, so I run up on the porch. The two children be making mud pies on the edge of the creek, they don't even look up.

I open the door cautious, thinking bout robbers and murderers. Horsethieves and hants. But it Harpo and Sofia. They fighting like two mens. Every piece of furniture they got is turned over. Every plate look like it broke. The looking glass hang crooked, the curtains torn. The bed look like the stuffing pulled out. They dont notice. They fight. He try to slap her. What he do that for?

She reach down and grab a piece of stove wood and whack him cross the eyes. He punch her in the stomach, she double over groaning but come up with both hands lock right under his privates. He roll on the floor. He grab her dress tail and pull. She stand there in her slip. She never blink a eye. He jump up to put a hammer lock under her chin, she throw him over her back. He fall barnup gainst the stove.

I don't know how long this been going on. I don't 39

40 know when they spect to conclude. I ease on back out, wave to the children by the creek, walk back on up home.

Saturday morning early, us hear the wagon. Harpo, Sofia, the two babies be going off for the week-end, to visit Sofia

sister.

41

For over a month I have trouble¹ sleeping. I stay up late as I can before Mr. ? ' .??start complaining bout the price of kerosene, then I soak myself in a warm bath with milk and epsom salts, then sprinkle little witch hazel on my pillow and curtain out all the moonlight. Sometimes I git a few hours sleep. Then just when it look like it ought to be gitting good, I wakes up.

At first I'd git up quick and drink some milk. Then I'd think bout counting fence post. Then I'd think bout reading the Bible.

What it is? I ast myself.

A little voice say, Something you done wrong. Somebody spirit you sin against. Maybe.

Way late one night it come to me. Sofia. I sin against Sofia spirit.

I pray she don't find out, but she do.

Harpo told.

The minute she hear it she come marching up the path, toting a sack. Little cut all blue and red under her eye.

42 She say, Just want you to know I looked to you for help.

Ain't I been helpful? I ast.

She open up her sack. Here your curtains, she say. Here

your thread. Here a dollar for letting me use 'em.

They yourn, I say, trying to push them back. I'm glad to help out. Do what I can.

You told Harpo to beat me, she said.

No I didn't, I said.

Don't lie, she said.

I didn't mean it, I said.

Then what you say it for? she ast.

She standing there looking me straight in the eye. She look tired and her jaws full of air.

I say it cause I'm a fool, I say. I say it cause I'm jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can't.

What that? she say.

Fight. I say.

She stand there a long time, like what I said took the wind out her jaws. She mad before, sad now.

She say, All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles.

A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house. She let out her breath. I loves

Harpo, she say. God knows I do. But I'll kill him dead before I let him beat me. Now if you want a dead son-in-law you just keep

on advising him like you doing. She put her hand on her hip.
I used to hunt game with a bow and arrow, she say.

I stop the little trembling that started when I saw her coming.
I'm soshame of myself, I say. And the Lord he done whip
me little
bit too.

The Lord don't like ugly, she say.

And he ain't stuck on pretty. 42

43 This open the way for our talk to turn another way.

I say, You feels sorry for me, don't you?

She think a minute. Yes ma'am, she say slow, I do.

I think I know how come, but I ast her anyhow.

She say, To tell the truth, you remind me of my mama. She
under my daddy thumb. Naw, she under my daddy foot.

Anything he say,

goes. She never say nothing back. She never stand up for
herself. Try to make a little half stand sometime for the
children but

that always backfire. More she stand up for us, the harder
time he give her. He hate children and he hate where they
come from.

Tho from all the children he got, you'd never know it.

I never know nothing bout her family. I thought, looking at
her, nobody in her family could be scared.

How many he got? I ast.

Twelve. She say.

Whew, I say. My daddy got six by my mama before she die,
I say. He got four more by the wife he got now. I don't
mention the two
he got by me.

How many girls? she ast.

Five, I say. How bout in your family?

Six boys, six girls. All the girls big and strong like me. Boys
big and strong too, but all the girls stick together. Two
brothers
stick with us too, sometime. Us git in a fight, it's a sight to
see.

I ain't never struck a living thing, I say. Oh, when I was at
home I tap the little ones on the behind to make 'em
behave, but
not hard enough to hurt.

What you do when you git mad? she ast.

I think. I can't even remember the last time I felt mad, I say. I
used to git mad at my mammy cause she put a lot of work
on me.
Then I see how sick she is. Couldn't stay mad at her.
Couldn't be mad at my daddy cause he my daddy. Bible
say, Honor father and

44 mother no matter what. Then after while every tune I got
mad, or start to feel mad, I got sick. Felt like throwing up.
Terrible
feeling. Then I start to feel nothing at all.

Sofia frown. Nothing at all?

Well, sometime Mr. ??? git on me pretty hard. I have to talk to Old Maker. But he my husband. I shrug my shoulders. This life soon be over, I say. Heaven last all ways.

You ought to bash Mr. ??? head open, she say. Think bout heaven later.

Not much funny to me. That funny. I laugh. She laugh. Then us both laugh so hard us flop down on the step.

Let's make quilt pieces out of these messed up curtains, she say. And I run git my pattern book.

I sleeps like a baby now.

45

Shug Avery sick and nobody in this town want to take the Queen Honeybee in. Her mammy say She told her so. Her pappy say, Tramp. A woman at church say she dying? maybe two berkulosis or some kind of nasty woman disease. What? I want to ast, but don't. The women at church sometime nice to me. Sometime not. They look at me there struggling with Mr. ??? children. Trying to drag 'em to the church, trying to keep 'em quiet after us get there. They some of the same ones used to be here both times I was big. Sometimes they think I don't notice, they stare at me. Puzzle.

I keep my head up, best I can. I do a right smart for the preacher. Clean the floor and windows, make the wine, wash the altar linen. Make sure there's wood for the stove in wintertime. He call me Sister Celie. Sister Celie, he say, You faithful as

the
day is long. Then he talk to the other ladies and they mens. I
scurry bout, doing, this, doing that. Mr. ??? sit back by the
door
gazing here and there. The womens smile in his direction
every chance they git. He never look at me or even notice.

46 Even the preacher got his mouth on Shug Avery, now
she down. He take her condition for his text. He don't call no
name, but
he don't have to. Everybody know who he mean. He talk
bout a strumpet in short skirts, smoking cigarettes, drinking
gin. Singing
for money and taking other women mens. Talk bout slut,
hussy, heifer and streetcleaner.

I cut my eyes back at Mr. ??? when he say that.
Streetcleaner. Somebody got to stand up for Shug, I think.
But he don't say nothing.
He cross his legs first to one side, then to the other. He
gaze out the window. The same women smile at him, say
amen gainst Shug.

But once us home he never stop to take off his clothes. He
call down to Harpo and Sofia house. Harpo come running.

Hitch up the wagon, he say.

Where us going? say Harpo.

Hitch up the wagon, he say again.

Harpo hitch up the wagon. They stand there and talk a few
minutes out by the barn. Then Mr. ??? drive off.

One good thing bout the way he never do any work round
the place, us never miss him when he gone.

Five days later I look way off up the road and see the wagon coming back.' It got sort of a canopy over it now, made out of old blankets or something. My heart begin to beat like furry, and the first thing I try to do is change my dress.

But too late for that. By time I git my head and arm out the old dress, I see the wagon pull up in the yard. Plus a new dress won't help none with my notty head and dusty headrag, my old everyday shoes and the way I smell.

47 I don't know what to do, I'm so beside myself. I stand there in the middle of the kitchen. Mind whirling. I feels like Who Would Have Thought.

Celie, I hear Mr. ??? call. Harpo.

I stick my head and my arm back in my old dress and wipe the sweat and dirt off my face as best I can. I come to the door. Yessir? I ast, and trip over the broom I was sweeping with when I first notice the wagon.

Harpo and Sofia in the yard now, looking inside the wagon. They faces grim.

Who this? Harpo ast.

The woman should have been your mammy, he say.

Shug Avery? Harpo ast. He look up at me.

Help me git her in the house, Mr. ??? say.

I think my heart fly out my mouth when I see one of her
foots come poking out.

She not lying down. She climbing down tween Harpo and
Mr. _____. And she dress to kill. She got on a red wool dress
and chestful
of black beads. A shiny black hat with what look like
chickinhawk feathers curve down side one cheek, and she
carrying a little
snakeskin bag, match her shoes.

She look so stylish it like the trees all round the house draw
themself up tall for a better look. Now I see she stumble,
tween
the two men. She don't seem that well acquainted with her
feets.

Close up I see all this yellow powder caked up on her face.
Red rouge. She look like she ain't long for this world but
dressed
well for the next. But I know better.

Come on in, I want to cry. To shout. Come on in. With God
help, Celie going to make you well. But I don't say nothing. It
not my
house. Also I ain't been told nothing.

They git halfway up the step, Mr. ??? look up at me. Celie,
he say. This here Shug Avery. Old friend of

48 the family. Fix up the spare room. Then he look down at
her, hold her in one arm, hold on to the rail with the other.
Harpo
on the other side, looking sad. Sofia and the children in the
yard, watching.

I don't move at once, cause I can't. I need to see her eyes. I

feel like once I see her eyes my feets can let go the spot
where
they stuck.

Git moving, he say, sharp.

And then she look up.

Under all that powder her face black as Harpo. She got a
long pointed nose and big fleshy mouth. Lips look like black
plum. Eyes
big, glossy. Feverish. And mean. Like, sick as she is, if a
snake cross her path, she kill it.

She look me over from head to foot. Then she cackle.
Sound like a death rattle. You sure is ugly, she say, like she
ain't believed
it.

49

Ain't nothing wrong with Snug Avery. She just sick. Sicker
than anybody I ever seen. She sicker than my mama was
when she die.
But she more evil than my mama and that keep her alive.

Mr. ??? be in the room with her all time of the night or day.
He don't hold her hand though. She too evil for that. Turn
loose
my goddam hand, she say to Mr. _____. What the matter
with you, you crazy? I don't need no weak little boy can't say
no to his
daddy hanging on me. I need me a man, she say. A man.
She look at him and roll her eyes and laugh. It not much of a
laugh but
it keep him away from the bed. He sit over in the corner
away from the lamp. Sometime she wake up in the night

and don't even see. But he there. Sitting in the shadows chewing on his pipe. No tobacco in it. First thing she said, I don't want to smell no stinking blankety-blank pipe, you hear me, Albert?

Who Albert, I wonder. Then I remember Albert Mr. ??? first name.

Mr. ___ don't smoke. Don't drink. Don't even

50 hardly eat. He just got her in that little room, watching every breath.

What happen to her I ast?

You don't want her here, just say so, he say. Won't do no good. But if that the way you feel... He don't finish.

I want her here, I say, too quick. He look at me like maybe I'm planning something bad.

I just want to know what happen, I say.

I look at his face. It tired and sad and I notice his chin weak. Not much chin there at all. I have more chin, I think. And his clothes dirty, dirty. When he pull them off, dust rise.

Nobody fight for Shug, he say. And a little water come to his eyes.

51

They have made three babies together but he squeamish bout giving her a bath. Maybe he figure he start thinking bout things he shouldn't. But what bout me? First time I got the full sight of

Shug Avery long black body with it black plum nipples, look like her mouth, I thought I had turned into a man.

What you staring at? she ast. Hateful. She weak as a kitten. But her mouth just pack with claws You never seen a naked woman before?

No ma'am, I said. I never did. Cept for Sofia, and she so plump and ruddy and crazy she feel like my sister.

She say, Well take a good look. Even if I is just a bag of bones now. She have the nerve to put one hand on her naked hip and bat her eyes at me. Then she suck her teef and roll her eyes at the ceiling while I wash her.

I wash her body, it feel like I'm praying. My hands tremble and my breath short.

She say, You ever have any kids?

I say, Yes ma'am.

She say, How many and don't you yes ma'am me, I ain't that old.

52 I say, two.

She ast me Where they is? I say, I don't know. She look at me funny.

My kids with they grandma, she say. She could stand the kids, I had to go. You miss 'em? I ast. Naw, she say. I don't miss nothing.

I ast Shug Avery what she want for breakfast. She say,
What yall got? I say ham, grits, eggs, biscuits, coffee, sweet
milk or butter
milk, flapjacks. Jelly and jam.

She say, Is that all? What about orange juice, grapefruit,
strawberries and cream. lea. Then she laugh.

I don't want none of your damn food, she say. Just gimme a
cup of coffee and hand me my cigarettes.

I don't argue. I git the coffee and light her cigarette. She
wearing a long white gown and her thin black hand
stretching out of
it to hold the white cigarette looks just right. Something bout
it, maybe the little tender veins I see and the big ones I try
not to, make me scared. I feel like something pushing me
forward. If I don't watch out I'll have hold of her hand, tasting
her
fingers in my mouth.

Can I sit in here and eat with you? I ast.

She shrug. She busy looking at a magazine. White women
in it laughing, holding they beads out on one finger, dancing
on top of
motocars. Jumping into

54 fountains. She flip the pages. Look dissatisfied. Remind
me of a child trying to git something out a toy it can't work
yet.

She drink her coffee, puff on her cigarette. I bite into a big
juicy piece of home cured ham. You can smell this ham for
a mile
when you cooking it, it perfume up her little room with no

trouble at all.

I lavish butter on a hot biscuit, sort of wave it about. I sop up ham gravey and splosh my eggs in with my grits.

She blow more and more smoke. Look down in her coffee like maybe its something solid at the bottom.

Finally she say, Celie, I believe I could drink a glass of water. And this here by the bed ain't fresh.

She hold out her glass.

I put my plate down on the card table by the bed. I go dip her up some water. I come back, pick up my plate. Look like a little mouse been rabbling the biscuit, a rat run off with the ham.

She act like nothing happen. Begin to complain bout being tired. Doze on off to sleep.

Mr. ??? ast me how I git her to eat. . I say, Nobody living can stand to smell home cured ham without tasting it. If they dead they got a chance. Maybe.

Mr. ??? laugh.

I notice something crazy in his eyes.

I been scared, he say. Scared. And he cover up his eyes with his hands.

55

Shug Avery sit up in bed a little today. I wash and comb out her hair. She got the nottiest, shortest, kinkiest hair I ever

saw,
and I loves every strand of it. The hair that come out in my
comb I kept. Maybe one day I'll get a net, make me a rat to
pomp
up my own hair.

I work on her like she a doll or like she Olivia? or like she
mama. I comb and pat, comb and pat. First she say, hurry
up and git
finish. Then she melt down a little and lean back gainst my
knees. That feel just right, she say. That feel like mama
used to
do. Or maybe not mama. Maybe grandma. She reach for
another cigarette. Start hum a little tune.

What that song? I ast. Sound low down dirty to me. Like
what the preacher tell you its sin to hear. Not to mention
sing.

She hum a little more. Something come to me, she say.
Something I made up. Something you help scratch out my
head.

56

Mr. ??? daddy show up this evening. He a little short shrunk
up man with a bald head and gold spectacles. He clear his
throat a
lot, like everything he say need announcement. Talk with his
head leant to the side.

He come right to the point.

Just couldn't rest till you got her in your house, could you?
he say, coming up the step.

Mr. ??? don't say nothing. Look out cross the railing at the

trees, over the top of the well. Eyes rest on the top of Harpo and Sofia house.

Won't you have a seat? I ast, pushing him up a chair. How bout a cool drink of water?

Through the window I hear Shug humming and humming, practicing her little song. I sneak back to her room and shet the window.

Old Mr. ___ say to Mr. ???, Just what is it bout this Shug Avery anyway, he say. She black as tar, she nappy headed. She got legs like baseball bats.

Mr.?,? don't say nothing. I drop little spit in Old Mr. ??? water.

57 Why, say Old Mr. ???, she ain't even clean. I hear she got the nasty woman disease.

I twirl the spit round with my finger. I think bout ground glass, wonder how you grind it. But I don't feel mad at all. Just interest.

Mr. ??? turn his head slow, watch his daddy drink. Then say, real sad, You ain't got it in you to understand, he say. I love Snug Avery. Always have, always will. I should have married her when I had the chance.

Yeah, say Old Mr. ????. And throwed your life away. (Mr. ????. grunt right there.) And a right smart of my money with it. Old Mr. ??? clear his throat. Nobody even sure exactly who her daddy is.

I never care who her daddy is, say Mr. ????

And her mammy take in white people dirty clothes to this day. Plus all her children got different daddys. It all just too trifling and confuse.

Well, say Mr. ??? and turn full face on his daddy, All Shug Avery children got the same daddy. I vouch for that.

Old Mr. ??? clear his throat. Well, this my house. This my land. Your boy Harpo in one of my houses, on my land.

Weeds come up

on my land, I chop 'em up. Trash blow over it I burn it. He rise to go. Hand me his glass. Next time he come I put a little Shug

Avery pee in his glass. See how he like that.

Celie, he say, you have my sympathy. Not many women let they husband whore lay up in they house.

But he not saying to me, he saying it to Mr. ????

Mr. ??? look up at me, our eyes meet. This the closest us ever felt.

He say, Hand Pa his hat, Celie.

And I do. Mr. ??? don't move from his chair by

58 the railing. I stand in the door. Us watch Old Mr. ??? begin harrumping and harrumping down the road home.

Next one come visit, his brother Tobias. He real fat and tall, look like a big yellow bear. Mr. ??? small like his daddy, his brother

stand way taller.

Where she at? he ast, grinning. Where the Queen Honeybee? Got something for her, he say. He put little box of chocolate on the railing.

She sleeping, I say. Didn't sleep much last night.

How you doing there, Albert, he say, dragging up a chair. He run his hand over his slicked back hair and try to feel if there's a bugga in his nose. Wipe his hand on his pants. Shake out the crease.

I just heard Shug Avery was here, he say. How long you had her?

Oh, say Mr. ???, couple of months.

Hell, say Tobias, I heard she was dying. That goes to show, don't it, that you can't believe everything you hear. He smooth down his mustache, run his tongue out the coiners of his lips.

What you know good, Miss Celie? he say.

Not much, I say.

Me and Sofia piecing another quilt together. I got bout five squares pieced, spread out on the table by my knee. My basket full of scraps on the floor.

Always busy, always busy, he say. I wish Margaret was more like you. Save me a bundle of money.

Tobias and his daddy always talk bout money like they still got a lot. Old Mr. ??_ been selling off the place so that nothing much left but the houses and the fields. My and Harpo fields bring in more than anybody.

59 I piece on my square. Look at the colors of the cloth.

Then I hear Tobias chair fall back and he say, Shug.

Shug halfway tween sick and well. Halfway tween good and evil, too. Most days now she show me and Mr. ??? her good side. But evil all over her today. She smile, like a razor opening. Say, Well, well, look who's here today.

She wearing a little flowery shift I made for her and nothing else. She look bout ten with her hair all cornrowed. She skinny as a bean, and her face full of eyes.

Me and Mr. ??? both look up at her. Both move to help her sit down. She don't look at him. She pull up a chair next to me.

She pick up a random piece of cloth out the basket. Hold it up to the light. Frown. How you sew this damn thing? she say.

I hand her the square I'm working on, start another one. She sew long crooked stiches, remind me of that little crooked tune she sing.

That real good, for first try, I say. That just fine and dandy. She look at me and snort. Everything I do is fine and dandy to

you, Miss Celie, she say. But that's cause you ain't got good sense. She laugh. I duck my head.

She got a heap more than Margaret, say Tobias. Margaret take that needle and sew your nostrils together.

All womens not alike, Tobias, she say. Believe it or not.

Oh, I believe it, he say. Just can't prove it to the world.

60 First time I think about the world.

What the world got to do with anything, I think. Then I see myself sitting there quilting tween Shug Avery and Mr. ???.
Us three
set together gainst Ibbias and his fly speck box of chocolate. Fbr the first time hi my life, I feel just right.

61

Me and Sofia work on the quilt. Got it frame up on the porch. Shug Avery donate her old yellow dress for scrap, and I work in a piece every chance I get. It a nice pattern call Sister's Choice. If the quilt turn out perfect, maybe I give it to her, if it not perfect, maybe I keep. I want it for myself, just for the little yellow pieces, look like stars, but not. Mr..??? and Shug
walk up the road to the mailbox. The house quiet, cept for the flies. They swing through every now and then, drunk from eating
and enjoying the heat, buzz enough to make me drowsy.

Sofia look like something on her mind, she just not sure what. She bend over the frame, sew a little while, then rear back in her chair and look out cross the yard. Finally she rest her

needle, say, Why do people eat, Miss Celie, tell me that.

To stay alive, I say. What else? Course some folks eat cause food taste good to 'em. Then some is gluttons. They love to feel they mouth work.

Them the only reasons you can think of? she ast.

62 Well, sometime it might be a case of being undernourish, I say.

She muse. He not undernourish, she say.

Who ain't? I ast.

Harpo. She say.

Harpo?

He eating more and more every day.

Maybe he got a tape worm?

She frown. Naw, she say. I don't think it a tape worm. Tape worm make you hungry. Harpo eat when he ain't even hungry.

What, force it down? This hard to believe, but sometime you hear new things everyday. Not me, you understand, but some folk do say that.

Last night for supper he ate a whole pan of biscuits by himself.

Naw. I say.

He sure did. And had two big glasses of butter milk along with it. This was after supper was over, too. I was giving the children
they baths, getting 'em ready for bed. He sposed to be washing the dishes. Stead of washing plates, he cleaning 'em with his mouth.

Well maybe he was extra hungry. Yall is been working hard.

Not that hard, she say. And this morning, for breakfast, darn if he didn't have six eggs. After all that food he look too sick to walk. When us got to the field I thought he was going to fault.

If Sofia say darn something wrong. Maybe he don't want to wash dishes, I say. His daddy never wash a dish in his life.

You reckon? she say. He seem so much to love it. To tell the truth, he love that part of housekeeping a heap more 'en me. I rather
be out in the fields or fooling with

63 the animals. Even chopping wood. But he love cooking and cleaning and doing little things round the house.

He sure is a good cook, I say. Big surprise to me that he knew anything about it. He never cooked so much as a egg when he lived
at home.

I bet he wanted to, she said. It seem so natural to him. But Mr. ????. You know how he is.

Oh, he all right, I say.

You feeling yourself, Miss Celie? Sofia ast.

I mean, he all right in some things, not in others.

Oh, she say. Anyway, next time he come here, notice if he eat anything.

I notice what he eat all right. First thing, coming up the steps, I give him a close look. He still skinny, bout half Sofia size, but I see a little pot beginning under his overalls.

What you got to eat, Miss Celie? he say, going straight to the warmer and a piece of fried chicken, then on to the safe for a slice of blackberry pie. He stand by the table and munch, munch. You got any sweet milk? he ast.

Got clabber, I say.

He say, Well, I love clabber. And dip him out some.

Sofia must not be feeding you, I say.

Why you say that? he ast with his mouth full.

Well, it not that long after dinner and here you is hungry again.

He don't say nothing. Eat.

Course, I say, supertime not too far off either. Bout three four hours.

He rummage through the drawer for a spoon to eat the clabber with. He see a slice of cornbread on the shelf back of the stove, he grab it and crumble it into the glass.

64 Us go back out on the porch and he put his foots up on the railing. Eat his clabber and cornbread with the glass near bout to his nose. Remind me of a hog at the troth.

Food tasting like food to you these days huh, I say, listening to him chew.

He don't say nothing. Eat.

I look out cross the yard. I see Sofia dragging a ladder and then lean it up gainst the house. She wearing a old pair of Harpo pants. Got her head tied up in a headrag. She clam up the ladder to the roof, begin to hammer hi nails. Sound echo cross the yard like shots.

Harpo eat, watch her.

Then he belch. Say, Scuse me, Miss Celie. lake the glass and spoon back in the kitchen. Come out and say Bye.

No matter what happening now. No matter who come. No matter what they say or do, Harpo eat through it. Food on his mind morning, noon and night. His belly grow and grow, but the rest of him don't. He begin to look like he big.

When it due? us ast.

Harpo don't say nothing. Reach for another piece of pie.

65

Harpo staying with us this week-end. Friday night after Mr.

??? and Shug and me done gone to bed, I heard this somebody crying.

Harpo sitting out on the steps, crying like his heart gon break. Oh, boo-hoo, and boo-hoo. He got his head in his hands, tears and snot running down his chin. I give him a hanker. He blow his nose, look up at me out of two eyes close like fists.

What happen to your eyes? I ast.

He clam round in his mind for a story to tell, then fall back on the truth.

Sofia, he say.

You still bothering Sofia? I ast.

She my wife, he say.

That don't mean you got to keep on bothering her, I say. Sofia love you, she a good wife. Good to the children and good looking. Hardworking. God fearing and clean. I don't know what more you want.

Harpo snuffle.

66 I want her to do what I say, like you do for Pa.

Oh, Lord, I say.

When Pa tell you to do something, you do it, he say. When he say not to, you don't. You don't do what he say, he beat you.

Sometime beat me anyhow, I say, whether I do what he say or not.

That's right, say Harpo. But not Sofia. She do what she want, don't pay me no mind at all. I try to beat her, she black my eyes.

Oh, boo-hoo, he cry. Boo-hoo-hoo.

I start to take back my hansker. Maybe push him and his black eyes off the step. I think bout Sofia. She tickle me. I used to hunt game with a bow and arrow, she say.

Some womens can't be beat, I say. Sofia one of them. Besides, Sofia love you. She probably be happy to do most of what you say if you ast her right. She not mean, she not spiteful. She don't hold a grudge.

He sit there hanging his head, looking retard.

Harpo, I say, giving him a shake, Sofia loveyou. You loveSofia.

He look up at me best he can out his fat little eyes. Yes ma'am? he say.

Mr. ??? marry me to take care of his children. I marry him cause my daddy made me. I don't love Mr. ??? and he don't love me.

But you his wife, he say, just like Sofia mine. The wife spouse to mind.

Do Shug Avery mind Mr. ????? I ast. She the woman he wanted to marry. She call him Albert, tell him his drawers stink in a minute.

Little as he is, when she git her weight back she can sit on him if he try to bother her.

67 Why I mention weight. Harpo start to cry again. Then he start to be sick. He lean over the edge of the step and vomit and vomit.

Look like every piece of pie for the last year come up. When he empty I put him in the bed next to Shug's little room. He fall right off to sleep.

67

68

I go visit Sofia, she still working on the roof.

The darn thing leak, she say.

She out to the woodpile making shingles. She put a big square piece of wood on the chopping block and chop, chop, she make big flat shingles. She put the ax down and ast me do I want some lemonade.

I look at her good. Except for a bruise on her wrist, she don't look like she got a scratch on her.

How it going with you and Harpo? I ast.

Well, she say, he stop eating so much. But maybe this just a spell.

He trying to git as big as you, I say.

She suck in her breath. I kinda thought so, she say, and let out her breath real slow.

All the children come running up, Mama, Mama, us want

lemonade. She pour out five glasses for them, two for us.
Us sit in a wooden
swing she made last summer and hung on the shady end of
the porch.

I'm gitting tired of Harpo, she say. All he think about since
us married is how to make me mind. He don't want a wife,
he want
a dog.

69 He your husband, I say. Got to stay with him. Else, what
you gon do?

My sister husband caught in the draft, she say. They don't
have no children, Odessa love children. He left her on a little
farm.
Maybe I go stay with them a while. Me and my children.

I think bout my sister Nettie. Thought so sharp it go through
me like a pain. Somebody to run to. It seem too sweet to
bear.

Sofia go on, frowning at her glass.

I don't like to go to bed with him no more, she say. Used to
be when he touch me I'd go all out my head. Now when he
touch me I
just don't want to be bothered. Once he git on top of me I
think bout how that's where he always want to be. She sip
her lemonade.

I use to love that part of it, she say. I use to chase him home
from the field. Git all hot just watching him put the children
to bed. But no more. Now I feels tired all the time. No
interest.

Now, now, I say. Sleep on it some, maybe it come back.
But I say this just to be saying something. I don't know

nothing bout it.

Mr. ??? clam on top of me, do his business, in ten minutes us both sleep. Only time I feel something stirring down there is when

I think bout Shug. And that like running to the end of the road and it turn back on itself.

You know the worst part? she say. The worst part is I don't think he notice. He git up there and enjoy himself just the same. No matter what I'm thinking. No matter what I feel. It just him. Heartfeeling don't even seem to enter into it. She snort. The fact he can do it like that make me want to kill him.

Us look up the path to the house, see Shug and Mr. ____ sitting on the steps. He reach over and pick something out her hair.

70 I don't know, say Sofia. Maybe I won't go. Deep down I still love Harpo, but?he just makes me realtired. She yawn. Laugh. I need a vacation, she say. Then she go back to the woodpile, start making some more shingles for the roof.

70

71

Sofia right about her sisters. They all big strong healthy girls, look like amazons. They come early one morning in two wagons to pick Sofia up. She don't have much to take, her and the children clothes, a mattress she made last winter, a looking glass and a rocking chair. The children.

Harpo sit on the steps acting like he don't care. He making a net for seining fish. He look out toward the creek every once in a while and whistle a little tune. But it nothing compared to the way he usually whistle. His little whistle sound like it lost way down in a jar, and the jar in the bottom of the creek.

At the last minute I decide to give Sofia the quilt. I don't know what her sister place be like, but we been having right smart cold weather long in now. For all I know, she and the children have to sleep on the floor.

You gon let her go? I ast Harpo.

He look like only a fool could ast the question. He puff back, She made up her mind to go, he say. How I'm gon stop her? Let her go on, he say, cutting his eyes at her sister wagons.

72 Us sit on the steps together. All us hear from inside is the thump, thump, thump of plump and stout feet. All Sofia sisters moving round together at one time make the house shake.

Where us going? ast the oldest girl.

Going to visit Aunt Odessa, say Sofia.

Daddy coming? she ast.

Naw, say Sofia.

How come daddy ain't coming? another one ast.

Daddy need to stay here and take care of the house. Look after Dilsey, Coco and Boo.

The child come stand in front of his daddy and just look at him real good.

You not coming? he say.

Harpo say, Naw.

Child go whisper to the baby crawling round on the floor, Daddy not coming with us, what you think of that.

Baby sit real still, strain real hard, fart.

Us all laugh, but it sad too. Harpo pick it up, finger the daidie, and get her ready for a change.

I don't think she wet, say Sofia. Just gas.

But he change her anyway. Him and the baby over in a corner of the little porch out of the way of traffic. He use the old dry daidie to wipe his eyes.

At the last, he hand Sofia the baby and she sling it up side her hip, sling a sack of daidies and food over her shoulder, corral all the little ones together, tell 'em to Say Good-bye to Daddy. Then she hug me best she can what with the baby and all, and she clam up on the wagon. Every sister just about got a child tween her knees, cept the two driving the mules, and they all quiet as they leave Sofia and Harpo yard and drive on up past the house.

Sofia gone six months, Harpo act like a different man.
Used to be a homebody, now all the time in the road.

I ast him what going on. He say, Miss Celie, I done learned
a few things.

One thing he learned is that he cute. Another that he smart.
Plus, he can make money. He don't say who the teacher is.

I hadn't heard so much hammering since before Sofia left,
but every evening after he leave the field, he knocking down
and nailing
up. Sometime his friend Swain come by to help. The two of
them work all into the night. Mr. ??? have to call down to tell
them
to shut up the racket.

What you building? I ast.

Jukejoint, he say.

Way back here?

No further back than any of the others.

I don't know nothing bout no others, only bout the Lucky
Star.

Jukejoint sposed to be back in the woods, say Harpo.

74 Nobody be bothered by the loud music. The dancing.
Hie fights.

Swain say, the killings.

Harpo say, and the polices don't know where to look.

What Sofia gon say bout what you doing to her house? I ast. Spose she and the children come back. Where they gon sleep.

They ain't coming back, say Harpo, nailing together planks for a counter.

How you know? I ast.

He don't answer. He keep working, doing every thing with Swain.

75

The first week, nobody come. Second week, three or four. Third week, one. Harpo sit behind his little counter listening to Swain pick his box.

He got cold drinks, he got barbecue, he 'got chit-lins, got store bought bread. He got a sign saying Harpo's tacked up on the side of the house and another one out on the road. But he ain't got no customers.

I go down the path to the yard, stand outside, look in. Harpo look out and wave.

Come on in, Miss Celie, he say.

I say, Naw thank you.

Mr. ??? sometime walk down, have a cold drink, listen to Swain. Miss Shug walk down too, every once in a while. She still wearing her little shifts, and I still comrow her hair, but it getting long now and she say soon she want it press.

Harpo puzzle by Shug. One reason is she say whatever come to mind, forgit about polite. Sometime I see him staring at her real hard when he don't think I'm looking.

76 One day he say, Nobody coming way out here just to hear Swain. Wonder could I get the Queen Honeybee?

I don't know, I said. She a lot better now, always humming or singing something. She probably be glad to git back to work. Why don't you ask her?

Shug say his place not much compared to what she used to, but she think maybe she might grace it with a song.

Harpo and Swain got Mr. ??? to give 'em some of Shug old announcements from out the trunk. Crossed out The Lucky Star of Coalman Road, put in Harpo's of ___ plantation. Stuck 'em on trees tween the turn off to our road and town. The first Saturday night so many folks come they couldn't git in.

Shug, Shug baby, us thought you was dead.

Five out of a dozen say hello to Shug like that.

And come to find out it was you, Shug say with a big grin.

At last I git to see Shug Avery work. I git to watch her. I git to hear her.

Mr. ___ didn't want me to come. Wives don't go to places like that, he say.

Yeah, but Celie going, say Shug, while I press her hair.
Spouse I git sick while I'm singing, she say. Spouse my dress
come undone?
She wearing a skintight red dress look like the straps made
out of two pieces of thread.

Mr. ??? mutter, putting on his clothes. My wife can't do this.
My wife can't do that. No wife of mines ... He go on and on.

Shug Avery finally say, Good thing I ain't your damn wife.

He hush then. All three of us go down to Harpo's. Mr. ???
and me sit at the same table. Mr. _??drink whiskey. I have
a cold drink.

77 First Shug sing a song by somebody name Bessie
Smith. She say Bessie somebody she know. Old friend. It
call A Good Man Is Hard
to Find. She look over at Mr. ??? a little when she sing that.
I look over at him too. For such a little man, he all puff up.
Look like all he can do to stay in his chair. I look at Shug
and I feel my heart begin to cramp. It hurt me so, I cover it
with
my hand. I think I might as well be under the table, for all
they care. I hate the way I look, I hate the way I'm dress.
Nothing
but churchgoing clothes in my chifferobe. And Mr. ???
looking at Shug's bright black skin in her tight red dress,
her feet in
little sassy red shoes. Her hair shining in waves.

Before I know it, tears meet under my chin.

And I'm confuse.

He love looking at Shug. I love looking at Shug.

But Shug don't love looking at but one of us. Him.

But that the way it spose to be. I know that. But if that so,
why my heart hurt me so?

My head droop so it near bout in my glass.

Then I hear my name.

Shug saying Celie. Miss Celie. And I look up where she at.

She say my name again. She say this song I'm bout to sing is call Miss Celie's song. Cause she scratched it out of my head when I was sick.

First she hum it a little, like she do at home. Then she sing the words.

It all about some no count man doing her wrong, again. But I don't listen to that part. I look at her and I hum along a little with the tune.

First time somebody made something and name it after me.

78

Pretty soon it be time for Shug to go. She sing every week-end now at Harpo's. He make right smart money off of her, and she make some too. Plus she gitting strong again and stout. First night or two her songs come out good but a little weak, now

she belt

them out. Folks out in the yard hear her with no trouble. She and Swain sound real good together. She sing, he pick his box. It

nice at Harpo's. Little tables all round the room with candles on them that I made, lot of little tables outside too, by the creek.

Sometime I look down the path from our house and it look like a swarm of lightening bugs all in and through Sofia house. In the evening Shug can't wait to go down there.

One day she say to me, Well, Miss Cetie, I believe it time for me to go.

When? I ast.

Early next month, she say. June. June a good time to go off into the world.

I don't say nothing. Feel like I felt when Nettie left.

She come over and put her hand on my shoulder.

He beat me when you not here,. I say. 78

79 Who do, she say, Albert?

Mr. ???, I say.

I can't believe it, she say. She sit down on the bench next to me real hard, like she drop.

What he beat you for? she ast.

For being me and not you.

Oh, Miss Celie, she say, and put her arms around me.

Us sit like that for maybe half a hour. Then she kiss me on the fleshy part of my shoulder and stand .up.

I won't leave, she say, until I know Albert won't even think about beating you.

80

Now we all know she going sometime soon, they sleep together at night. Not every night, but almost every night, from Friday to Monday.

He go down to Harpo's to watch her sing. And just to look at her. Then way late they come home. They giggle and they talk and they rattle until morning. Then they go to bed until it time for her to get ready to go back to work.

First time it happen, it was a accident. Feeling just carried them away. That what Shug say. He don't say nothing.

She ast me, Tell me the truth, she say, do you mind if Albert sleep with me?

I think, I don't care who Albert sleep with. But I don't say that.

I say, You might git big again.

She say, Naw, not with my sponge and all.

You still love him, I ast.

She say, I got what you call a passion for him. If I was ever going to have a husband he'd a been it. But he weak, she say. Can't make up his mind what he want.

81 And from what you tell me he a bully. Some things I love about him though, she say. He smell right to me. He so little. He make me laugh.

You like to sleep with him? I ast.

Yeah, Celie she say, I have to confess, I just loveit. Don't you?

Naw, I say. Mr. ??? can tell you, I don't like it at all. What is it like? He git up on you, heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretend I ain't there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep.

She start to laugh. Do his business, she say. Do his business. Why, Miss Celie. You make it sound like he going to the toilet on you.

That what it feel like, I say.

She stop laughing.

You never enjoy it at all? she ast, puzzle. Not even with your children daddy?

Never, I say.

Why Miss Celie, she say, you still a virgin.

What? I ast..

Listen, she say, right down there in your pussy is a little button that gits real hot when you do you know what with somebody.

It git boner and hotter and then it melt. That the good part. But other parts good too, she say. Lot of sucking go on, here and there, she say. Lot of finger and tongue work.

Button? Finger and tongue? My face hot enough to melt itself.

She say. Here, take this mirror and go look at yourself down there, I bet you never seen it, have you?

Naw.

And I bet you never seen Albert down there either. 81

82 I felt him, I say.

I stand there with the mirror.

She say, What, too shame even to go off and look at yourself? And you look so cute too, she say, laughing. All dressed up for Harpo's, smelling good and everything, but scared to look at your own pussy.

You come with me while I look, I say.

And us run off to my room like two little prankish girls.

You guard the door, I say.

She giggle. Okay, she say. Nobody coming. Coast clear.

I lie back on the bed and haul up my dress. Yank down my bloomers. Stick the looking glass tween my legs. Ugh. All that hair. Then
my pussy lips be black. Then inside look like a wet rose.

It a lot prettier than you thought, ain't it? she say from the door.

It mine, I say. Where the button?

Right up near the top, she say. The part that stick out a little.

I look at her and touch it with my finger. A little shiver go through me. Nothing much. But just enough to tell me this the right
button to mash. Maybe.

She say, While you looking, look at your titties too. I haul up my dress and look at my titties. Think bout my babies sucking them.

Remember the little shiver I felt then too. Sometimes a big shiver. Best part about having the babies was feeding 'em.

Albert and Harpo coming, she say. And I yank up my drawers and yank down my dress. I feel like us been doing

something wrong.

I don't care if you sleep with him, I say.

And she take me at my word. 82

83 I take me at my word too.

But when I hear them together all I can do is pull the quilt over my head and finger my little button and titties and cry.

84

One night while Shug singing a hot one, who should come prancing through the door of Harpo's but Sofia.

She with a big tall hefty man look like a prize fighter.

She her usual stout and bouncy self.

Oh, Miss Celie, she cry. It so good to see you again. It even good to see Mr. ?:??, she say. She take one of his hands.

Even if

his handshake is a little weak, she say.

He act real glad to see her.

Here, pull up a chair, he say. Have a cold drink.

Gimme a shot of white lightening, she say.

Prizefighter pull up a chair, straddle it backwards, hug on Sofia like they at home.

I see Harpo cross the room with his little yellowskin girlfriend. He look at Sofia like she a hant.

This Henry Broadnax, Sofia say. Everybody call him Buster. Good friend of the family.

How you all? he say. He smile pleasant and us keep listening to the music. Shug wearing a gold dress that show her titties near
bout to the nipple. Everybody sorta hoping something break. But that dress strong.

85 Man oh man, say Buster. Fire department won't do. Somebody call the Law.

Mr. ??? whisper to Sofia. Where your children at?

She whisper back, My children at home, whereyours?' \ .

He don't say nothing.

Both the girls bigged and gone. Bub hi and out of jail. If his granddaddy wasn't the colored uncle of the sheriff who look just

like Bub, Bub be lynch by now.

I can't git over how good Sofia look.

Most women with five children look a little peaked, I say to her cross the table when Shug finish her song. You look like you ready for five more.

Oh, she say, I got six children now, Miss Celie.

Six. I am shock.

She toss her head, look over at Harpo. Life don't stop just cause you leave home, Miss Celie. You know that.

My life stop when I left home, I think. But then I think again. It stop with Mr. ??? maybe, but start up again with Shug.

Shug come over and she and Sofia hug.

Shug say, Girl, you look like a good time, you do.

That when I notice how Shug talk and act sometimes nice a man. Men say stuff like that to women, Girl, you look like a good time.

Women always talk bout hair and health. How many babies living or dead, or got teef. Not bout how some woman they hugging on look

like a good time.

All the men got they eyes glued to Shug's bosom. I got my eyes glued there too. I feel my nipples harden under my dress. My little button sort of perk up too. Shug, I say to her hi my mind, Girl, you looks like a real good time, the Good Lord knows you do.

86 What you doing here? ast Harpo.

Sofia say, Come to hear Miss Shug. You got a nice place here Harpo. She look around. This and that her eyes admire.

Harpo say, It just a scandless, a woman with five children hanging out in a jukejoint at night.

Sofia eye go cool. She look him up and down.

Since he quit stuffing himself, he gained a bunch of weight, face, head and all, mostly from drinking home brew and eating left-over barbecue. By now he just about her size.

A woman need a little fun, once in a while, she say.

A woman need to be at home, he say.

She say, This is my home. Though I do think it go better as a jukejoint.

Harpo look at the prize fighter. Prizefighter push back his chair a little, pick up his drink.

I don't fight Sofia battle, he say. My job to love her and take her where she want to go.

Harpo breathe some relief.

Let's dance, he say.

Sofia laugh, git up. Put both arms round his neck. They slow drag out cross the floor.

Harpo little yellowish girlfriend sulk, hanging over the bar. She a nice girl, friendly and everything, but she like me. She do anything Harpo say.

He give her a little nickname, too, call her Squeak.

Pretty soon Squeak git up her nerve to try to cut. in.

Harpo try to turn Sofia so she can't see. But Squeak keep on tapping and tapping on his shoulder.

Finally he and Sofia stop dancing. They bout two feet from

our table.

Shug say, uh-oh, and point with her chin, somethingbout to blow right there.'

87 Who dis woman, say Squeak, in this little teenouncy voice.

You know who she is, say Harpo.

Squeak turn to Sofia. Say, You better leave him alone.

Sofia say, Fine with me. She turn round to leave.

Harpo grab her by the arm. Say, You don't have to go no where. Hell, this your house.

Squeak say, 'i^iat you mean, Dis her house? She walk out on you. Walk away from the house. It over now, she say to Sofia.

Sofia say, Fine with me. Try to pull away from Harpo grip. He hold her tight.

Listen Squeak, say Harpo, Can't a man dance with his own wife?

Squeak say, Not if he my man he can't. You hear that, bitch, she say to Sofia.

Sofia getting a little tired of Squeak, I can tell by her ears. They sort of push back. But she say again, sorta end of argument like, Hey, fine with me.

Squeak slap her up cross the head.

What she do that for. Sofia don't even deal in little ladyish things such as slaps. She ball up her fist, draw back, and knock two of Squeak's side teef out, Squeak hit the floor. One toof hanging on her lip, the other one upside my cold drink glass.

Then Squeak start banging on Harpo leg with her shoe.

You git that bitch out a here, she cry, blood and slobber running down her chin.

Harpo and Sofia stand side by side looking down at Squeak, but I don't think they hear her. Harpo still holding Sofia arm. Maybe half a minute go by. Finally he turn loose her arm, reach down and cradle poor little

88 Squeak in his arms. He coo and coo at her like she a baby.

Sofia come over and git the prizefighter. They go out the door and don't look back. Then us hear a car motor start.

89

Harpo mope. Wipe the counter, light a cigarette, look outdoors, walk up and down. Little Squeak run long all up under him trying to git his tension. Baby this, she say, Baby that. Harpo look through her head, blow smoke.

Squeak come over to the corner where me and Mr. ??? at. She got two bright gold teef in the side of her mouth, generally grin all the time. Now she cry. Miss Celie, she say, What the matter with Harpo?

Sofia in jail, I say.

In jail? She look like I say Sofia on the moon.

What she in jail for? she ast.

Sassing the mayor's wife, I say.

Squeak pull up a chair. Look down my throat.

What your real name? I ast her. She say, Mary Agnes.

Make Harpo call you by your real name, I say. Then maybe he see you even when he trouble.

She look at me puzzle. I let it go. I tell her what one of Sofia sister tell me and Mr. ???.

Sofia and the prizefighter and all the children got in

90 the prizefighter car and went to town. Clam out on the street looking like somebody. Just then the mayor and his wife come by.

All these children, say the mayor's wife, digging in her pocketbook. Cute as little buttons though, she say. She stop, put her hand on one of the children head. Say, and such strong white teef.

Sofia and the prizefighter don't say nothing. Wait for her to pass. Mayor wait too, stand back and tap his foot, watch her with

a little smile. Now Millie, he say. Always going on over colored. Miss Millie finger the children some more, finally look at Sofia

and the prizefighter. She look at the prizefighter car. She eye Sofia wristwatch. She say to Sofia, All your children so clean,

she say, would you like to work for me, be my maid?

Sofia say, Hell no.

She say, What you say?

Sofia say, Hell no.

Mayor look at Sofia, push his wife out the way. Stick out his chest. Girl, what you say to Miss Millie?

Sofia say, I say, Hell no.

He slap her.

I stop telling it right there.

Squeak on the edge of her seat. She wait. Look down my throat some more.

No need to say no more, Mr. ??? say. You know what happen if somebody slap Sofia.

Squeak go white as a sheet. Now, she say.

Nawnothing, I say. Sofia knock the man down.

The polices come, start slinging the children off the mayor, bang they heads together. Sofia really start to fight. They drag her to the ground.

91 This far as I can go with it, look like. My eyes git full of water and my throat close.

Poor Squeak all scrunch down in her chair, trembling.

They beat Sofia, Mr. ??? say.

Squeak fly up like she sprung, run over hind the counter to Harpo, put her arms round him. They hang together a long time, cry.

What the prizefighter do in all this? I ast Sofia sister, Odessa.

He want to jump in, she say. Sofia say No, take the children home.

Polices have they guns on him anyway. One move, he dead. Six of them, you know.

Mr. ??? go plead with the sheriff to let us see Sofia. Bub be in so much trouble, look so much like the sheriff, he and Mr. ???

almost on family terms. Just long as Mr. ??? know he colored.

Sheriff say, She a crazy woman, your boy's wife. You know that?

Mr. ??? say, Yassur, us do know it. Been trying to tell Harpo she crazy for twelve years. Since way before they marry.

Sofia come

from crazy peoples, Mr. ???say, it not all her fault. And then again, the sheriff know how womens is, anyhow.

Sheriff think bout the women he know, say, Yep, you right there.

Mr. ??? say, We gon tell her she crazy too, if us ever do git in to see her.

Sheriff say, Well make sure you do. And tell her she lucky she alive.

When I see Sofia I don't know why she still alive. They crack her skull, they crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side.

They blind her in one eye. She

92 swole from head to foot. Her tongue the size of my arm, it stick out tween her teef like a piece of rubber. She can't talk.

And she just about the color of a eggplant.

Scare me so bad I near bout drop my grip. But I don't. I put it on the floor of the cell, take out comb and brush, nightgown, witch

hazel and alcohol and I start to work on her. The colored
tendant bring me water to wash her with, and I start at her
two little
slits for eyes.

93

They put Sofia to work in the prison laundry. All day long
from five to eight she washing clothes. Dirty convict
uniforms, nasty
sheets and blankets piled way over her head. Us see her
twice a month for hah7 a hour. Her face yellow and sickly,
her fingers
look like fatty sausage.

Everything nasty here, she say, even the air. Food bad
enough to kill you with it. Roaches here, mice, flies, lice and
even a snake
or two. If you say anything they strip you, make you sleep on
a cement floor without a light.

How you manage? us ast.

Every time they ast me to do something, Miss Celie, I act
like I'm you. I jump right up and do just what they say.

She look wild when she say that, and her bad eye wander
round the room.

Mr. ??? suck in his breath. Harpo groan. Miss Shug cuss.
She come from Memphis special to see Sofia.

I can't fix my mouth to say how I feel.

94 I'm a good prisoner, she say. Best convict they ever see.
They can't believe I'm the one sass the mayor's wife, knock
the mayor
down. She laugh. It sound like something from a song. The
part where everybody done gone home but you.

Twelve years a long time to be good though, she say.

Maybe you git out on good behavior, say Harpo.

Good behavior ain't good enough for them, say Sofia.
Nothing less than sliding on your belly with your tongue on
they boots can
even git they attention. I dream of murder, she say, I dream
of murder sleep or wake.

Us don't say nothing.

How the children? she ast.

They all fine, say Harpo. Tween Odessa and Squeak, they
git by.

Say thank you to Squeak, she say. Tell Odessa I think

about hen

95

Us all sit round the table after supper. Me, Shug, Mr. ???-, Squeak, the prizefighter, Odessa and two more of Sofia sisters.

Sofia not gon last, say Mr. ____.

Yeah, say Harpo, she look little crazy to me.

And what she had to say, say Shug. My God.

Us got to do something, say Mr. ??? and be right quick about it.

What can us do? ast Squeak. She look a little haggard with all Sofia and Harpo children sprung on her at once, but she carry on.

Hair a little stringy, slip show, but she carry on.

Bust her out, say Harpo. Git some dynamite off the gang that's building that big bridge down the road, blow the whole prison to kingdom come.

Shut up,- Harpo, say Mr. ???, us trying to think.

I got it, say the prizefighter, smuggle in a gun. Well, he rub his chin, maybe smuggle in a file.

Naw, say Odessa. They just come after her if she leave that way.

Me and Squeak don't say nothing. I don't know what

96 she think, but I think bout angels, God coming down by chariot, swinging down real low and carrying ole Sofia home. I see 'em

all as clear as day. Angels all in white, white hair and white eyes, look like albinos. God all white too, looking like some stout

white man work at the bank. Angels strike they cymbals, one of them blow his horn, God blow out a big breath of fire and suddenly
Sofia free.

Who the warden's black kinfolks? say Mr. ???.

Nobody say nothing.

Finally the prizefighter speak. What his name? he ast.

Hodges, say Harpo. Bubber Hodges.

Old man Henry Hodges' boy, say Mr. ????. Used to live out on the old Hodges' place.

Got a brother name Jimmy? ast Squeak.

Yeah, say Mr. ????. Brother name Jimmy. Married to that Quitman girl. Daddy own the hardware. You know them?

Squeak duck her head. Mumble something.

Say what? ast Mr. ???.

Squeak cheek turn red. She mumble again.

He your what? Mr. ??? ast.

Cousin, she say.

Mr. ??? look at her.

Daddy, she say. She cut her eye at Harpo. Look at the floor.

He know anything bout it? ast Mr. ???.

Yeah, she say. He got three children by my mama. Two younger than me.

His brother know anything bout it? ast Mr. ____.

One time he come by the house with Mr. Jimmy, he give us

all quarters, say we sure do look .like Hodges.

Mr. ??? rear back in his chair, give Squeak a good 96

97 look from head to foot. Squeak push her greasy brown hair back from her face.

Yeah, say Mr. ???. I see the resemblance. He bring his chair down on the floor.

Well, look like you the one to go.

Go where, ast Squeak.

Go see the warden. He your uncle.

98

Us dress Squeak like she a white woman, only her clothes patch. She got on a starch and iron dress, high heel shoes with scuffs, and a old hat somebody give Shug. Us give her a old pocketbook look like a quilt and a little black bible. Us wash her hair and git all the grease out, then I put it up in two plaits that cross over her head. Us bathe her so clean she smell like a good dean floor.

What I'm gon say? she ast.

Say you living with Sofia husband and her husband say Sofia not being punish enough. Say she laugh af the fool she make of the guards. Say she gitting along just fine where she at. Happy even, long as she don't have to be no white woman maid.

Gracious God, say Squeak, how I'm gonna tune up my mouth to say all that?

He ast you who you is, make him remember. Tell him how much that quarter he give you meant to you.

That was fifteen years ago, say Squeak, he ain't gonna remember that.

99 Make him see the Hodges in you, say Odessa. He'll remember.

Tell him you just think justice ought to be done, yourself. But make sure he know you living with Sofia husband, say Shug. Make sure you git in the part bout being happy where she at, worse thing could happen to her is to be some white lady maid.

I don't know, say the prizefighter. This sound mighty much like some ole uncle Tomming to me.

Shug snort, Well, she say, Uncle Tom wasn't call Uncle for nothing.

100

Poor little Squeak come home with a limp. Her dress rip. Her hat missing and one of the heels come off her shoe.

What happen? us ast.

He saw the Hodges in me, she say. And he didn't like it one bit.

Harpo come up the steps from the car. My wife beat up, my woman rape, he say. I ought to go back out there with guns, maybe set fire to the place, burn the crackers up.

Shut up, Harpo, say Squeak. I'm telling it.

And she do.

Say, the minute I walk through the door, he remembered me.

What he say? us ast.

Say, What you want? I say, I come out of the interest I haves

in seeing justice is done. What you say you want? he ast again.

I say what yall told me to say. Bout Sofia not being punish enough. Say she happy in prison, strong girl like her. Her main worry is just the thought of ever being

101 some white woman maid. That what start the fight, you know, I say. Mayor's wife ask Sofia to be her maid. Sofia say she never going to be no white woman's nothing, let alone maid.

That so? he ast, all the time looking me over real good.

Yessir, I say. Say, prison suit her just fine. Shoot, washing and ironing all day is all she do at home. She got six children, you know.

That a fact? he say.

He come from behind his desk, lean over my chair.

Who your folks? he ast.

I tell him my mama's name, grandmama's name. Grandpa's name.

Who your daddy? he ast. Where you git them eyes?

Ain't got no daddy ,J say.

Come on now, he say. Ain't I seen you before?

I say, Yessir. And one time bout ten years ago, when I was a little girl, you give me a quarter. I sure did preshate it, I say.

I don't remember that, he say.

You come by the house with my mama friend, Mr. Jimmy, I say.

Squeak look round at all of us. Then take a deep breath. Mumble.

Say what? ast Odessa.

Yeah, say Shug, if you can't tell us, who you gon tell, God?

He took my hat off, say Squeak. Told me to undo my dress. She drop her head, put her face hi her hands.

My God, say Odessa, and he your uncle.

He say if he was my uncle he wouldn't do it to me. That be a sin. But this just little fornication. Everybody guilty of that.

102 She turn her face up to Harpo. Harpo, she say, do you really love me, or just my color?

Harpo say, I love you, Squeak. He kneel down and try to put his arms round her waist.

She stand up. My name Mary Agnes, she say.

103

6 months after Mary Agnes went to git Sofia out of prison, she begin to sing. First she sing Shug's songs, then she begin to make up songs her own self.

She got the kind of voice you never think of trying to sing a song. It tittle, it high, it sort of meowing. But Mary Agnes don't care.

Pretty soon, us git used to it. Then us like it a whole lot.

Harpo don't know what to make of it.

It seem funny to me, he say to me and Mr. ???. So sudden. It put me in the mind of a gramophone. Sit in the corner a year silent as the grave. Then you put a record on, it come to life.

Wonder if she still mad Sofia knock her teef out? I ast.

Yeah, she mad. But what good being mad gon do? She not evil, she know Sofia life hard to bear right now.

How she-git long with the children? ast Mr. _____.

They love her, say Harpo. She let 'em do anything they want.

Oh-oh, I say.

104 Besides, he say, Odessa and Sofia other sisters always on hand to take up the slack. They bring up children like military.

Squeak sing,

They calls me yellow like yellow be my name

They calls me yellow like yellow be my name

But if yellow is a name Why ain't black the same

Well, if I say Hey black girl Lord, she try to ruin my game

Sofia say to me today, I just can't understand it.

What that? I ast.

Why we ain't already kill them off.

Three years after she beat she out of the wash house, got her color and her weight back, look like her old self, just all time think bout killing somebody.

Too many to kill off, I say. Us outnumbered from the start. I speck we knock over one or two, though, here and there, through the years, I say.

We sit on a piece of old crate out near the edge of Miss Millie's yard. Rusty nails stick out long the bottom and when us move they creak gainst the wood.

Sofia job to watch the children play ball. The little boy throw the ball to the little girl, she try to catch it with her eyes shut. It roll up under Sofia foot.

Throw me the ball, say the little boy, with his hands on his hip. Throw me the ball.

Sofia mutter to herself, half to me. I'm here to watch, not to

throw, she say. She don't make a move toward the ball.

Don't you hear me talking to you, he shout. He 105

106 maybe six years old, brown hair, ice blue eyes. He come steaming up to where us sit, haul off and kick Sofia leg. She swing her foot to one side and he scream.

What the trouble? I ast.

Done stab his foot with a rusty nail, Sofia say.

Sure enough, blood come leaking through his shoe.

His little sister come watch him cry. He turn redder and redder. Call his mama.

Miss Millie come running. She scared of Sofia. Everytime she talk to her it like she expect the worst. She don't stand close to her either. When she git a few yards from where us sit, she motion for Billy to come there.

My foot, he say to her.

Sofia do it? she ast.

Little girl pipe up. Billy do it his own self, she say. Trying to

kick Sofia leg. The little girl dote on Sofia, always stick up for her. Sofia never notice, she as deaf to the little girl as she is to her brother.

Miss Millie cut her eyes at her, put one arm round Billy shoulder and they limp into the back of the house. Little girl follow,
wave bye-bye to us.

She seem like a right sweet little thing, I say to Sofia.

Who is? She frown.

The little girl, I say. What they call her, Eleanor Jane?

Yeah, say Sofia, with a real puzzle look on her face, I wonder why she was ever born.

Well, I say, us don't have to wonder that bout darkies.

She giggle. Miss Celie, she say, you just as crazy as you can be.

This the first giggle I heard in three years.

Sofia would make a dog laugh, talking about those people she work for. They have the nerve to try to make us think

slavery fell

through because of us, say Sofia. Like us didn't have sense enough to handle it. All the time breaking hoe handles and letting the mules loose in the wheat. But how anything they build can last a day is a wonder to me. They backward, she say. Clumsy, and unlucky.

Mayor???bought Miz Millie a new car, cause she said if colored could have cars then one for her was past due. So he bought her a car, only he refuse to show her how to drive it. Every day he come home from town he look at her, look out the window at her car, say, How you enjoying 'er Miz Millie. She fly off the sofa in a huff, slam the door going in the bathroom.

She ain't got no friends.

So one day she say to me, car been sitting out in the yard two months, Sofia, do you know how to drive? I guess she remembered first seeing me up gainst Buster Broadnax car.

Yes ma'am, I say. I'm slaving away cleaning that big

108 post they got down at the bottom of the stair. They act real funny bout that post. No finger prints is sposed to be on

it,
ever.

Do you think you could teach me? she says.

One of Sofia children break in, the oldest boy. He tall and handsome, all the time serious. And mad a lot.

He say, Don't say slaving, Mama.

Sofia say, Why not? They got me in a little storeroom up under the house, hardly bigger than Odessa's porch, and just about as warm in the winter time. I'm at they beck and call all night and all day. They won't let me see my children. They won't let me see no mens. Well, after five years they let me see you once a year. I'm a slave, she say. What would you call it?

A captive, he say.

Sofia go on with her story, only look at him like she glad he hers.

So I say, Yes ma'am. I can teach you, if it the same kind of car I learned on.

Next thing you know there go me and Miz Millie all up and down the road. First I drive and she watch, then she start to

try to
drive and I watch her. Up and down the road. Soon as I
finish cooking breakfast, putting it on the table, washing
dishes and sweeping
die floor?and just before I go git the mail out of the box
down by the road?we go give Miz Millie her driving lesson.

Well, after while she got die hang of it, more or less. Then
she really git it. Then one day when we come home from
riding, she
say to me, I'm gonna drive you home. Just like that.

Home? I ast.

Yes, she say. Home. You ain't been home or seen your
children in a while, she say. Ain't that right?

I say, Yes ma'am. It been five years.

She say, That's a shame. You just go git your things

109 right now. Here it is, Christmas. Go get your things.
You can stay all day.

For all day I don't need nothing but what I got on, I say.

Fine, she say. Fine. Well git in.

Well, say Sofia, I was so use to sitting up there next to her

teaching her how to drive, that I just naturally clammed into the front seat.

She stood outside on her side the car clearing her throat.

Finally she say, Sofia, with a little laugh, This is the South.

Yes ma'am, I say-She clear her throat, laugh some more. Look where you sitting, she say.

I'm sitting where I always sit, I say.

That's the problem, she say. Have you ever seen a white person and a colored sitting side by side in a car, when one of 'em wasn't showing the other one how to drive it or clean it?

I got out the car, opened the back door and clammed in. She sat down up front. Off us traveled down the road, Miz Millie hair blowing all out the window.

It's real pretty country out this way, she say, when we hit the Marshall county road, coming toward Odessa's house.

Yes ma'am, I say.

Then us pull into the yard and all the children come

crowding round the car. Nobody told them I was coming, so they don't know

who I is. Except the oldest two. They fall on me, and hug me. And then all the little ones start to hug me too. I don't think

they even notice I was sitting in the back of the car. Odessa and Jack come out after I was out, so they didn't see it.

Us all stand round kissing and hugging each other, 109

110 Miz Millie just watching. Finally, she lean out the window and say, Sofia, you only got the rest of the day. I'll be back to

pick you up at five o'clock. The children was all pulling me into the house, so sort of over my shoulder I say, Yes ma'am, and

I thought I heard her drive off.

But fifteen minutes later, Marion says, That white lady still out there.

Maybe she going to wait to take you back, say Jack.

Maybe she sick, say Odessa. You always say how sickly they is.

I go out to the car, say Sofia, and guess what the matter is? The matter is, she don't know how to do nothing but go forward, and

Jack and Odessa's yard too full of trees for that.

Sofia, she say, How you back this thing up?

I lean over the car window and try to show her which way to move the gears. But she flustered and all the children and Odessa and Jack all standing round the porch watching her.

I go round on the other side. Try to explain with my head poked through that window. She stripping gears aplenty by now. Plus her nose red and she look mad and frustrate both.

I clam in the back seat, lean over the back of the front, steady trying to show her how to operate the gears. Nothing happen. Finally the car stop making any sound. Engine dead.

Don't worry, I say, Odessa's husband Jack will drive you home. That's his pick-up right there.

Oh, she say, I couldn't ride in a pick-up with a strange colored man.

I'll ask Odessa to squeeze in too, I say. That would give me a chance to spend a little time with the

111 children, I thought. But she say, No, I don't know her

neither.

So it end up with me and Jack driving her back home in the pick-up, then Jack driving me to town to git a mechanic, and at five o'clock I was driving Miz Millie's car back to her house.

I spent fifteen minutes with my children.

And she been going on for months bout how ungrateful I is.

White folks is a miracle of affliction, say Sofia.

III

112

Shug write she got a big surprise, and she intend to bring it home for Christmas.

What it is? us wonder.

Mr. _??? think it a car for him. Shug making big money now, dress in furs all the time. Silk and satin too, and hats made out of gold.

Christmas morning us hear this motor outside the door. Us look out.

Hot diggidy dog, say Mr. ??? throwing on his pants. He rush to the door. I stand in front the glass trying to make something out my hair. It too short to be long, too long to be short. Too nappy to be kinky, too kinky to be nappy. No set color to it either.
I give up, tie on a headrag.

I hear Shug cry, Oh, Albert. He say, Shug. I know they hugging. Then I don't hear nothing.

I run out the door. Shug, I say, and put out my arms. But before I know anything a skinny big toof man wearing red suspenders is all up in my face. Fore I can wonder whose dog he is, he hugging me.

113 Miss Celie, he say. Aw, Miss Celie. I heard so much about you. Feel like we old Mends.

Shug standing back with a big grin.

This Grady, she say. This my husband.

The minute she say it I know I don't like Grady. I don't like his shape, I don't like his teef, I don't like his clothes. Seem like to me he smell.

Us been driving all night, she say. Nowhere to stop, you know. But here us is. She come over to Grady and put her arms round him, look up at him like he cute and he lean down and give her a kiss.

I glance round at Mr. ????. He look like the end of the world. I know I don't look no better.

And this my wedding present to us, say Shug. The car big and dark blue and say Packard on the front. Brand new, she say. She look at Mr. ????, take his arm, give it a little squeeze. While we here, Albert, she say, I want you to learn how to drive. She laugh.

Grady drive like a fool, she say. I thought the polices was gonna catch us for sure.

Finally Shug really seem to notice me. She come over and hug me a long time. Us two married ladies now, she say. Two married ladies.

And hungry, she say. What us got to eat?

114

Mr. ??? drink all through Christmas. Him and Grady. Me and Shug cook, talk, clean the house, talk, fix up the tree, talk, wake up in the morning, talk.

She singing all over the country these days. Everybody know her name. She know everybody, too. Know Sophie Tucker, know Duke Ellington, know folks I ain't never heard of. And money. She make so much money she don't know what to do with it. She got a fine house in Memphis, another car. She got one hundred pretty dresses. A room full of shoes. She buy Grady anything he think he want.

Where you find him at? I ast.

Up under my car, she say. The one at home. I drove it after the oil gave out, kilt the engine. He the man fixed it. Us took one look at one nother, that was it.

Mr. ??? feelings hurt, I say. I don't mention mine.

Aw, she say. That old stuff finally over with. You and Albert feel just like family now. Anyhow, once you told me he beat you, and won't work, I felt different

115 about him. If you was my wife, she say, I'd cover you up with kisses stead of licks, and work hard for you too.

He ain't beat me much since you made him quit, I say. Just

a slap now and then when he ain't got nothing else to do.

Y'all make love any better? she ast.

Us try, I say. He try to play with the button but feel like his fingers dry. Us don't git nowhere much.

You still a virgin? she ast.

I reckon. I say.

116

Mr. ??? and Grady gone off in the car together. Shug ast me could she sleep with me. She cold in her and Grady bed all alone. Us talk bout this and that. Soon talk about making love. Shug don't actually say making love. She say something nasty. She say fuck.

She ast me, How was it with your children daddy?

The girls had a little separate room, I say, off to itself, connected to the house by a little plank walk. Nobody ever come hi there but Mama. But one time when mama not at home, he come. Told me he want me to trim his hair. He bring the scissors and comb and brush and a stool. While I trim his hair he look at me

funny. He a little nervous too, but I don't know why, till he grab hold of me and cram me up tween his legs.

I lay there quiet, listening to Shug breathe.

It hurt me, you know, I say. I was just going on fourteen. I never even thought bout men having nothing down there so big. It scare me just to see it. And the way it poke itself and grow.

Shug so quiet I think she sleep. 116

117 After he through, I say, he mate me finish trimming his hair.

I sneak a look at Shug.

Oh, Miss Celie, she say. And put her arms round me. They black and smooth and kind of glowy from the lamplight.

I start to cry too. I cry and cry and cry. Seem like it all come back to me, laying there in Shug arms. How it hurt and how much

I was surprise. How it stung while I finish trimming his hah-. How the blood drip down my leg and mess up my stocking. How he don't never look at me straight after that. And Nettie.

Don't cry, Celie, Shug say. Don't cry. She start kissing the water as it come down side my face.

After while I say, Mama finally ast how come she find his hair in the girls room if he don't never go in there like he say. That when he told her I had a boyfriend. Some boy he say he seen sneaking put the back door. It the boy's hair, he say, not his. You know how she love to cut anybody hair, he say.

I did love to cut hair, I say to Shug, since I was a little bitty thing. I'd run go git the scissors if I saw ban-coming, and I'd cut and cut, long as I could. That how come I was the one cut his hah-. But always before I cut it on the front porch. It got to the place where everytime I saw him coming with the scissors and the comb and the stool, I start to cry.

Shug say, Wellsah, and I thought it was only white-folks do freakish things like that.

My mama die, I tell Shug. My sister Nettie run away. Mr. ??? come git me to take care bis rotten children. He never ast me nothing bout myself. He clam on top of me and fuck and fuck, even when my head bandaged. Nobody ever love me, I say.

118 She say, I love you, Miss Celie. And then she haul off

and kiss me on the mouth.

Um, she say, like she surprise. I kiss her back, say, um, too. Us kiss and kiss till us can't hardly kiss no more. Then us touch each other.

I don't know nothing bout it, I say to Shug.

I don't know much, she say.

Then I feels something real soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my little lost babies mouth.

Way after while, I act like a little lost baby too.

119

Grady and Mr. ??? come staggering in round daybreak. Me and Snug sound asleep. Her back to me, my arms round her waist. What it like? Little like sleeping with mama, only I can't hardly remember ever sleeping with her. Little like sleeping with Nettie, only sleeping with Nettie never feel this good. It warm and cushiony, and I feel Shug's big tits sorta flop over my arms like suds. It feel like heaven js what it feel like, not like sleeping with Mr. ??? at all.

Wake up Sugar, I say. They back. And Shug roll over, hug me, and git out of the bed. She stagger into the other room and fall on the bed with Grady. Mr. ??? fall into bed next to me, drunk, and snoring before he hit the quilts.

I try my best to like Grady, even if he do wear red suspenders and bow ties. Even if he do spend Shug's money like he made it himself. Even if he do try to talk like somebody from the North. Memphis, Tennessee ain't North, even I know that. But one thing I sure miff can't stand, the way he call Shug Mama.

120 I ain't your fucking mama, Shug say. But he don't pay her no mind.

Like when he be making goo-goo eyes at Squeak and Shug sorta tease him about it, he say, Aw, Mama, you know I don't mean no harm.

Shug like Squeak too, try to help her sing. They sit in Odessa's front room with all the children crowded round them singing and singing. Sometime Swain come with his box, Harpo cook dinner, and me and Mr. ??? and the prizefighter bring our preshation.

It nice.

Shug say to Squeak, I mean, Mary Agnes, You ought to sing in public.

Mary Agnes say, Now. She think cause she don't sing big and broad like Shug nobody want to hear her. But Shug say she wrong.

What about all them funny voices you hear singing in church? Shug say. What about all them sounds that. sound good but they not the sounds you thought folks could make? What bout that? Then she start moaning. Sound like death approaching, angels can't prevent it. It raise the hair on the back of your neck. But it really sound sort of like panthers would sound if they could sing.

I tell you something else, Shug say to Mary Agnes, listening to you sing, folks git to thinking bout a good screw.

Aw, Miss Shug, say Mary Agnes, changing color.

Shug say, What, too shamefaced to put singing and dancing and fucking together? She laugh. That's the reason they call what us sing the devil's music. Devils love to fuck. Listen, she say, Let's go sing one night at Harpo place. Be like old times for me.

And if I bring you before the crowd, they better listen with respect.

121 Niggers don't know how to act, but if you git through the first half of one song, you got 'em.

You reckon that's the truth? say Mary Agnes. She all big eyed and delight.

I don't know if I want her to sing, say Harpo.

How come? ast Shug. That woman you got singing now can't git her ass outthe church. Folks don't know whether to dance or creep to the mourner's bench. Plus, you dress Mary Agnes up the right way and you'll make piss pots of money. Yellow like she is, stringy hair and cloudy eyes, the men'll be crazy bout her. Ain't that right, Grady, she say.

Grady look little sheepish. Grin. Mama you don't miss a thing, he say.

And don't you forgit it, say Shug.

122 Dear God, This the letter I been holding in my hand.

Dear Cetie,

I know you think I am dead. But I am not. I been writing to you too, over the years, but Albert said you'd never hear from me again
and since I never heard from you all this time, I guess he was right. Now I only write at Christmas and Easter hoping my letter
get lost among the Christmas and Easter greetings, or that Albert get the holiday spirit and have pity on us.

There is so much to tell you that I don't know, hardly, where to begin?and anyway, you probably won't get this letter, either.

I'm sure Albert is still the only one to take mail out of the box.

But if this do get through, one thing I want you to know, I love you, and I am not dead. And Olivia is fine and so is your son.

We are all coming home before the end of another year.

Your loving sister,

Nettie

123 One night in bed Shug ast me to tell her bout Nettie. What she like? Where she at?

I tell her how Mr. ??? try to turn her head. How Nettie refuse

him, and how he say Nettie have to go.

Where she go? she ast.

I don't know, I say. She leave here.

And no word from her yet? she ast.

Naw, I say. Every day when Mr. ??? come from the mailbox I hope for news. But nothing come. She dead, I say.

Shug say, She wouldn't be someplace with funny stamps, you don't reckon? She look like she studying. Say, Sometimes when Albert and me walk up to the mailbox there be a letter with a lot of funny looking stamps. He never say nothing bout it, just put it in his inside pocket. One time I ast him could I look at the stamps but he said he'd take it out later. But he never did.

She was just on her way to town, I say. Stamps look like stamps round here. White men with long hah*.

Hm, she say, look like a little fat white woman was on one. What your sister Nettie like? she ast. Smart?

Yes, Lord, I say. Smart as anything. 'Read the newspapers when she was little more than talking. Did figures like they was nothing.

Talked real well too. And sweet. There never was a sweeter girl, I say. Eyes just brimming over with it. She love me too, I say to Shug.

She tall or short? Shug ast. What kind of dress she like to wear? What her birthday? What her favorite color? Can she cook? Sew? What about hah-?

Everything bout Nettie she want to know.

I talk so much my voice start to go. Why you want to know so much bout Nettie? I ast.

Cause she the only one you ever love, she say, sides me.

124

All of a sudden Shug buddy-buddy again with Mr. ???. They sit on the steps, go down Harpo's. Walk to the mailbox.

Shug laugh and laugh when he got anything to say. Show teef and tits aplenty.

Me and Grady try to carry on like us civilize. But it hard. When I hear Shug laugh I want to choke her, slap Mr. ??? face.

All this week I suffer. Grady and me feel so down he turn to reefer, I turn to prayer.

Saturday morning Shug put Nettie letter in my lap. Little fat queen of England stamps on it, plus stamps that got peanuts, coconuts, rubber trees and say Africa. I don't know where England at. Don't know where Africa at either. So I still don't know where Nettie at.

He been keeping your letters, say Shug.

Naw, I say. Mr. ___ mean sometimes, but he not that mean.

She say, Humpf, he that mean.

But how come he do it? I ast. He know Nettie mean everything in the world to me.

125 Shug say she don't know, but us gon find out.

Us seal the letter up again and put it back in Mr. ??? pocket.

He walk round with it in his coat all day. He never mention it. Just talk and laugh with Grady, Harpo and Swain, and try to learn how to drive Shug car.

I watch him so close, I begin to feel a lightening hi the head. Fore I know anything I'm standing hind his chair with his razor open.

Then I hear Shug laugh, like something just too funny. She say to me, I know I told you I need something to cut this hangnail with, but Albert git real niggerish bout his razor.

Mr. ??_ look behind him. Put that down, he say. Women always needing to cut this and shave that, and always gumming up the razor.

Shug got her hand on the razor now. She say. Oh it look dull .anyway. She take and sling it back in the shaving box.

All day long I act just like Sofia. I stutter. I mutter to myself. I stumble bout the house crazy for Mr. -??blood. In my mind, he falling dead every which a way. By time night come, I can't speak. Every time I open my mouth nothing come out but a little burp.

Shug tell everybody I got a fever and she put me to bed. It probably catching, she say to Mr. ???. Maybe you better sleep somewhere else. But she stay with me all night long. I don't sleep. I don't cry. I don't do nothing. I'm cold too. Pretty soon I think

maybe
I'm dead:

Shug hold me close to her and sometimes talk.

One thing my mama hated me for was how much I love to fuck, she say. She never love to do nothing had anything to do with touching nobody, she say. I try to kiss her, she turn her mouth away. Say, Cut that out

126 Lillie, she say. Lillie Shug's real name. She just so sweet they call her Shug.

My daddy love me to kiss and hug him, but she didn't like the looks of that. So when I met Albert, and once I got in his arms, nothing could git me out. It was good, too, she say. You know for me to have three babies by Albert and Albert weak as he is, it had to be good.

I had every one of my babies at home, too. Midwife come, preacher come, a bunch of the good ladies from the church. Just when I hurt so much I don't know my own name, they think a good time to talk bout repent.

She laugh. I was too big a fool to repent. Then she say, I

loved me some Albert ???..

I don't even want to say nothing. Where I'm at it peaceful. It calm. No Albert there. No Shug. Nothing.

Shug say, the last baby did it. They turned me out. I went to stay with my mama wild sister in Memphis. She just like me, Mama say. She drink, she fight, she love mens to death. She work in a roadhouse. Cook. Feed fifty men, screw fifty-five.

Shug talk and talk.

And dance, she say. Nobody dance like Albert when he was young. Sometime us did the moochie for a hour. After that, nothing to do but go somewhere and lay down. And funny. Albert was so funny. He kept me laughing. How come he ain't funny no more? she ast.

How come he never hardly laugh? How come he don't dance? she say. Good God, Celie, she say, What happen to the man I love?

She quiet a little while. Then she say, I was so surprise when I heard he was going to marry Annie Julia, she say. Too surprise to be hurt. I didn't believe it. After all, Albert knew as well as me that love would have to go some to be better than ours. Us had the kind of love couldn't be improve. That's what I

thought.

127 But, he weak, she say. His daddy told him I'm trash, my mama trash before me. His brother say the same. Albert try to stand up for us, git knock down. One reason they give him for not marrying me is cause I have children.

But they his, Itold old Mr. ???.

How us know? He ast.

Poor Annie Julia, Shug say. She never had a chance. I was so mean, and so wild, Lord. I used to go round saying, I don't care who he married to, I'm gonna fuck him. She stop talking a minute. Then she say, And I did, too. Us fuck so much in the open us give fucking a bad name.

But he fuck Annie Julia too, she say, and she didn't have nothing, not even a liking for him. Her family forgot about her once she married. And then Harpo and all the children start to come. Finally she start to sleep with that man that shot her down. Albert beat her. The children dragged on her. Sometimes I wonder what she thought about while she died.

I know what I'm thinking bout, I think. Nothing. And as much of it as I can.

I went to school with Annie Julia, Shug say. She was pretty, man. Black as anything, and skin just as smooth. Big black eyes look

like moons. And sweet too. Hell, say Shug, I liked hef myself. Why I hurt her so? I used to keep Albert away from home for a week

at the time. She'd come and beg him for money to buy groceries for the children.

I feel a few drops of water on my hand.

And when I come here, say Shug, I treated you so mean. Like you was a servant. And all because Albert married you. And I didn't

even want him for a husband, she say. I never really wanted Albert for a husband. But just to choose me, you know, cause

128 nature had already done it. Nature said, You two folks, hook up, cause you a good example of how it sposed to go. I didn't

want nothing to be able to go against that. But what was good tween us must have been nothing but bodies, she say. Cause I don't

know the Albert that don't dance, can't hardly laugh, never talk bout nothing, beat you and hid your sister Nettie's

letters.

Who he? I don't know nothing, I think. And glad of it.

128

129

Now that I know Albert hiding Nettie's letters, I know exactly where they is. They in his trunk. Everything that mean something to Albert go in his trunk. He keep it locked up tight, but Shug can git the key.

One night when Mr. ??? and Grady gone, us open the trunk. Us find a lot of Shug's underclothes, some nasty picture postcards, and way down under his tobacco, Nettie's letters. Bunches and bunches of them. Some fat, some thin. Some open, some not.

How us gon do this? I ast Shug.

She say, Simple. We take the letters out of the envelopes, leave the envelopes just like they is. I don't think he look in this corner of the trunk much, she say.

I heated the stove, put on the kettle. Us steam and steam the envelopes until we had all the letters laying on the table.

Then
us put the envelopes back inside the trunk.

I'm gonna put them in some kind of order for you, say Shug.

Yeah, I say, but don't let's do it in here, let's go in you and
Grady room.

130 So she got up and us went into they little room. Snug
sat in a chair by the bed with all Nettie letters spread round
her, I
got on the bed with the pillows behind my back.

These the first ones, say Shug. They postmark right here.

131 Dear Celie, the first letter say,

You've got to fight and get away from Albert. He ain't no
good.

When I left you all's house, walking, he followed me on his
horse. When we was well out of sight of the house he
caught up with
me and started trying to talk. You know how he do, You sure
is looking fine, Miss Nettie, and stuff like that. I tried to
ignore
him and walk faster, but my bundles was heavy and the sun
was hot. After while I had to rest, and that's when he got
down from

his horse and started to try to kiss me, and drag me back in the woods.

Well, I started to fight him, and with God's help, I hurt him bad enough to make him let me alone. But he was some mad. He said because of what I'd done I'd never hear from you again, and you would never hear from me.

I was so mad myself I was shaking.

Anyhow, I got a ride into town on somebody's 131

132 wagon. And that same somebody pointed me in the direction of the Reverend Mr. ???'s place. And what was my surprise when a little girl opened the door and she had your eyes set in your face.

love,

Nettie

133

Dear Celie,

I keep thinking it's too soon to look for a letter from you. And I know how busy you is with all Mr. ???*s ?children. But I

miss

you somuch. Please write to me, soon as you have a chance. Every day I think about you. Every minute.

The lady you met in town is name Corrine. The little girl's name is Olivia. The husband's name is Samuel. The little boy's name

is Adam. They are sanctified religious and very good to me. They live in a nice house next to the church where Samuel preaches, and we spend a lot of time on church business. I say "we" because they always try to include me in everything they do, so I don't feel so left out and alone.

But God, I miss you, Celie. I think about the tune you laid yourself down for me. I love you with all my heart,

Your sister,

134

Dearest Celie,

By now I am almost crazy. I think Albert told me the truth, and that he is not giving you my letters. The only person I can think of who could help us out is Pa, but I don't want him to know where I am.

I asked Samuel if he would visit you and Mr. ???, just to see how you are. But he says he can't risk putting himself between man and wife, especially when he don't know them. And I felt bad for having to ask him, he and Corrine have been so nice to me. But my heart is breaking. It is breaking because I can not find any work in this town, and I will have to leave. After I leave, what will happen to us? How will we ever know what is going on?

Corrine and Samuel and the children are part of a group of people called Missionaries, of the American and African Missionary Society.

They have ministered to the Indians out west and are ministering to the poor of this town. All in preparation for the work they feel they were born for, missionary work in Africa.

135 I dread parting from them because in the short time we've been together they've been Uke family to me. Like family might have been, I mean.

Write if you can. Here are some stamps.

love, Nettie

136 Next one, fat, dated two months later, say,

Dear Celie,

I wrote a letter to you almost every day on the ship coming to Africa. But by the time we docked I was so down, I tore them into little pieces and dropped them into the water. Albert is not going to let you have my letters and so what use is there in writing them. That's the way I felt when I tore them up and sent them to you on the waves. But now I feel different.

I remember one time you said your life made you feel so ashamed you couldn't even talk about it to God, you had to write it, bad as you thought your writing was. Well, now I know what you meant. And whether God will read letters or no, I know you will go on writing them; which is guidance enough for me. Anyway, when I don't write to you I feel as bad as I do when I don't pray, locked up in myself and choking on my own heart. I am so lonely, Celie.

The reason I am in Africa is because one of the missionaries that was supposed to go with Corrine and Samuel to help with the children and with setting up a

137 school suddenly married a man who was afraid to let her go, and refused to come to Africa with her. So there they were, all set to go, with a ticket suddenly available and no missionary to give it to. At the same time, I wasn't able to find a job anywhere around town. But I never dreamed of going to Africa! I never even thought about it as a real place, though Samuel and Corrine and even the children talked about it all the time.

Miss Beasley used to say it was a place overrun with savages who didn't wear clothes. Even Corrine and Samuel thought like this at times. But they know a lot more about it than Miss Beasley or any of our other teachers, and besides, they spoke of all the good things they could do for the downtrodden people from whom they sprang. People who need Christ and good medical advice.

One day I was in town with Corrine and we saw the mayor's wife and her maid. The mayor's wife was shopping?going hi and out of stores?and her maid was waiting for her on the street and taking the packages. I don't know if you have ever seen the mayor's wife. She looks like a wet cat. And there was her maid

looking like the very last person in the world you'd expect to see waiting on anybody, and hi particular not on anybody that looked like that.

I spoke. But just speaking to me seemed to make her embarrassed and she suddenly sort of erased herself. It was the strangest thing, Celie! One minute I was saying howdy to a living woman. The next minute nothing living was there. Only its shape.

All that night I thought about it. Then Samuel and Corrine told me what they'd heard about how she got to be the mayor's maid.

That she attacked the mayor,

138 and then the mayor and his wife took her from the prison to work in their home.

In the morning I started asking questions about Africa and started reading all the books Samuel and Corrine have on the subject.

Did you know there were great cities in Africa, greater than Milledgeville or even Atlanta, thousands of years ago? That the Egyptians who built the pyramids and enslaved the Israelites were colored? That Egypt is in Africa? That the Ethiopia we read about in the

Bible meant all of Africa?

We'll, I read and I read until I thought my eyes would fall out. I read where the Africans sold us because they loved money more than their own sisters and brothers. How we came to America in ships. How we were made to work.

I hadn't realized I was so ignorant, Celie. The little I knew about my own self wouldn't have filled a thimble! And to think Miss

Beasley always said I was the smartest child she ever taught! But one thing I do thank her for, for teaching me to learn for myself,

by reading and studying and writing a clear hand. And for keeping alive in me somehow the desire to know. So when Corrine and Samuel

asked me if I would come with them and help them build a school in the middle of Africa, I said yes. But only if they would teach

me everything they knew to make me useful as a missionary and someone they would not be ashamed to call a friend. They agreed to this condition, and my real education began at that time.

They have been as good as their word. And I study everything night and day.

Oh, Celie, there are colored people in the world who want

us to know! Want us to grow and see the light! They are not all mean like Pa and Albert, or beaten

139 down like ma was. Corrine and Samuel have a wonderful marriage. Their only sorrow in the beginning was that they could not have children. And then, they say, "God" sent them Olivia and Adam.

I wanted to say, "God" has sent you their sister and aunt, but I didn't. Yes, their children, sent by "God" are your children, Cetie. And they are being brought up in love, Christian charity and awareness of God. And now "God" has sent me to watch over them, to protect and cherish them. To lavish all the love I feel for you on them. It is a miracle, isn't it? And no doubt impossible for you to believe.

But on the other hand, if you can believe I am in Africa, and I am, you can believe anything.

Your sister, Nettie

140 The next letter after that one say,

DearCelie,

While we were in town Corrine bought doth to make me two sets of traveling outfits. One olive green and the other gray. Long gored skirts and suit jackets to be worn with white cotton blouses and lace-up boots. She also bought me a woman's boater with a checkered band.

Although I work for Corrine and Samuel and look after the children, I don't feel like a maid. I guess this is because they teach me, and I teach the children and there's no beginning or end to teaching and learning and working?it all runs together.

Saying good-bye to our church group was hard. But happy, too. Everyone has such high hopes for what can be done in Africa. Over the pulpit there is a saying: Ethiopia Shall Stretch forth Her Hands to God. Think what it means that Ethiopia is Africa! All the Ethiopians in the bible were colored. It had never occurred to me, though when you read the bible it is perfectly plain if you pay attention only to the words. It is the

141 pictures in the bible that fool you. The pictures that illustrate the words. All of the people are white and so you

just think

all the people from the bible were white too. But really whitewhite people lived somewhere else during those times. That's why the bibie says that Jesus Christ had hair like lamb's wool. Lamb's wool is not straight, Celie. It isn't even curly.

What can I tell you about New York?or even about the train that took us there! We had to ride in the sit-down section of the train, but Celie, there are beds on trams! And a restaurant! And toilets! The beds come down out of the walls, over the tops of the seats, and are called berths. Only white people can ride in the beds and use the restaurant. And they have different toilets from colored.

One white man on the platform in South Carolina asked us where we were going?we had got off the train to get some fresh air and to dust the grit and dust out of our clothes. When we said Africa he looked offended and tickled too. Niggers going to Africa, he said to his wife. Now I have seen everything.

When we got to New York we were tired and dirty. But so excited! Listen, Celie, New York is a beautifulcity. And colored own a whole section of it, called Harlem. There are colored

%

%

%

l

,

3

Đ à

(

+!

! " *
7

!

:

+

!

(

*

7

!

!

!

+

)

!

7

,

+

(

!

*

*

+

!

* +

! 5

= + ??;

??H= ! " +
! !

5 4 !

! & ! = =

"

= 6 +

- ! +! ! !
7 ! !) !
7

& !

6 F

7 ! ! 7 !

E

!

"

G

!

What humming? Harpo ast.

Listen, she say.

Us git real quiet and listen. Sure enough, us hear
iimmitimm.mnini-

What it coming from? ast Sofia. She git up and go look out
the door. Nothing there. Sound git louder. Ummmmmmmm.

Harpo go look out the window. Nothing out there, he say.
Humming say ummmmmmm.

I think I know what it is, I say.

They say, What?

I say, Everything.

Yeah, they say. That make a lots of sense.

228 Well, say Harpo at the funeral, here come the
amazons.

Her brothers there too, I whisper back. What you call them?

I don't know, he say. Them three always stood by they crazy
sisters. Nothing yet could get 'em to budge. I wonder what
they wives

have to put up with.

They all march stoutly in, shaking the church, and place Sofia mother in front the pulpit.

Folks crying and fanning and trying to keep a stray eye on they children, but they don't stare at Sofia and her sisters.

They act

like this the way it always done. I love folks.

Amen

229

The first thing I notice bout Mr. ??? is how clean he is. His skin shine. His hair brush back.

When he walk by the casket to review Sofia mother's body he stop, whisper something to her. Pat her shoulder. On his way back to

his seat he look over at me. I raise my fan and look off the other way.

Us went back to Harpo's after the funeral.

I know you won't believe this, Miss Celie, say Sofia, but Mr. ??? act like he trying to git religion.

Big a devil as he is, I say, trying is bout all he can do.

He don't go to church or nothing, but he not so quick to judge. He work real hard too.

What? I say. Mr. ??? work!

He sure do. He out there in the field from sunup to sundown. And clean that house just like a woman.

Even cook, say Harpo. And what more, wash the dishes when he finish.

Naw, I say. Yall must still be dope.

But he don't talk much or be round people, Sofia say.

Sound like craziness closing in to me, I say.

Just then, Mr. ??? walk up.

230 How you Celie, he say.

Fine, I say. I look in his eyes and I see he feeling scared of me. Well, good, I think. Let him feel what I felt.

Shug didn't come with you this time? he say.

Naw, I say. She have to work. Sorry bout Sofia mama though.

Anybody be sorry, he say. The woman that brought Sofia in the world brought something.

I don't say nothing.

They put her away nice, he say.

They sure did, I say.

And so many grandchildren, he say. Well. Twelve children, all busy multiplying. Just the family enough to fill the church.

Yeah, I say. That's the truth.

How long you here for? he say.

Maybe a week, I say.

You know Harpo and Sofia baby girl real sick? he say.

Naw, I didn't, I say. I point to Henrietta in the crowd. There she is over there, I say. She look just fine.

Yeah, she look fine, he say, but she got some kind of blood disease. Blood sort of clot up in her veins every once in a while, make her sick as a dog. I don't think she gon make it, he say.

Great goodness of life, I say.

Yeah, he say. It hard for Sofia. She still have to try to prop up that white gal she raise. Now her mama dead. Her health not that good either. Plus, Henrietta a hard row to hoe whether she sick or well.

Oh, she a little mess, I say. Then I think back to one of Nettie's letters bout the sicknesses children have where she at in Africa.

Seem like to me she mention something bout blood clots. I try to remember what she

231 say African peoples do, but I can't. Talking to Mr. ??? such a surprise I can't think of nothing. Not even nothing else to say.

Mr. ??? stand waiting for me to say something, looking off up to his house. Finally he say, Good evening, and walk away.

Sofia say after I left, Mr. ??? live like a pig. Shut up hi the house so much it stunk. Wouldn't let nobody in until finally Harpo force his way in. Clean the house, got food. Give his daddy a bath. Mr. ??? too weak to fight back. Plus, too far gone to

care.

He couldn't sleep, she say. At night he thought he heard bats outside the door. Other things rattling in the chimney. But the worse part was having to listen to his own heart. It did pretty well as long as there was daylight, but soon as night come, it went crazy. Beating so loud it shook the room. Sound like drums.

Harpo went up there plenty nights to steep with him, say Sofia. Mr. ??? would be all cram up in a comer of the bed. Eyes clamp on different pieces of furniture, see if they move hi his direction. You know how little he is, say Sofia. And how big and stout Harpo is. Well, one night I walked up to tell Harpo something?and the two of them was just laying there on the bed fast asleep. Harpo holding his daddy hi his arms.

After that, I start to feel again for Harpo, Sofia say. And pretty soon us start work on our new house. She laugh. But did I say it been easy? If I did, God would make me cut my own switch.

What make bun pull through? I ast

Oh, she say, Harpo made him send you the rest of your sister's letters. Right after that he start to fan-prove. You know meanness kill, she say.

Amen

232

By now I expected to be home. Looking into your face and saying Celie, is it really you? I try to picture what the years have brought you in the way of weight and wrinkles? or how you fix your hair. From a skinny, hard little something I've become quite plump. And some of my hair is gray!

But Samuel tells me he loves me plump and graying.

Does this surprise you?

We were married last Fall in England where we tried to get relief for the Olinka from the churches and the Missionary Society.

As long as they could, the Olinka ignored the road and the white builders who came. But eventually they had to notice them because one of the first things the builders did was to tell the people

they must be moved elsewhere. The builders wanted the village site as headquarters for the rubber plantation. It is the only spot for miles that has a steady supply of fresh water.

Protesting and driven, the Olinka, along with their missionaries, were placed on a barren stretch of land that has no water at all for six months of the year.

233 During that time, they must buy water from the planters. During the rainy season there is a river and they are trying to dig holes in the nearby rocks to make cisterns. So far they collect water in discarded oil drums, which the builders brought.

But the most horrible thing to happen had to do with the roofleaf, which, as I must have written you, the people worship as a God and which they use to cover their huts. Well, on this barren strip of ground the planters erected workers' barracks. One for men and one for women and children. But, because the Olinka swore they would never live in a dwelling not covered by their God, Roofleaf, the builders left these barracks uncovered. Then they proceeded to plow under the Olinka village and everything else for miles

around. Including every last stalk of roofleaf.

After nearly unbearable weeks in the hot sun, we were awakened one morning by the sound of a large truck pulling into the compound.

It was loaded with sheets of corrugated tin.

Celie, we had to pay for the tin. Which exhausted what meager savings the Olinka had, and nearly wiped out the money Samuel and I had managed to put by for the education of the children once we return home. Which we have planned to do each year since Corrine died, only to find ourselves more and more involved in the Olinka's problems. Nothing could be uglier than corrugated tin, Celie.

And as they struggled to put up roofs of this cold, hard, glittery, ugly metal the women raised a deafening ululation of sorrow that echoed off the cavern walls for miles around. It was on this day that the Olinka acknowledged at least temporary defeat.

Though the Olinka no longer ask anything of us, beyond teaching their children?because they can see

234 how powerless we and our Qod are?Samuel and I decided we must do something about this latest outrage, even as many of the people

to whom we felt close ran away to join the mbelesor forest people, who live deep in the jungle, refusing to work for whites or be ruled by them.

So off we went, with the children, to England.

It was an incredible voyage, Celie, not only because we had almost forgot about the rest of the world, and such things as ships and coal fires and streetlights and oatmeal, but because on the ship with us was the white woman missionary whom we'd heard about years ago. She was now retired from missionary work and going back to England to live. She was traveling with a little African boy whom she introduced as her grandchild!

Of course it was impossible to ignore the presence of an aging white woman accompanied by a small black child. The ship was in a tither. Each day she and the child walked about the deck alone, groups of white people falling into silence as they passed.

She is a jaunty, stringy, blue-eyed woman, with hair the color of silver and dry grass. A short chin, and when she speaks she seems to be gargling.

I'm pushing on for sixty-five, she told us, when we found ourselves sharing a table for dinner one night. Been in the tropics most of my life. But, she said, a big war. is coming. Bigger than the one they were starting when I left. It'll go hard on England, but I expect we'll survive. I missed the other war, she said. I mean to be present for this one.

Samuel and I had never really thought about war.

Why, she said, the signs are all over Africa. India too, I expect. First there's a road built to where you keep your goods. Then your trees are hauled off to make ships and captain's furniture. Then your land is

235 planted with something you can't eat. Then you're forced to work it. That's happening all over Africa, she said. Burma too, I expect.

But Harold here and I decided to get out. Didn't we Harry? she said, giving the little boy a biscuit. The child said nothing, just chewed his biscuit thoughtfully. Adam and Olivia soon took him off to explore the lifeboats.

Dons' story?the woman's name is Doris Baines?is an interesting one. But I won't bore you with it as we eventually became bored.

She was born to great wealth in England. Her father was Lord Somebody or Other. They were forever giving or attending parties that were no fun. Besides, she wanted to write books. Her family was against it. Totally. They hoped she'd marry.

Me marry/ she hooted. (Really, she has the oddest ideas.)

They did everything to convince me, she said. You can't imagine. I never saw so many milkfed young men in all my life as when I was nineteen and twenty. Each one more boring than the last. Can anything be more boring than an upper-class Englishman? she said. They remind one of bloody mushrooms.

Well, she rattled on, through endless dinners, because the captain assigned us permanently to the same table. It seems the notion of becoming a missionary struck her one evening she was getting ready for yet another tedious date, and lay in the tub thinking a convent would be better than the castle in which she lived. She could think, she could write. She could be her own boss. But

wait. As a nun she would not be her own boss. God would be boss. The virgin mother. The mother superior. Etc.Etc. Ah, but a missionary! Far off in the wilds of India, alone! It,seemed like bliss.

236 And so she cultivated a pious interest in heathens. Fooled her parents. Fooled the Missionary Society, who were so taken with Jier quick command of languages they sent her to Africa (worst luck!) where she began writing novels about everything under the sun.

My pen name is Jared Hunt, she said. In England and even in America, I'm a run-away success. Rich, famous. An eccentric recluse who spends most of his time shooting wild game.

Well now, she continued, several evenings later, you don't think I paid much attention to the heathen? I saw nothing wrong with them as they were. And they seemed to like mewell enough. I was actually able to help them a good deal. I was a writer, after all, and I wrote reams of paper in their behalf: about their culture, their behavior, their needs, that sort of thing. You'd be surprised how good writing matters when you're going after money. I learned to speak their language faultlessly, and to

throw

off the missionary snoopers back at headquarters I wrote entire reports in it. I tapped the family vaults for close on to a million

pounds before I got anything from the missionary societies or rich old family friends. I built a hospital, a grammar school. A

college. A swimming pool?the one luxury I permitted myself, since swimming in the river one is subject to attack by leeches.

You wouldn't believe the peace! she said, at breakfast, halfway to England. Within a year everything as far as me and the heathen

were concerned ran like clockwork. I told them right off that their souls were no concern of mine, that I wanted to write books

and not be disturbed. For this pleasure I was prepared to pay. Rather handsomely.

In a burst of appreciation one day, I'm afraid the chief?not knowing what else to do, no doubt?

237 presented me with a couple of wives. I don't think it was commonly believed I was a woman. There seemed some question in their

minds just what I was. Anyhow. I educated the two young girls as best I could. Sent them to England, of course, to learn medicine

and agriculture. Welcomed them home when they returned, gave them away in marriage to two young chaps who were always about the place, and began the happiest period of my life as the grandmother of their children. I must say, she beamed, I've turned out to be fab-o as a grandmama. I learned it from the Akweans. They never spank their children. Never lock them away in another part of the hut. They do a bit of bloody cutting around puberty. But Harry's mother the doctor is going to change all that. Isn't she Harold?

Anyway, she said. When I get to England I'll put a stop to their bloody encroachments. I'll tell them what to do with their bloody road and their bloody rubber plantations and their bloody sunburned but still bloody boring English planters and engineers. I am a very wealthy woman, and I own the village of Akwee.

We listened to most of this in more or less respectful silence. The children were very taken with young Harold, though he never said a word in our presence. He seemed fond of his grandmother and used to her, but her verbosity produced in him a kind of soberly observant speechlessness.

He's quite different with us though, said Adam, who is really a great lover of children, and could get through to any child given

half an hour. Adam makes jokes, he sings, he clowns and knows games. And he has the sunniest smile, most of the time?and great healthy African teeth.

As I write about his sunny smile I realize he's been unusually glum during this trip. Interested and excited,

238 but not really sunny,except when he's with young Harold.

I will have to ask Olivia what's wrong. She is thrilled at the thought of going back to England. Her mother used to tell her about

the thatched cottages of the English and how they reminded her of the roofleaf huts of the Olinka. They are square, though, she'd say. More like our church and school than like our homes, which Olivia thought very strange.

When we reached England, Samuel and I presented the Olinka's grievances to the bishop of the English branch of our church, a youngish man wearing spectacles who sat thumbing through a stack of Samuel's yearly reports. Instead of even mentioning the

Olinka the bishop wanted to know how long it had been since Corrine's death, and why, as soon as she died, I had not returned to America.

I really did not understand what he was driving at.

Appearances, Miss ???, he said. Appearances. What must the natives think?

About what? I asked.

Come, come, he said.

We behave as brother and sister to each other, said Samuel.

The bishop smirked. Yes, he did.

I felt my face go hot.

Well, there was more of this, but why burden you with it? You know what some people are, and the bishop was one of them. Samuel and I left without even a word about the Olinka's problems.

Samuel was so angry, I was frightened. He said the only thing for us to do, if we wanted to remain in Africa, was join the mbelesand

encourage all the Olinka to do the same.

But suppose they do not want to go? I asked. Many 238

239 of them are too old to move back into the forest. Many are sick. The women have small babies. And then there are the youngsters who want bicycles and British clothes. Mirrors and shiny cooking pots. They want to work for the white people in order to have these things.

Things! he said, in disgust. Bloody things!

Well, we have a month here anyway, I said, let's make the most of it.

Because we had spent so much of our money on tin roofs and the voyage over, it had to be a poor man's month in England. But it was a very good time for us. We began to feel ourselves a family, without Corrine. And people meeting us on the street never failed (if they spoke to us at all) to express the sentiment that the children looked just like the two of us. The children began to accept this as natural, and began going out to view the sights that interested them, alone. Leaving their father and me to our quieter, more sedate pleasures, one of which was simple

conversation.

Samuel, of course, was born in the North, in New York, and grew up and was educated there. He met Corrine through his aunt who had been a missionary, along with Corrine's aunt, in the Belgian Congo. Samuel frequently accompanied his aunt Althea to Atlanta, where Corrine's aunt Theodosia lived.

These two ladies had been through marvelous things together, said Samuel, laughing. They'd been attacked by lions, stampeded by elephants, flooded out by rains, made war on by "natives," The tales they told were simply incredible. There they sat on a heavily antimacassar horsehair sofa, two prim and proper ladies in ruffles and lace, telling these stupendous stories over tea.

Corrine and I as teenagers used to attempt to stylize these tales into comics. We called them such things as

240 THREE MONTHS IN A HAMMOCK, Or SORE HIPS OF THE DARK CONTINENT. Or, A MAP OF AFRICA: A GUIDE TO NATIVE INDIFFERENCE TO THE HOLY WORD.

We made fun of them, but we were riveted on their

adventures, and on the ladies' telling of them. They were so staid looking. So proper. You really couldn't imagine them actually building? with their own hands ? a school in the bush. Or battling reptiles. Or unfriendly Africans who thought, since they were wearing dresses with things that looked like wings behind, they should be able to fly.

Bush? Corrine would snicker to me or me to her. And just the sound of the word would send us off into quiet hysteria, while we calmly sipped our tea. Because of course they didn't realize they were being funny, and to us they were, very. And of course the prevailing popular view of Africans at that time contributed to our feeling of amusement. Not only were Africans savages, they were bumbling, inept savages, rather like their bumbling, inept brethren at home. But we carefully, not to say studiously, avoided this very apparent connection.

Corrine's mother was a dedicated housewife and mother who disliked her more adventurous sister. But she never prevented Corrine from visiting. And when Corrine was old enough, she sent her to Spelman Seminary where Aunt Theodosia had gone.

This was a very interesting place. It was started by two white missionaries from New England who used to wear identical dresses. Started in a church basement, it soon moved up to Army barracks. Eventually these two ladies were able to get large sums of money from some of the richest men in America, and so the place grew. Buildings, trees. Girls were taught everything: Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, sewing, cleaning, cooking.

241 But more than anything else, they were taught to serve God and the colored community. Their official motto

was OUR WHOLE SCHOOL FOR CHRIST. But I always

thought their unofficial motto should have been our community covers the world, because no sooner had a young woman got through Spelman Seminary than she began to put her hand to whatever work she could do for her people, anywhere in the world. It was truly astonishing. These very polite and proper young women, some of them never having set foot outside their own small country towns, except to come to the Seminary, thought nothing of packing up for India, Africa, the Orient. Or for Philadelphia or New York.

Sixty years or so before the founding of the school, the Cherokee Indians who lived in Georgia were forced to leave their homes and walk, through the snow, to resettlement camps in Oklahoma. A third of them died on the way. But many of them refused to leave Georgia. They hid out as colored people and eventually blended with us. Many of these mixed-race people were at Spelman. Some remembered who they actually were, but most did not. If they thought about it at aU (and it became harder to think about Indians because there were none around) they thought they were yellow or reddish brown and wavy haired because of white ancestors, not Indian.

Even Corrine thought this, he said. And yet, I always felt her Indianness. She was so quiet. So reflective. And she could erase herself, her spirit, with a swiftness that truly startled, when she knew the people around her could not respect it.

It did not seem hard for Samuel to talk about Corrine while we were in England. It wasn't hard for me to listen.

It all seems so improbable, he said. Here I am, an 241

242 aging man whose dreams of helping people have been just that, dreams. How Corrine and I as children would have laughed at ourselves.
twenty years a fool of the

WEST, OR MOUTH AND ROOFLEAF DISEASE: A TREATISE ON

futility in the tropics, Etc. Etc. We failed so utterly, he said. We became as comical as Althea and Theo-dosia. I think her awareness of this fueled Corrine's sickness. She was far more intuitive than I. Her gift for understanding people much greater. She used to say the Olinka resented us, but I wouldn't see it. But they do, you know.

No, I said, it isn't resentment, exactly. It really is indifference. Sometimes I feel our position is like that of flies on an elephant's hide.

I remember once, before Corrine and I were married, Samuel continued, Aunt Theodosia had one of her at-homes. She had them every Thursday. She'd invited a lot of "serious young people" as she called them, and one of them was a young Harvard scholar named Edward. DuBoyce was his last name, I think. Anyhow, Aunt Theodosia was going on about her African adventures,

leading up to the time King Leopold of Belgium presented her with a medal. Well Edward, or perhaps his name was Bill, was a very impatient sort. You saw it in his eyes, you could see it in the way he moved his body. He was never still. As Aunt Theodosia got closer to the part about her surprise and joy over receiving this medal? which validated her service as an exemplary missionary in the King's colony? DuBoyce's foot began to pat the floor rapidly and uncontrollably. Corrine and I looked at each other in alarm. Clearly this man had heard this tale before and was not prepared to endure it a second time.

Madame, he said, when Aunt Theodosia finished her 243 story and flashed her famous medal around the room, do you realize King Leopold cut the hands off workers who, in the opinion of his plantation overseers, did not fulfill their rubber quota? Rather than cherish that medal, Madame, you should regard it as a symbol of your unwitting complicity with this despot who worked to death and brutalized and eventually exterminated thousands and thousands of African peoples.

Well, said Samuel, silence struck the gathering like a blight. Poor Aunt Theodosia! There's something in all of us that wants a medal for what we have done. That wants to be appreciated. And Africans certainly don't deal in medals. They hardly seem to care whether missionaries exist.

Don't be bitter, I said.

How can I not? he said.

The Africans never asked us to come, you know. There's no use blaming them if we feel unwelcome.

It's worse than unwelcome, said Samuel. The Africans don't even see us. They don't even recognize us as the brothers and sisters they sold.

Oh, Samuel, I said. Don't.

But you know, he had started to cry. Oh Nettie, he said. That's the heart of it, don't you see. We love them. We try every way we can to show that love. But they reject us. They never even listen to how we've suffered. And if they listen they say stupid things. Why don't you speak our language? they ask. Why

can't you remember the old ways? Why aren't you happy in America, if everyone there drives motorcars?

Celie, it seemed as good a time as any to put my arms around him. Which I did. And words long buried in my heart crept to my lips.

I stroked his dear head and face and I called him darling and dear. And I'm afraid, dear,

244 dear Celie, that concern and passion soon ran away with us.

I hope when you receive this news of your sister's forward behavior you will not be shocked or inclined to judge me harshly. Especially when I tell you what a total joy it was. I was transported by ecstasy in Samuel's arms.

You may have guessed that I loved him all along; but I did not know it. Oh, I loved him as a brother and respected him as a friend,

but Celie, I love him bodily, as a man! I love his walk, his size, his shape, his smell, the kinkiness of his hah-. I love the

very texture of his palms. The pink of his inner lip. I love his big nose. I love his brows. I love his feet. And I love his dear eyes in which the vulnerability and beauty of his soul can be plainly read.

The children saw the change hit us immediately. I'm afraid, my dear, we were radiant.

We love each other dearly, Samuel told them, with his arm around me. We intend to marry.

But before we do, I said, I must tell you something about my life and about Corrine and about someone else. And it was then I told them about you, Celie. And about their mother Corrine's love of them. And about being their aunt.

But where is this other woman, your sister? asked Olivia.

I explained your marriage to Mr. _____ as best I could.

Adam was instantly alarmed. He is a very sensitive soul who hears what isn't said as clearly as what is.

We will go back to America soon, said Samuel to reassure him, and see about her.

The children stood up with us in a simple church ceremony in London. And it was that night, after the

245 wedding dinner, when we were all getting ready for bed, that Olivia told me what has been troubling her brother. He is missing

Tashi.

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

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

It is a way the Olinka can show they still have their own ways, said Olivia, even though the white man has taken everything else.

lashi didn't want to do it, but to make her people feel better, she's resigned. She's going to have the female initiation ceremony too, she said.

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

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

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

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

I see, I said.

She and Adam had an awful fight. Not like any they've had before. He wasn't teasing her or chasing her around the village or trying to tie roofleaf twigs in her hair. He was mad enough to strike her.

Well, it's a good thing he didn't, I said. Tashi would have jammed his head through her rug loom.

I'll be glad when we get back home, said Olivia. Adam isn't the only one who misses Tashi.

She kissed me and her father good night. Adam soon came in to do the same.

246 Mama Nettie, he said, sitting on the bed next to me, how do you know when you really love someone?

Sometimes you don't know, I said.

He is a beautiful young man, Celie. Tall and broad-

shouldered, with a deep, thoughtful voice. Did I tell you he writes verses?

And loves to sing? He's a son to make you proud.

Your loving sister,

Nettie P.S. Your brother Samuel sends his love as well.

247

When we returned home everyone seemed happy to see us. When we told them our appeal to the church and the Missionary Society felled, they were disappointed. They literally wiped the smiles off their faces along with the sweat, and returned, dejected, to then*

barracks. We went on to our building, a combination, church, house and school, and began to unpack our things.

The children ... I realize I shouldn't call them children, they're grown, went in search of Tashi; an hour later they returned dumbfounded. They discovered no sign of her. Catherine, her mother, is planting rubber trees some distance from the compound, they were told. But no one had seen Tashi all day.

Olivia was very disappointed. Adam was trying to appear unconcerned, but I noticed he was absentmindedly biting the skin around

his nails.

After two days it became clear that Tashi was deliberately biding. Her friends said while we were away she'd undergone both the facial scarification ceremony and the rite of female initiation. Adam went quite gray at

248 this news. Olivia merely stricken and more concerned than ever to find her.

It was not until Sunday that we saw Tashi. She'd lost a considerable amount of weight, and seemed listless, dull-eyed and tired.

Her face was still swollen from half a dozen small, neat incisions high on each cheek. When she put out her hand to Adam he refused to take it. He just looked at her scars, turned on his heel and left.

She and Olivia hugged. But it was a quiet, heavy embrace. Nothing like the boisterous, giggling behavior I expect from them.

Tashi is, unfortunately, ashamed of these scars on her face, and now hardly ever raises her head. They must be painful too because they look irritated and red.

But this is what the villagers are doing to the young women and even the men. Carving their identification as a people into their children's faces. But the children think of scarification as backward, something from their grandparents' generation, and often resist. So the carving is done by force, under the most appalling conditions. We provide antiseptics and cotton and a place for the children to cry and nurse their wounds.

Each day Adam presses us to leave for home. He can no longer bear living as we do. There aren't even any trees near us, just giant boulders and smaller rocks. And more and more of his companions are running away. The real reason, of course, is he can no longer bear his conflicting feelings about Tashi, who is beginning, I think, to appreciate the magnitude of her mistake.

Samuel and I are truly happy, Celie. And so grateful to God that we are! We still keep a school for the littlest children; those eight and over are already workers in the fields. In order to pay rent for the barracks, taxes on the land, and to buy water and wood and food,

249 everyone must work. So, we teach the young ones,

babysit the babies, look after the old and sick, and attend birthing mothers.

Our days are fuller than ever, our sojourn in England already a dream. But all things look brighter because I have a loving soul to share them with.

Your sister,

Nettie

250

The man us knowed as Pa is dead.

How come you still call him Pa? Shug ast me the other day.

But, too late to call him Alphonso. I never even remember Ma calling him by his name. She always said, Your Pa. I reckon to make us believe it better. Anyhow, his little wife, Daisy, call me up on the telephone in the middle of the night.

Miss Celie, she say, I got bad news. Alphonso dead.

Who? I ast.

Alphonso, she say. Your stepdaddy.

How he die? I ast. I think of killing, being hit by a truck, struck by lightning, lingering disease. But she say, Naw, he died in his sleep. Well, not quite in his sleep, she say. Us was spending a little time in bed together, you know, before us drop off.

Well, I say, you have my sympathy.

Yes ma'am, she say, and I thought I had this house 250 251 too, but look like it belong to your sister Nettie and you.

Say what? I ast.

Your stepdaddy been dead over a week, she say. When us went to town to hear the will read yesterday, you could have knock me over with a feather. Your real daddy owned the land and the house and the store. He left it to your mama. When your mama died, it passed on to you and your sister Nettie. I don't know why Alphonso never told you that.

Well, I say, anything coming from him, I don't want it.

I hear Daisy suck in her breath. How about your sister Nettie, she say. You think she feel the same way?

I wake up a little bit then. By the time Shug roll over and ast me who it is, I'm beginning to see the light.

Don't be a fool, Shug say, nudging me with her foot. You got your own house now. Your daddy and mama left it for you. That dog of a stepdaddy just a bad odor passing through.

But I never had no house, I say. Just to think about having my own house enough to scare me. Plus, this house I'm gitting is bigger than Shug's, got more land around it. And, it come with a store.

My God, I say to Shug. Me and Nettie own a drygood store. What us gon sell?

How bout pants? she say.

So us bung up the phone and rush down home again to look at the property.

About a mile before us got to town us come up on the entrance to the colored cemetery. Shug was sound asleep, but something told me I ought to drive in. Pretty soon I see something look like a short skyscraper and I stop the car and go up to it. Sure enough it's got

252 Alphonso's name on it. Got a lot of other stuff on it too. Member of this and that. Leading businessman and fanner. Upright

husband and father. Kind to the poor and helpless. He been dead two weeks but fresh flowers still blooming on his grave.

Shug git out the car and come stand by me.

Finally she yawn loud and stretch herself. The son of a bitch still dead, she say.

Daisy try to act like she glad to see us, but she not: She got two children and look pregnant with one more. But she got nice clothes, a- car, and Alphonso left her all his money. Plus, I think she manage to set her folks up while she live with him.

She say, Celie, the old house you remember was torn down so Alphonso could build this one. He got an Atlanta architect to design it, and these tiles come all the way from New York. We was standing in the kitchen at the time. But he put tiles everywhere. Kitchen, toilet, back porch. All around the fireplaces in back and front parlour. But this the house go with the place, right on, she say.

Of course I did take the furniture, because Alphonso bought

it special for me.

Fine with me, I say. I can't get over having a house. Soon as Daisy leave me with the keys I run from one room to another like

I'm crazy. Look at this, I say to Shug. Look at that! She look, she grin. She hug me whenever she git the chance and I stand still.

You doin' all right, Miss Celie, she say. God know where you live.

Then she took some cedar sticks out of her bag and lit them and gave one of them to me. Us started at the very top of the house in the attic, and us smoked it all

253 the way down to the basement, chasing out all the evil and making a place for good.

Oh, Nettie, us have a house! A house big enough for us and our children, for your husband and Shug. Now you can come home cause you have a home to come to!

Your loving sister,

Celie

My heart broke.

Shug love somebody else.

Maybe if I had stayed in Memphis last summer it never would have happen. But I spent the summer fixing up the house. I thought if you come anytime soon, I want it to be ready. And it is real pretty, now, and comfortable. And I found me a nice lady to live in it and look after it. Then I come home to Shug.

Miss Celie, she say, how would you like some Chinese food to celebrate your coming home?

I loves Chinese food. So off us go to the restaurant. I'm so excited about being home again I dont even notice how nervous Shug is. She a big graceful woman most of the time, even when she mad. But I notice she can't git her chopsticks to work right. She knock over her glass of water. Somehow or nother her eggroll come unravel.

But I think she just so glad to see me. So I preen and pose for her and stuff myself with wonton soup and fried rice.

Finally the fortune cookies come. I love fortune 254

255 cookies. They so cute. And I read my fortune right away. It say, because you are who you are, the future look happy and bright.

I laugh. Pass it on to Shug. She look at it and smile. I feel at peace with the world.

Shug pull her slip of paper out real slow, like she scared of what might be on it.

Well? I say, watching her read it. What it say?

She look down at it, look up at me. Say, It say I got the hots for a boy of nineteen.

Let me see, I say, laughing. And I read it out loud. A burnt finger remember the fire, it say.

I'm trying to tell you, Shug say.

Trying to tell me what? I'm so dense it still don't penetrate,
For one thing, it been a long time since I thought about boys
and
I ain't never thought about men.

Last year, say Shug, I hired a new man to work in the band.
I almost didn't because he cant play nothing but flute. And

who ever
heard of blues flute? I hadn't. The very notion sound crazy.
But it was just my luck that blues flute is the one thing blues
music
been lacking and the minute I heard Germaine play I knew
this for a fact.

Germaine? I ast.

Yeah, she say, Germaine. I don't know who gave him that
flittish name, but it suit him.

Then she start right in to rave about this boy. Like all his
good points have to be stuff I'm dying to hear.

Oh, she say. He little. He cute. Got nice buns. You know,
real bantu. She so used to telling me everything she rattle
on and on,
gitting more excited and in-love looking by the minute. By
the time she finish talking about his neat little dancing feet
and
git back up to his honey brown curly hair, I feel like shit.

Hold it, I say. Shug, you killing me. 255

256 She halt in mid-praise. Her eyes fill with tears and her
face crumple. Oh God, Celie, she say. I'm sorry. I just been
dying
to tell somebody, and you the somebody I usually tell.

Well, I say, if words could kill, I'd be in the ambulance.

She put her face in her hands and start to cry. Celie, she say, through her fingers, I still love you.

But I just sit there and watch her. Seem like all my wonton soup turn to ice.

Why you so upset? she ast, when us got back home. You never seem to git upset bout Grady. And he was my husband.

Grady never bring no sparkle to your eye, I think. But I don't say nothing, I'm too far away.

Course, she say, Grady so dull, Jesus. And when you finish talking bout women and reefer you finish Grady. But still, she say.

I don't say nothing.

She try to laugh. I was so glad he lit out after Mary Agnes I didn't know what to do, she say. I don't know who tried to teach him what to do in the bedroom, but it must have been a furniture salesman.

I don't say nothing. Stillness, coolness. Nothingness.

Coming fast.

You notice when they left here together going to Panama I didn't shed a tear? But now really, she say, what they gon look like in Panama?

Poor Mary Agnes, I think. How could anybody guess old dull Grady would end up running a reefer plantation in Panama?

Course they making boocoos of money, say Shug. And Mary Agnes outdress everybody down there, the way she tell it in her letters.

And at least Grady let her sing. What little snatches of her songs she can still

257 remember. But really, she say, Panama? Where is it at, anyhow? Is it down there round Cuba? Us ought to go to Cuba, Miss Celie, you know? Lots of gambling there and good times. A lots of colored folks look like Mary Agnes. Some real black, like us. All in the same family though. Try to pass for white, somebody mention your

I don't say nothing. I pray to die, just so I don't never have to speak.

All right, say Shug. It started when you was down home. I

missed you, Celie. And you know I'm a high natured woman.

I went and got a piece of paper that I was using for cutting patterns. I wrote her a note. It said, Shut up.

But Celie, she say. I have to make you understand. Look, she say. I'm gitting old. I'm fat. Nobody think I'm good looking no more, but you. Or so I thought. He's nineteen. A baby. How long can it last?

He's a man. I write on the paper.

Yeah, she say. He is. And I know how you feel about men. But I don't feel that way. I would never be fool enough to take any of them seriously, she say, but some mens can be a lots of fun.

Spare me, I write.

Celie, she say. All I ast is six months. Just six months to have my last fling. I got to have it Celie. I'm too weak a woman not to. But if you just give me six months, Celie, I will try to make our hie together like it

Not hardly. I write.

Celie, she say, Do you love me? She down on her knees by now, tears falling all over the place. My heart hurt so much I can't believe

it. How can it keep beating, feeling like this? But I'm a woman. I love you, I say. Whatever happen, whatever you do, I love you.

258 She whimper a little, lean her head against my chair. Thank you, she say.

But I can't stay here, I say.

But Celie, she say, how can you leave me? You're my friend. I love this child and I'm scared to death. He's a third of my age.

A third of my size. Even a third of my color. She try to laugh again. You know he gon hurt me worse than I'm hurting you. Don't leave me, please.

Just then the door bell ring. Shug wiped her face and went to answer it, saw who it was and kept on out the door. Soon I heard a car drive off. I went on up to bed. But sleep remain a stranger to this night. Pray for me,

Your sister, Celie

The only thing keep me alive is watching Henrietta fight for her life. And boy can she fight. Every time she have an attack she scream enough to wake the dead. Us do what you say the peoples do in Africa. Us feed her yams every single day. Just our luck she hate yams and she not too polite to let us know. Everybody for miles around try to come up with yam dishes that don't taste like yams. Us git plates of yam eggs, yam chitlins, yam goat. And soup. My God, folks be making soup out of everything but shoe leather trying to kill off the yam taste. But Henrietta claim she still taste it, and is likely to throw whatever it is out the window. Us tell her in a little while she'll have three months not to eat yams, but she say that day don't seem like it ever want to come. Meanwhile, her joints all swole, she hot enough to burn, she say her head feel like its full of little white men with hammers.

Sometime I meet up with Mr. ??? visiting Henrietta. He dream up his own little sneaky recipes. For instance, one time he hid the yams in peanut butter. Us sit by the fire with Harpo and Sofia and play

260 a hand or two of bid whist, while Suzie Q and Henrietta listen to the radio. Sometime he drive me home in his car. He still live in the same little house. He been there so long, it look just like him. Two straight chairs always on the porch, turned against the wall. Porch railings with flower cans on them. He keep it painted now though. Fresh and white. And guess what he collect just cause he like them? He collect shells. All kinds of shells. Tarrapin, snail and all kinds of shells from the sea.

Matter of fact, that's how he got me up to the house again. He was telling Sofia bout some new shell he had that made a loud sea sound when you put it to your ear. Us went up to see it. It was big and heavy and speckled like a chicken and sure enough, seem like you could hear the waves or something crashing against your ear. None of us ever seen the ocean, but Mr. ??? learn about it from books. He order shells from books too, and they all over the place.

He don't say that much about them while you looking, but he hold each one like it just arrive.

Shug one time had a seashell, he say. Long time ago, when us first met. Big white thing look like a fan. She still

love shells?
he ast.

Naw, I say. She love elephants now.

He wait a little while, put all the shells back in place. Then
he ast me, You like any special thing?

I love birds, I say.

You know, he say, you use to remind me of a bird. Way
back when you first come to live with me. You was so
skinny, Lord, he say.
And the least little thing happen, you looked about to fly
away.

You saw that, I say.

I saw it, he said, just too big a fool to let myself care.

Well, I say, us lived through it. 260

261 We still man and wife, you know, he say.

Naw, I say, we never was.

You know, he say, you look real good since you been up in
Memphis.

Yeah, I say, Shug take good care of me.

How you make your living up there? he say.

Making pants, I say.

He say, I notice everybody in the family just about wearing pants you made. But you mean you turned it into a business?

That's right, I say. But I really started it right here in your house to keep from killing you.

He look down at the floor.

Shug help me make the first pair I ever did, I say. And then, like a fool, I start to cry.

He say, Celie, tell me the truth. You don't like me cause I'm a man?

I blow my nose. Take off they pants, I say, and men look like frogs to me. No matter how you kiss 'em, as far as I'm concern, frogs is what they stay.

I see, he say.

By the time I got back home I was feeling so bad I couldn't

do nothing but sleep. I tried to work on some new pants I'm trying to make for pregnant women, but just the thought of anybody girting pregnant make me want to cry.

Your sister,

Celie

262

The only piece of mail Mr. ??? ever put directly in my hand is a telegram that come from the United States Department of Defense.

It say the ship you and the children and your husband left Africa in was sunk by German mines off the coast of someplace called Gi-bralta. They think you all drowned. Plus, the same day, all the letters I wrote to you over the years come back unopen.

I sit here in this big house by myself trying to sew, but what good is sewing gon do? What good is anything? Being alive begin to seem like a awful strain.

Your sister,

Celie

Tashi and her mother have run away. They have gone to join the mbeles. Samuel and the children and I were discussing it just yesterday, and we realized we do not even know for sure the mbeles exist. All we know is that they are said to live deep in the forest, that they welcome runaways, and that they harass the white man's plantations and plan his destruction? or at least for his removal from their continent.

Adam and Olivia are heartbroken because they love Tashi and miss her, and because no one who has gone to join the mbeles ever returned.

We try to keep them busy around the compound and because there is so much sickness from malaria this season there is plenty for them to do. In plowing under the Olinka's yam crop and substituting canned and powdered goods, the planters destroyed what makes them resistant to malaria. Of course they did not know this, they only wanted to take the land for rubber, but the Olinka have been eating yams to prevent malaria and to control chronic blood disease for thousands and thousands of years. Left without a

sufficient supply of yams, the people?

264 what's left of them?are sickening and dying at an alarming rate.

To tell you the truth, I fear for our own health, and especially for the children. But Samuel feels we will probably be all right, having had bouts with malaria during the first years we were here.

And how are you, dearest sister? Nearly thirty years have passed without a word between us. For all I know you may be dead. As

the time nears for us to come home, Adam and Olivia ask endless questions about you, few of which I can answer.

Sometimes I tell

them Tashi reminds me of you. And, because there is no one finer to them than lashi, they glow with delight. But will you still

have Tashi's honest and open spirit, I wonder, when we see you again? Or will years of childbearing and abuse from Mr. ??? have

destroyed it? These are thoughts I don't pursue with the children, only with my beloved companion, Samuel, who advises me not

to worry, to trust in God, and to have faith in the sturdiness of my sister's soul.

God is different to us now, after all these years in Africa. More spirit than ever before, and more internal. Most people think he has to look like something or someone? a roofoaf or Christ? but we don't. And not being tied to what God looks like, frees us.

When we return to America we must have long talks about this, Celie. And perhaps Samuel and I will found a new church in our community that has no idols in it whatsoever, in which each person's spirit is encouraged to seek God directly, his belief that this is possible strengthened by us ais people who also believe.

There is little to do here for entertainment, as you can imagine. We read the papers and magazines from home, play any number of African games with the children. Rehearse the African children in parts of

265 Shakespeare's plays? Adam was always very good as Hamlet giving his To Be or Not to Be soliloquy. Corrine had firm notions of what the children should be taught and saw to it that every good work advertised in the papers became part of their library. They know many things, and I think will not find American society such a shock, except for the hatred of black people, which

is also

very clear in all the news. But I worry about then* very African independence of opinion and outspokenness, also extreme self-centeredness.

And we will be poor, Celie, and it will be years no doubt before we even own a home. How will they manage the hostility towards

them, having grown up here? When I think of them hi America I see them as much younger than they appear here. Much more naive.

The worst we have had to endure here is indifference and a certain understandable shallowness in our personal relationships?excluding

our relationship with Catherine and Tashi. After all, the Olinka know we can leave, they must stay. And, of course, none of this

has to do with color. And?

Dearest Celie,

Last night I stopped writing because Olivia came in to tell me Adam is missing. He can only have gone after Tashi.

Pray for his safety,

Your sister, Nettie

Sometimes I think Shug never love me. I stand looking at my naked self in the looking glass. What would she love? I ast myself.

My hair is short and kinky because I don't straighten it anymore. Once Shug say .she love it no need to. My skin dark. My nose just a nose. My lips just lips. My body just any woman's body going through the changes of age. Nothing special here for nobody to love. No honey colored curly hair, no cuteness. Nothing young and fresh. My heart must be young and fresh though, it feel like it blooming blood.

I talk to myself a lot, standing in front the mirror. Celie, I say, happiness was just a trick in your case. Just cause you never had any before Shug, you thought it was time to have some, and that it was gon last. Even thought you had the trees with you. The whole earth. The stars. But look at you. When Shug left, happiness desert.

Every once in a while I git a postcard from Shug. Her and Germaine hi New York, hi California. Gone to see Mary Agnes and Grady in Panama.

267 Mr. ??? seem to be the only one understand my

feeling.

I know you hate me for keeping you from Nettie, he say.
And now she dead.

But I don't hate him, Nettie. And I don't believe you dead.
How can you be dead if I still feel you? Maybe, like God,
you changed
into something different that I'll have to speak to in a
different way, but you not dead to me Nettie. And never will
be. Sometime
when I git tired of talking to myself I talk to you. I even try to
reach our children.

Mr. ??? still can't believe I have children. Where you git
children from? he ast.

My stepdaddy, I say.

You mean he knowed he was the one damage you all
along? he ast.

-I say, Yeah.

Mr. ??? shake his head.

After all the evil he done I know you wonder why I don't hate
him. I don't hate him for two reasons. One, he love Shug.
And two,

Shug use to love him. Plus, look like he trying to make something out of himself. I don't mean just that he work and he clean up after himself and he appreciate some of the things God was playful enough to make. I mean when you talk to him now he really listen, and one time, out of nowhere in the conversation us was having, he said Celie, I'm satisfied this the first time I ever lived on Earth as a natural man. It feel like a new experience.

Sofia and Harpo always try to set me up with some man. They know I love Shug but they think womens love just by accident, anybody handy likely to do. Everytime I go to Harpo's some little policy salesman git all up in my face. Mr. ??? have to come to the

268 rescue. He tell the man, This lady my wife. The man vanish out the door.

Us sit, have a cold drink. Talk about our days together with Shug. Talk about the time she come home sick. The little crooked song she use to sing. All our fine evenings down at Harpo's.

You was even sewing good way back then, he say. I remember the nice little dresses Shug always wear.

Yeah, I say. Shug could wear a dress.

Remember the night Sofia knock Mary Agnes' toofs out?
he ast.

Who could forgit it? I say.

Us don't say nothing bout Sofia's troubles. Us still can't
laugh at that. Plus, Sofia still have trouble with that family.
Well,
trouble with Miss Eleanor Jane.

You just don't know, say Sofia, what that girl done put me
through. You know how she use to bother me all the time
when she had
problems at home? Well finally she start bothering me when
anything good happen. Soon as she snag that man she
married she come
running to me. Oh, Sofia, she say, you just have to meet
Stanley Earl. And before I can say anything, Stanley Earl is
in the middle
of my front room.

How you, Sofia, he say, grinning and sticking out his hand.
Miss Eleanor Jane done told me so much about you.

I wonder if she told him they made me sleep up under their
house, say Sofia. But I don't ask. I try to be polite, act

pleasant.

Henrietta turn the radio up loud in the back room. I have to almost holler to make myself understood. They stand round looking

at the children's pictures on the wall and saying how good my boys look in they army uniforms.

Where they fighting? Stanley Earl want to know, 268

269 They in the service right here in Georgia, I say. But pretty soon they be bound for overseas.

He ast me do I know which part they be station in? France, Germany or the Pacific.

I don't know where none of that is so I say, Naw. He say he want to fight but got to stay home and run his daddy's cotton gin.

Army got to wear clothes, he say, if they fighting in Europe. Too bad they not fighting hi Africa. He laugh. Miss Eleanor Jane

smile. Henrietta turn the dial as high as it can go. Got on some real sorry whitefolks music sound tike I don't know what. Stanley

Earl snap his fingers and try to tap one of his good size foots. He got a long head go straight up and hair cut so short it look

fuzzy. His eyes real bright blue and never hardly blink. Good

God, I think.

Sofia raise me, practically, say Miss Eleanor Jane. Don't know what we would have done without her.

Well, say Stanley Earl, everybody round here raise by colored. That's how come we turn out so well. He wink at me, say, Well Sugar
Pie, to Miss Eleanor Jane, time for us to mosey along.

She leap up tike somebody stuck her with a pin. How Henrietta doing? she ast. Then she whisper, I brought her something with yams
so well hid she won't never suspect. She run out to the car and come back with a tuna casserole.

Well, say Sofia, one thing you have to say for Miss Eleanor Jane, her dishes almost always fool Henrietta. And that mean a lots
to me, Of course I never tell Henrietta where they come from: If I did, out the window they would go. Else she'd vomit, tike it
made her sick.

But finally, the end come to Sofia and Miss Eleanor 269

270 Jane, I think. And it wasn't nothing to do with Henrietta, who hate Miss Eleanor Jane's guts. It was Miss Eleanor Jane herself

and that baby she went and had. Every time Sofia turned round Miss Eleanor Jane was shoving Reynolds Stanley Earl in her face.

He a little fat white something without much hair, look like he headed for the Navy.

Ain't little Reynolds sweet? say Miss Eleanor Jane, to Sofia. Daddy just love him, she say. Love having a grandchild name for him and look so much like him, too.

Sofia don't say nothing, stand there ironing some of Susie Q and Henrietta's clothes.

And so smart, say Eleanor Jane. Daddy say he never saw a smarter baby. Stanley Earl's mama say he smarter than Stanley Earl was when he was this age.

Sofia still don't say nothing.

Finally Eleanor Jane notice. And you know how some whitefolks is, won't let well enough alone. If they want to bad enough, they gon harass a blessing from you if it kill.

Sofia mighty quiet this morning, Miss Eleanor Jane say, like she just talking to Reynolds Stanley. He stare back at her out of

his big stuck open eyes.

Don't you think he sweet? she ast again.

He sure fat, say Sofia, turning over the dress she ironing.

And he sweet, too, say Miss Eleanor Jane.

Just as plump as he can be, say Sofia. And tall, ,

But he sweet, too, say Eleanor Jane. And he smart. She haul off and kiss him up side the head. He rub his head, say Yee.

Ain't he the smartest baby you ever saw? she ast Sofia.

271 He got a nice size head on him, say Sofia. You know some peoples place a lot of weight on head size. Not a whole lot of hair

on it either. He gon be cool this summer, for sure. She fold the piece she iron and put it on a chair.

Just a sweet, smart, cute, innocent little baby boy, say Miss Eleanor Jane. Don't you just love him? she ast Sofia point blank.

Sofia sigh. Put down her iron. Stare at Miss Eleanor Jane and Reynolds Stanley. All the time me and Henrietta over in the comer

playing pitty pat. Henrietta act like Miss Eleanor Jane ain't alive, but both of us hear the way the iron sound when Sofia put it down. The sound have a lot of old and new stuff in it.

No ma'am, say Sofia. I do not love Reynolds Stanley Earl. Now. That's what you been trying to find out ever since he was born. And now you know.

Me and Henrietta look up. Miss Eleanor Jane just that quick done put Reynolds Stanley on the floor where he crawling round knocking stuff over. Head straight for Sofia's stack of ironed clothes and pull it down on his head. Sofia take up the clothes, straighten them out, stand by the ironing board with her hand on .the iron. Sofia the kind of woman no matter what she have in her hand it look like a weapon.

Eleanor Jane start to cry. She always have felt something for Sofia. If not for her, Sofia never would have survive living in her daddy's house. But so what? Sofia never wanted to be there in the first place. Never wanted to leave her own children.

Too late to cry, Miss Eleanor Jane, say Sofia. All us can do

now is laugh. Look at him, she say. And she do laugh. He can't even walk and already he in my bouse messing it up. Did I ast him to come? Do I care whether

272 he sweet or not? Will it make any difference in the way he grow up to treat me what I think?

You just don't like him cause he look like daddy, say Miss Eleanor Jane.

You don't like him cause he look like daddy, say Sofia. I don't feel nothing about him at all. I don't love nun, I don't hate him.

I just wish he couldn't run loose all the time messing up folks stuff.

All the time! All the time! say Miss Eleanor Jane. Sofia, he just a baby. Not even a year old. He only been here five or six times.

I feel like he been here forever, say Sofia.

I just don't understand, say Miss Eleanor Jane. All the other colored women I know love children. The way you feel is something unnatural.

I love children, say Sofia. But all the colored women that say

they love yours is lying. They don't love Reynolds Stanley any more than I do. But if you so badly raise as to ast 'em, what you expect them to say? Some colored people so scared of whitefolks they claim to love the cotton gin.

But he just a little baby! say Miss Elean9r Jane, like saying this is spouse to clear up everything.

What you want from me? say Sofia, I feel something for you because out of all the people in your daddy's house you showed me some human kindness. But on the other hand, out of all the people in your daddy's house, I showed you some. Kind feeling is all I have to offer you. I don't have nothing to offer your relatives but just what they offer me. I don't have nothing to offer him.

Reynolds Stanley by this time is over on Henrietta pallet look like trying to rape her foot. Finally he start to chew her teg and Henrietta reach up on the window-sill and hand him a cracker.

273 I feel like you the only person love me, say Miss Eleanor Jane. Mama only love Junior, she say. Cause that's who daddy really love.

Well, say Sofia. You got your own husband to love you now.

Look like he don't love nothing but that cotton gin, she say. Ten o'clock at night and he still down there working. When he not working, he playing poker with the boys. My brother see a lot more of Stanley Earl than I do.

Maybe you ought to leave him, say Sofia. You got kin in Atlanta, go stay with some of them. Git a job.

Miss Eleanor Jane toss her hair back, act like she don't even hear this, it such a wild notion.

I got my own troubles, say Sofia, and when Reynolds Stanley grow up, he's gon be one of them.

But he won't, say Miss Eleanor Jane. I'm his mama and I won't let him be mean to colored.

You and whose army? say Sofia. The first word he likely to speak won't be nothing he learn from you.

You telling me I won't even be able to love my own son, say Miss Eleanor Jane.

No, say Sofia. That's not what I'm telling you. I'm telling you / won't be able to love your own son. You can love him just as

much as you want to. But be ready to suffer the consequences. That's how the colored live.

Little Reynolds Stanley all up on top Henrietta's face by now, just slobbering and sucking. Trying to kiss. Any second I think

she gon knock him silly. But she lay real still while he zamine her. Every once in a while he act like he peeking into her eyeball.

Then he sit down with a bounce on top her chest and grin. He take one of her playing cards and try to give her a bite of it.

Sofia come over and lift him off. 273

274 He not bothering me, say Henrietta. He make me tickle.

He bother me, say Sofia.

Well, Miss Eleanor Jane say to the baby, picking him up, we not wanted here. She say it real sad, like she done run out of places to go.

Thank you for all you done for us, say Sofia. She don't look so good herself, and a little water stand in her eyes. After Miss

Eleanor Jane and Reynolds Stanley leave, she say, It's

times like this make me know us didn't make this world.
And all the colored
folks talking bout loving everybody just ain't looked hard at
what they thought they said.

So what else new?

Well, your sister too crazy to kill herself. Most times I feels
like shit but I felt like shit before in my life and what
happen?

I had me a fine sister name Nettie. I had me another fine
woman friend name Snug. I had me some fine children
growing up in Africa,
singing and writing verses. The first two months was hell
though, I tell the world. But now Shug's six months is come
and gone
and she ain't come back. And I try to teach my heart not to
want nothing it can't have.

Besides, she give me so many good years. Plus, she
learning new things in her new life. Now she and Germaine
staying with one of
her children.

Dear Celie, she wrote me, Me and Germaine ended up in
Tucson, Arizona where one of my children live. The other
two alive and turned
out well but they didn't want to see me. Somebody told
them I lives a evil life. This one say he want to see his

mama no matter

what. He live in a little mud looking house like they have out here, call adobe, so you know I feels right at home (smile).

He

a schoolteacher too and work on the Indian

275 reservation. They call him the black white man. They have a word that mean that, too, and it really bother him.

But even if

he try to tell them how heteel, they don't seem to care. They so far gone nothing strangers say mean nothing. Everybody not a

Indian they got no use for. I hate to see his feelings hurt, but that's life.

It was Germaine who had the idea to look up my children. He noticed how I always love dressing him up and playing with his hair.

He didn't make it like a mean suggestion. He just said if I knowed how my children was doing I would probably feel better in my life.

This son we staying with is name James. His wife is name Cora Mae. They have two kids name Davis and Cantrell.

He say he thought

something was funny bout his mama (my mama) cause she and big daddy was so old and strict and set in they ways.

But still, he

felt a lot of love from them, he say.

Yeah son, I tell him. They had a lot of love to give. But I needed love plus understanding. They run a little short of that.

They beendead now, he say. Nine or ten years. Sent us all to school as far as they could.

You know I never think bout mama and daddy. You know how tough I think I is. But now that they dead and I see my children doing well, I like to think about them. Maybe when I come back I can put some flowers on they graves.

Oh, she write me now near bout every week. Long newsy letters full of stuff she thought she had forgot. Plus stuff bout the desert and the Indians and the rocky mountains. I wish I could be traveling with her, but thank God she able to do it. Sometimes I feel mad at her. Feel like I could scratch her hair right off her head. But then I think, Shug got a right to live too. She got a

276 right to look over the world in whatever company she choose. Just cause I love her don't take away none of her rights.

The only thing bother me is she don't never say nothing bout

coming back. And I miss her. I miss her friendship so much that if

she want to come back here dragging Germaine I'd make them both welcome, or die trying. Who am I to tell her who to love? My job just to love her good and true myself.

Mr. ??? ast me the other day what it is I love so much bout Shug. He say he love her style. He say to tell the truth, Shug act

more manly than most men. I mean she upright, honest. Speak her mind and the devil take the hindmost, he say. You know Shug will fight, he say. Just like Sofia. She bound to live her life and be herself no matter what.

Mr. ??? think all this is stuff men do. But Harpo not like this, I tell him. You not like this. What Shug got is womanly it seem like to me. Specially since she and Sofia the ones got it.

Sofia and Shug not like men, he say, but they not tike women either.

You mean they not tike you or me.

They hold they own, he say. And it's different.

What I love best bout Shug is what she been through, I say.

When you look in Shug's eyes you know she been where she been, seen what she seen, did what she did. And now she know.

That's the truth, say Mr. ???.

And if you don't git out the way, she'll tell you about it.

Amen, he say. Then he say something that really surprise me cause it so thoughtful and common sense. When it come to what folks do together with they

277 bodies, he say, anybody's guess is as good as mine. But when you talk bout love I don't have to guess. I have love and I have been love. And I thank God he let me gain understanding enough to know love can't be halted just cause some peoples mean and groan.

It don't surprise me you love Shug Avery, he say. I have love Shug Avery all my life.

What load of bricks fell on you? I ast.

No bricks, he say. Just experience. You know, everybody bound to git some of that sooner or later. All they have to do is stay alive. And I start to git mine real heavy long about the time I told Shug it was true that I beat you cause you was you and

not
her.

I told her, I say.

I know it, he say, and I don't blame you. If a mule could tell folks how it's treated, it would. But you know some womens would

have just love to hear they man say he beat his wife cause she wasn't them. Shug one time was tike that bout Annie Julia. Both

of us messed over my first wife a scanless. And she never told nobody. Plus, she didn't have nobody to tell. After they married

her off to me her folks behave like they'd throwed her down a well. Or oft the face of the earth. I didn't want her. I wanted Shug. But my daddy was the boss. He give me the wife he wanted me to have.

But Shug spoke right up for you, Celie, he say. She say Albert, you been mistreating somebody I love. So as far as you concern,

I'm gone. I couldn't believe it, he say. All along in there we was as hot for each other as two pistols. Excuse me, he say. But

we was. I tried to laugh it off. But she meant what she said.

I tried to tease her. You don't love old dumb Celie, I said. She ugly and skinny and can't hold a candle to you. She

can't even
screw.

278 What I want to say that for. From what she tell me,
Shug said, she don't have no reason to screw. You on and
off like a jackrabbit.

Plus, she say, Celie say you not always clean. And she turn
up her nose.

I wanted to kill you, said Mr. ??,? and I did slap you around
a couple of times. I never understood how you and Shug
got along
so well together and it bothered the hell out of me. When
she was mean and nasty to you, I understood. But when I
looked around
and the two of you was always doing each other's hair, I
start to worry.

She still feel for you, I say.

Yeah, he say. She feel like I'm her brother.

What so bad about that, I ast. Don't her brothers love her?

Them clowns, he say. They still act the fool I use to be.

Well, I say, we all have to start somewhere if us want to do
better, and our own self is what us have to hand.

I'm real sorry she left you, Celie. I remember how I felt when she left me.

Then the old devil put his arms around me and just stood there on the porch with me real quiet. Way after while I bent my stiff neck onto his shoulder. Here us is, I thought, two old fools left over from love, keeping each other company under the stars.

Other times he want to know bout my children.

I told him you say they both wear long robes, sort of like dresses. That was the day he come to visit me while I was sewing and ast me what was so special bout my pants.

Anybody can wear them, I said.

Men and women not suppose to wear the same thing, he said. Men spose to wear the pants.

So I said, You ought to tell that to the mens in Africa.

279 Say what? he ast. First time he ever thought bout what Africans do.

People in Africa try to wear what feel comfortable in the heat, I say. Of course, missionaries have they own ideas

bout dress.

But left to themselves, Africans wear a little sometimes, or a lot, according to Nettie. But men and women both preshate a nice dress.

Robe you said before, he say.

Robe, dress. Not pants, anyhow.

Well, he say. I'll be dog.

And men sew in Africa, too, I say.

They do? he ast.

Yeah, I say. They not so backward as mens here.

When I was growing up, he said, I use to try to sew along with mama cause that's what she was always doing. But everybody laughed at me. But you know, I liked it.

Well, nobody gon laugh at you now, I said. Here, help me stitch in these pockets.

But I don't know how, he say.

I'll show you, I said. And I did.

Now us sit sewing and talking and smoking our pipes.

Guess what, I say to him, folks in Africa where Nettie and the children is believe white people is black peoples children.

Naw, he say, like this interesting but his mind really on the slant of his next stitch.

They named Adam some other name soon as he arrive. They say the white missionaries before Nettie and them come told them all about Adam from the white folks point of view and what the white folks know. But they know who Adam is from they own point of view.

And for a whole lot longer time ago.

And who that? Mr. ??? ast.

The first man that was white. Not the first man. They 279

280 say nobody so crazy they think they can say who was the first man. But everybody notice the first white man cause he was white.

Mr. ??? frown, look at the different color thread us got. Thread his needle, lick his finger, tie a knot.

They say everybody before Adam was black. Then one day some woman they just right away kill, come out with this colorless baby.

They thought at first it was something she ate. But then another one had one and also the women start to have twins. So the people start to put the white babies and the twins to death. So really Adam wasn't even the first white man. He was just the first one the people didn't kill.

Mr. ??? look at me real thoughtful. He not such a bad looking man, you know, when you come right down to it. And now it do begin to look like he got a lot of feeling hind his face.

Well, I say, you know black folks have what you call albinos to this day. But you never hear of white folks having nothing black unless some black men been messing with 'em. And no white folks been in Africa back yonder when all this happen.

So these Olinka people heard about Adam and Eve from the white missionaries and they heard about how the serpent tricked Eve and how God chased them out of the garden of Eden. And they was real curious to hear this, cause after they had chased the white Olinka children out of the village they hadn't hardly thought no more

about it. Nettie say one thing about Africans, Out of sight, out

of mind. And another thing, they don't like nothing around them that look or act different. They want everybody to be just alike.

So you know somebody white wouldn't last long. She say seem tike to her the Africans throwed out the white Olinka peoples for how they look. They throwed out the rest of

281 us, all us who become slaves, for how us act. Seem like us just wouldn't do right no matter how us try. Wen, you know how niggers is. Can't nobody tell 'em nothing even today. Can't be rule. Every nigger you see got a kingdom in his head.

But guess what else, I say to Mr. ???_. When the missionaries got to the part bout Adam and Eve being naked, the Glinka peoples nearly bust out laughing. Especially when the missionaries tried to make them put on clothes because-of this. They tried to explain to the missionaries that it was theywho put Adam and Eve out of the Village because they wasnaked. Their word for naked is white.

But since they are covered by color they are not naked. They said anybody looking at a white person can tell they naked, but black people can not be naked because they can not be white.

Yeah, say Mr. ?,?. But they was wrong.

Right, I said. Adam and Eve prove it. What they did, these Olinka peoples, was throw out they own children, just cause they was a little different.

I bet they do that same kind of stuff today, Mr. ??? say,

. Oh, from what Nettie say, them Africans is a mess. And you know what the bible say, the fruit don't fall too far from the tree.

And something else, I say. Guess who they say the snake is?

Us, no doubt, say Mr. ???.

Right, I say. Whitefolks sign for they parents. They was so mad to git throwed out and told they was naked they made up they minds to crush us wherever they find us, same as they would a snake.

You reckon? Mr. ??? ast.

That's what these Olinka peoples say. But they say just like they know history before the white children start to come, they know

the future after the biggest of

282 'em leave. They say they know these particular children and they gon kill each other off, they still so mad bout being unwanted.

Gon kill off a lot of other folk too who got some color. In fact, they gon kill off so much of the earth and the colored that everybody gon hate them just like they hate us today. Then they will become the new serpent. And wherever a white person is found

he'll be crush by somebody not white, just like they do us today. And some of the Olinka peoples believe life will just go on

and on like this forever. And every million years or so something will happen to the earth and folks will change the way they

look. Folks might start growing two heads one of these days, for all we know, and then the folks with one head will send 'em all

someplace else. But some of 'em don't think like this. They think, after the biggest of the white folks no longer on the earth,

the only way to stop making somebody the serpent is for everybody to accept everybody else as a child of God, or one mother's

children, no matter what they look like or how they act. And guess what else about the snake?

What? he ast.

. These Olinka people worship it. They say who knows, maybe it is kinfolks, but for sure it's the smartest, cleanest, slickest thing they ever seen.

These folks sure must have a heap of time just to sit and think, say. Mr. ???.

Nettie say they real good at thinking, I say. But they think so much in terms of thousands of years they have a hard time girting themselves through one.

So what they name Adam?

Something sound like Omatangu, I say. It mean a un-naked man somewhere near the first one God made that knowed what he was. A whole lot of the men that come before the first man was men, but none of 'em

283 didn't know it. You know how long it take some mens to notice anything, I say.

Took me long enough to notice you such good company, he say. And he laugh.

He ain't Shug, but he begin to be somebody I can talk to.

And no matter how much the telegram said you must be
drown, I still git letters from you.

Your sister,

Celie

284

After two and a half months Adam and Tashi returned!
Adam overtook Tashi and her mother and some other
members of our compound
as they were nearing the village where the white woman
missionary had lived, but Tashi would not hear of turning
back, nor would
Catherine, and so Adam accompanied them to the
mbelesencampment.

Oh, be says, it is the most extraordinary place!

You know, Celie, in Africa there is a huge depression in the
earth called the great rift valley, but it is on the other side of
the continent from where we are. However, according to
Adam, there is a "small" rift on our side, several thousand
acres large
and even deeper than the great rift, which covers millions of
acres. It is a place set so deep into the earth that it can only
really be seen, Adam thinks, from the air, and then it would

seem just an overgrown canyon. Well, in this overgrown canyon are a thousand people from dozens of African tribes, and even one colored man? Adam swears? from Alabama! There are farms. There is a school. An infirmary. A temple. And there are male 285 and female warriors who do indeed go on missions of sabotage against the white plantations.

But all this seemed more a marvel in the recounting than in the actual experiencing of it, if I am any judge of Adam and lashi. Their minds seem to have been completely riveted on each other.

I wish you could have seen them as they staggered into the compound. Filthy as hogs, hair as wild as could be. Sleepy. Exhausted. Smelly. God knows. But still arguing.

Just because I came back with you, don't think I am saying yes to marriage, says lashi.

Oh yes you are, says Adam, heatedly, but through ayawn. You promised your mother. / promised your mother., ?

Nobody in America will like me, says lashi.

I will like you, says Adam.

Olivia ran and enfolded lashi in her arms. Ran about preparing food and a bath.

Last night, after lashi and Adam had slept most of the day, We had a family conference. We informed them that because so many of our people had gone to join the mbelesand the planters were beginning to bring in Moslem workers from the North, and because it was time for us to do so, we would be leaving for home in a matter of weeks.

Adam announced his desire to marry lashi.

lashi announced her refusal to be married.

And then, in that honest, forthright way of hers, she gave her reasons. Paramount among them that, because of the scarification marks on her cheeks Americans would look down on her as a savage and shun her, and whatever children she and Adam might have. That she had seen the magazines we receive from home and

286 that it was very clear to her that black people did not truly admire blackskinned black people like herself, and

especially

did not admire blackskinned black women. They bleach their faces, she said. They fry their hair. They try to look naked.

Also, she continued, I fear Adam will be distracted by one of these naked looking women and desert me. Then I would have no country, no people, no mother and no husband and brother.

You'd have a sister, said Olivia.

Then Adam spoke. He asked Tashi to forgive his initial stupid response to the scarification. And to forgive the repugnance he'd felt about the female initiation ceremony. He assured Tashi that it was she he loved and that hi America she would have country, people, parents, sister, husband, brother and lover, and that whatever befell her in America would also be his own choice and his own lot.

Oh, Celie.

So, the next day, our boy came to us with scars identical to Tashi's on his cheeks.

And they are so happy. So happy, Celie. Tashi and Adam

Omatangu.

Samuel married them, of course, and all the people left in the compound came to wish them happiness and an abundance of roofleaf forever. Olivia stood up with the bride and a friend of Adam's? a man too old to have joined the mbeles? stood up with him. Immediately after the wedding we left the compound, riding in a lorry that took us to a boat at the coast inlet that flows out to sea.

In a few weeks, we will all be home.

Your loving sister,

Nettie

287

Mr. ??_ talk to Snug a lot lately by telephone. He say as soon as he told her my sister and her family was missing, she and Germaiae made a beeline for the State department trying to find out what happen. He say Shug say it just kill her to think I'm down here suffering from not knowing. But nothing happen at the State department. Nothing at the department of defense. It's a big war. So much going on. One ship lost feel like nothing, I guess.

Plus, colored don't count to those people.

Well, they just don't know, and never did. Never will. And so what? I know you on your way home and you may not git here till I'm ninety, but one of these days I do expect to see your face.

Meanwhile, I hired Sofia to clerk in our store. Kept the white man Alphonso got to run it, but put Sofia in there to wait on colored cause they never had nobody in a store to wait on 'em before and nobody in a store to treat 'em nice. Sofia real good at selling stuff too cause she act like she don't care if you buy or not. No skin off her nose. And then if you decide to buy anyhow, well,

288 she might exchange a few pleasant words with you. Plus, she scare that white man. Anybody else colored he try to call 'em auntie or something. First time he try that with Sofia she ast him which colored man his mama sister marry.

I ast Harpo do he mind if Sofia work.

What I'm gon mind for? he say. It seem to mate her happy. And I can take care of anything come up at home. Anyhow, he say, Sofia got me a little help for when Henrietta need anything special

to eat or git sick.

Yeah, say Sofia. Miss Eleanor Jane gon look hi on Henrietta and every other day promise to cook her something she'll eat. You know white people have a look of machinery in they kitchen. She whip up stuff with yams you'd never believe. Last week she went and made yam ice cream.

How this happen? I ast. I thought the two of you was through.

Oh, say Sofia. It finally dawn on her to ast her mama why I come to work for them.

I don't expect ft to last, though, say Harpo. You know how they is.

Do her peoples know? I ast.

They know, say Sofia. They carrying on just like you know they would. Whoever heard of a white woman working for niggers, they rave. She tell them, Whoever heard of somebody like Sofia working for trash.

She bring Reynolds Stanley with her? I ast.

Henrietta say she don't mind him.

Well, say Harpo, I'm satisfied if her menfolks against her helping you, she gon quit.

Let her quit, say Sofia. It not my salvation she working for. And if she don't learn she got to face judgment for herself, she won't even have live.

Well, you got me behind you, anyway, say Harpo. 288

289 And I loves every judgment you ever made. He move up and kiss her where her nose was stitch.

Sofia toss her head. Everybody learn something in life, she say. And they laugh.

Speaking of learning, Mr. ??? say one day us was sewing out on the porch, I first start to team all them days ago I use to sit up there on my porch, staring out cross the railing.

Just miserable. That's what I was. And I couldn't understand why us have life at an if all it can do most times is make us feel

bad. All I ever wanted in life was Shug Avery, he say. And one while, all she wanted in life was me. Well, us couldn't have each

other, he say. I got Annie Julia. Then you. All them rotten children. She got Grady and who know who all. But still, look like she come out better than me. A lot of people love Shug, but nobody but Shug love me.

Hard not to love Shug, I say. She know how to love somebody back.

I tried to do something bout my children after you left me. But by that time it was too late. Bub come with me for two weeks, stole all my money, laid on the porch drunk. My girls so far off into mens and religion they can't hardly talk. Everytime they open they mouth some kind of plea come out. Near bout to broke my sorry heart.

If you know your heart sorry, I say, that mean it not quite as spoilt as you think.

Anyhow, he say, you know how it is. You ast yourself one question, it lead to fifteen. I start to wonder why us need love. Why us suffer. Why us black. Why us men and women. Where do children really come from. It didn't take long to realize I didn't hardly know nothing. And that if you ast yourself why you black or a man or a

290 woman or a bush it don't mean nothing if you don't ast
why you here, period.

So what you think? I ast.

I think us here to wonder, myself. To wonder. To ast. And
that in wondering bout the big things and asting bout the big
things,
you learn about the little ones, almost by accident. But you
never know nothing more about the big things than you start
out with.

The more I wonder, he say, the more I love.

And people start to love you back, I bet, I say.

They do, he .say, surprise. Harpo seem to love me. Sofia
and the children. I think even ole evil Henrietta love me a
little bit,
but that's cause she know she just as big a mystery to me
as the man in the moon.

Mr. ??? is busy patterning a shirt for folks to wear with my
pants.

Got to have pockets, he say. Got to have loose sleeves.
And definitely you not spose to wear it with no tie. Folks
wearing ties
look like they being lynch.

And then, just when I know I can live content without Shug,
just when Mr. ??? done ast me to marry him again, this time
in the
spirit as well as in the flesh, and just after I say Naw, I still
don't like frogs, but let's us be friends, Shug write me she
coming home.

Now. Is this life or not?

I be so calm.

If she come, I be happy. If she don't, I be content.

And then I figure this the lesson I was suppose to learn.

Oh Celie, she say, stepping out of the car, dress like a
moving star, I missed you more than I missed my own
mama.

Us hug.

Come on in, I say.

291 Oh, the house look so nice, she say, when us git to her
room. You know I love pink.

Got you some elephants and turtles coming, too, I say.

Where your room? she ast.

Down the hall, I say.

Let's go see it, she say.

Well, here it is, I say, standing in the door. Everything in my room purple and red cept the floor, that painted bright yellow.

She go right to the little purple frog perch on my mantelpiece.

What this? she ast.

Oh, I say, a little something Albert carve for me.

She look at me funny for a minute, I look at her. Then us laugh.

Where Germaine at? I ast.

In college, she say. Wilberforce. Can't let all that talent go to waste. Us through, though, she say. He feel just like family now. Like a son. Maybe a grandson. What you and Albert been up to? she ast.

Nothing much, I say.

She say, I know Albert and I bet he been up to something,

with you looking as fine as you look.

Us sew, I say. Make idle conversation.

How idle? she ast.

What do you know, I think. Shug jealous. I have a good mind to make up a story just to make her feel bad. But I don't.

Us talk bout you, I say. How much us love you.

She smile, come put her head on my breast. Let out a long breath.

Your sister,

Celie

292 Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God..

Thank you for bringing my sister Nettie and our children home.

Wonder who that coming yonder? ast Albert, looking up the road. Us can see the dust just a flying.

Me and him and Shug sitting out on the porch after dinner.

Talking. Not talking. Rocking and fanning flies. Shug mention she don't want to sing in public no more?well, maybe-a night or two at Harpo's. Think maybe she retire. Albert say he want her to try on his new shirt. I talk bout Henrietta. Sofia. My garden and the store. How tilings doing generally. So much in the habit of sewing something I stitch up a bunch of scraps, try to see what I can make. The weather cool for the last of June, and sitting on the porch with Albert and Shug feel real pleasant. Next week be the fourth of July and us plan a big family reunion outdoors here at my house. Just hope the cool weather hold.

Could be the mailman, I say. Cept he driving a little fast.

293 Could be Sofia, say Shug. You know she drive like a maniac.

Could be Harpo, say Albert. But it not.

By now the car stop under the trees in the yard and all these peoples dress like old folks git out.

A big tall whitehaired man with a backward turn white collar, a little dumpty woman with her gray hair in plaits cross on top her

head. A tall youngish man and two robust looking youngish women. The whitehaired man say something to the driver of the car and the car leave. They all stand down there at the edge of the drive surrounded by boxes and bags and all kinds of stuff.

By now my heart is in my mouth and I can't move.

It's Nettie, Albert say, girting up.

All the people down by the drive look up at us. They look at the house. The yard. Shug and Albert's cars. They look round at the fields. Then they commence to walk real slow up die walk to the house.

I'm so scared I don't know what to do. Feel like my mind stuck. I try to speak, nothing come. Try to git up, almost fall. Shug reach down and give me a helping hand. Albert press me on the arm.

When Nettie's foot come down on the porch I almost die. I stand swaying, tween Albert and Shug. Nettie stand swaying tween Samuel and I reckon it must be Adam. Then us both start to moan and cry. Us totter toward one nother like us use to do when us was babies. Then us feel so weak when us touch, us knock each other

down. But what us care? Us sit and lay there on the porch inside each other's arms.

After while, she say Celie.

Isay Nettie.

Little bit more time pass. Us look round at a lot of peoples knees/Nettie never let go my waist. This my

294 husband Samuel, she say, pointing up. These our children Olivia and Adam and this Adam's wife Tashi, she say.

I point up at my peoples. This Shug and Albert, I say.

Everybody say Pleased to Meetcha. Then .Shug and Albert start to hug everybody one after the other.

Me and Nettie finally git up off the porch and I hug my children. And I hug Tashi. Then I hug Samuel.

Why us always have family reunion on July 4th, say Henrietta, mouth poke out, full of complaint. It so hot.

White people busy celebrating they independence from England July 4th, say Harpo, so most black folks don't have to work. Us can

spend the day celebrating each other.

Ah, Harpo, say Mary Agnes, sipping some lemonade, I didn't know you knowed history. She and Sofia working together on the potato salad. Mary Agnes come back home to pick up Suzie Q. She done left Grady, move back to Memphis and live with her sister and her ma. They gon look after Suzie Q while she work. She got a lot of new songs, she say, and not too knocked out to sing 'em.

After while, being with Grady, I couldn't think, she say. Plus, he not a good influence for no child. Course, I wasn't either, she say. Smoking so much reefer.

Everybody make a lot of miration over Tashi. People look at her and Adam's scars like that's they business. Say they never suspect African ladies could look so good. They make a fine couple. Speak a little funny, but us girting use to it.

What your people love best to eat over there in Africa? us ast.

She sort of blush and say barbecue.294

295 Everybody laugh and stuff her with one more piece.

I feel a little peculiar round the children. For one thing, they grown. And I see they think me and Nettie and Shug and Albert and Samuel and Harpo and Sofia and Jack and Odessa real old and don't know much what going on. But I don't think us feel old at all. And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think this the youngest us ever felt.

Amen

296 I thank everybody in this book for coming. A.W., author and medium