

G O O D

H E E L P

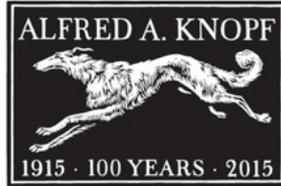
the

C H I L L D

a novel

TONI
MORRISON

WINNER OF THE NOBEL PRIZE



ALSO BY TONI MORRISON

FICTION

Home
A Mercy
Love
Paradise
Jazz
Beloved
Tar Baby
Song of Solomon
Sula
The Bluest Eye

NONFICTION

The Dancing Mind
Playing in the Dark:
Whiteness and the Literary Imagination

God Help the Child



TONI MORRISON



ALFRED A. KNOPF

New York · Toronto

2015

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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For You

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Also by Toni Morrison

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Reading Group Guide

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

LUKE 18:16

PART I



Sweetness

It's not my fault. So you can't blame me. I didn't do it and have no idea how it happened. It didn't take more than an hour after they pulled her out from between my legs to realize something was wrong. Really wrong. She was so black she scared me. Midnight black, Sudanese black. I'm light-skinned, with good hair, what we call high yellow, and so is Lula Ann's father. Ain't nobody in my family anywhere near that color. Tar is the closest I can think of yet her hair don't go with the skin. It's different—straight but curly like those naked tribes in Australia. You might think she's a throwback, but throwback to what? You should've seen my grandmother; she passed for white and never said another word to any one of her children. Any letter she got from my mother or my aunts she sent right back, unopened. Finally they got the message of no message and let her be. Almost all mulatto types and quadroons did that back in the day—if they had the right kind of hair, that is. Can you imagine how many white folks have Negro blood running and hiding in their veins? Guess. Twenty percent, I heard. My own mother, Lula Mae, could have passed easy, but she chose not to. She told me the price she paid for that decision. When she and my father went to the courthouse to get married there were two Bibles and they had to put their hands on the one reserved for Negroes. The other one was for white people's hands. The Bible! Can you beat it? My mother was housekeeper for a rich white couple. They ate every meal she cooked and insisted she scrub their backs while they sat in the tub and God knows what other intimate things they made her do, but no touching of the same Bible.

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

I hate to say it, but from the very beginning in the maternity ward the baby, Lula Ann, embarrassed me. Her birth skin was pale like all babies', even African ones, but it changed fast. I thought I was going crazy when she turned blue-black right before my eyes. I know I went crazy for a minute because once—just for a few seconds—I held a blanket over her face and pressed. But I couldn't do that, no matter how much I wished she hadn't been born with that terrible color. I even thought of giving her away to an orphanage someplace. And I was scared to be one of those mothers who put their

babies on church steps. Recently I heard about a couple in Germany, white as snow, who had a dark-skinned baby nobody could explain. Twins, I believe—one white, one colored. But I don't know if it's true. All I know is that for me, nursing her was like having a pickaninny sucking my teat. I went to bottle-feeding soon as I got home.

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

He never touched her. I never did convince him that I ain't never, ever fooled around with another man. He was dead sure I was lying. We argued and argued till I told him her blackness must be from his own family—not mine. That's when it got worse, so bad he just up and left and I had to look for another, cheaper place to live. I knew enough not to take her with me when I applied to landlords so I left her with a teenage cousin to babysit. I did the best I could and didn't take her outside much anyway because when I pushed her in the baby carriage, friends or strangers would lean down and peek in to say something nice and then give a start or jump back before frowning. That hurt. I could have been the babysitter if our skin colors were reversed. It was hard enough just being a colored woman—even a high-yellow one—trying to rent in a decent part of the city. Back in the nineties when Lula Ann was born, the law was against discriminating in who you could rent to, but not many landlords paid attention to it. They made up reasons to keep you out. But I got lucky with Mr. Leigh. I know he upped the rent seven dollars from what he advertised, and he has a fit if you a minute late with the money.

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

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

Her color is a cross she will always carry. But it's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's not.

Bride

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

"Neither am I."

I still don't know why I said that. It just popped out of my mouth. But when he heard my sassy answer he shot me a hateful look before putting on his jeans. Then he grabbed his boots and T-shirt and when I heard the door slam I wondered for a split second if he was not just ending our silly argument, but ending us, our relationship. Couldn't be. Any minute I would hear the key turn, the front door click open and close. But I didn't hear anything the whole night. Nothing at all. What? I'm not exciting enough? Or pretty enough? I can't have thoughts of my own? Do things he doesn't approve of? By morning soon as I woke up I was furious. Glad he was gone because clearly he was just using me since I had money and a crotch. I was so angry, if you had seen me you would have thought I had spent those six months with him in a holding cell without arraignment or a lawyer, and suddenly the judge called the whole thing off—dismissed the case or refused to hear it at all. Anyway I refused to whine, wail or accuse. He said one thing; I agreed. Fuck him. Besides, our affair wasn't all that spectacular—not even the mildly dangerous sex I used to let myself enjoy. Well, anyway it was nothing like those double-page spreads in fashion magazines, you know, couples standing half naked in surf, looking so fierce and downright mean, their sexuality like lightning and the sky going dark to show off the shine of their skin. I love those ads. But our affair didn't even measure up to any old R-&-B song—some tune with a beat arranged to generate fever. It wasn't even the sugary lyrics of a thirties blues song: "Baby, baby, why you treat me so? I do anything you say, go anywhere you want me to go." Why I kept comparing us to magazine spreads and music I can't say, but it tickled me to settle on "I Wanna Dance with Somebody."

It was raining the next day. Bullet taps on the windows followed by crystal lines of water. I avoided the temptation to glance through the panes at the sidewalk beneath my condo. Besides, I knew what was out there—nasty-looking palm trees lining the road, benches in that tacky little park, few if any pedestrians, a sliver of sea far beyond. I fought giving in to any wish that he was coming back. When a tiny ripple of missing him surfaced, I beat it back. Around noon I opened a bottle of Pinot Grigio and sank into the sofa, its suede and silk cushions as comfy as any arms. Almost. Because I have to admit he is one beautiful man, flawless even, except for a tiny scar on his upper lip and an ugly one on his shoulder—an orange-red blob with a tail. Otherwise, head to toe, he is one gorgeous man. I'm not so bad myself, so imagine how we looked as a couple. After a glass or two of the wine I was a little buzzed, and decided to call my friend Brooklyn, tell her all about it. How he hit me harder than a fist with six

words: You not the woman I want. How they rattled me so I agreed with them. So stupid. But then I changed my mind about calling her. You know how it is. Nothing new. Just he walked out and I don't know why. Besides, too much was happening at the office for me to bother my best friend and colleague with gossip about another breakup. Especially now. I'm regional manager now and that's like being a captain so I have to maintain the right relationship with the crew. Our company, Sylvia, Inc., is a small cosmetics business, but it's beginning to blossom and make waves, finally, and shed its frumpy past. It used to be Sylph Corsets for Discriminating Women back in the forties, but changed its name and ownership to Sylvia Apparel, then to Sylvia, Inc., before going flat-out hip with six cool cosmetics lines, one of which is mine. I named it YOU, GIRL: Cosmetics for Your Personal Millennium. It's for girls and women of all complexions from ebony to lemonade to milk. And it's mine, all mine—the idea, the brand, the campaign.

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

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

Actually the timing of his leaving was perfect for me. With him gone out of my life and out of my apartment I could concentrate on the launch of YOU, GIRL and, equally important, keep a promise I'd made to myself long before I met him—we fought about it the night he said "You not the woman...." According to prisoninfo.org/paroleboard/calendar, it was time. I'd been planning this trip for a year, choosing carefully what a parolee would need: I saved up five thousand dollars in cash over the years, and bought a three-thousand-dollar Continental Airlines gift certificate. I put a promotional box of YOU, GIRL into a brand-new Louis Vuitton shopping bag, all of which could take her anywhere. Comfort her, anyway; help her forget and take the edge off bad luck, hopelessness and boredom. Well, maybe not boredom, no prison is a convent. He didn't understand why I was so set on going and the night when we quarreled about my promise, he ran off. I guess I threatened his ego by doing some Good Samaritan thing not directed at him. Selfish bastard. I paid the rent, not him, and

the maid too. When we went to clubs and concerts we rode in my beautiful Jaguar or in cars I hired. I bought him beautiful shirts—although he never wore them—and did all the shopping. Besides, a promise is a promise, especially if it's to oneself.

It was when I got dressed for the drive I noticed the first peculiar thing. Every bit of my pubic hair was gone. Not gone as in shaved or waxed, but gone as in erased, as in never having been there in the first place. It scared me, so I threaded through the hair on my head to see if it was shedding, but it was as thick and slippery as it had always been. Allergy? Skin disease, maybe? It worried me but there was no time to do more than be anxious and plan to see a dermatologist. I had to be on my way to make it on time.

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

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

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

No limousines today, unless you count the Lincoln town car. Mostly just worn Toyotas and ancient Chevys, silent grown-ups and jittery children. An old man sitting at the bus stop is digging into a box of Cheerios, trying to find the last circle of sweet oat bran. He's wearing ancient wing-tip shoes and crisp new jeans. His baseball cap,

his brown vest over a white shirt, scream Salvation Army store but his manner is superior, dainty, even. His legs are crossed and he examines the bit of dry cereal as though it were a choice grape picked especially for him by groundskeepers to the throne.

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

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

No, she can't and, damn, here she is. Number 0071140. Even after fifteen years I could never mistake her simply because of her height, six feet at least. Nothing has shrunk the giant I remember who was taller than the bailiff, the judge, the lawyers and almost as tall as the police. Only her co-monster husband matched her height. Nobody doubted she was the filthy freak that parents shaking with anger called her. "Look at her eyes," they whispered. Everywhere in the courthouse, ladies' room, on benches lining the halls they whispered: "Cold, like the snake she is." "At twenty? How could a twenty-year-old do those things to children?" "Are you kidding? Just look at those eyes. Old as dirt." "My little boy will never get over it." "Devil." "Bitch."

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

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

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

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

"Somebody picking you up?" I smile.

"Taxi," she says.

Funny. She is answering a stranger dutifully like she's used to it. No "What's it to you?" or even "Who the hell are you?" but going on to explain further. "Called a cab. I mean the desk did."

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

I rush to my car. Following them isn't hard. I even pass the taxi to disguise the fact that I am tailing her. That turns out to be a mistake. Just as I'm about to enter the exit ramp, I see the taxi shoot ahead of me toward Norristown. Gravel pings my wheels as I brake, reverse and follow them. The road to Norristown is lined with neat, uniform houses built in the fifties and added on repeatedly—a closed side porch, a garage

expanded for two cars, backyard patio. The road looks like a kindergarten drawing of light-blue, white or yellow houses with pine-green or beet-red doors sitting smugly on wide lawns. All that is missing is a pancake sun with ray sticks all around it. Beyond the houses, next to a mall as pale and sad as “lite” beer, a sign announces the beginning of the town. Next to it another, bigger sign for Eva Dean’s Motel and Restaurant. The taxi turns and stops by the entrance. She gets out and pays the driver. I follow and park a ways back near the restaurant. Only one other car is in the parking area—a black SUV. I am sure she is meeting someone, but after a few minutes at the check-in desk, she goes straight to the restaurant and takes a seat by the window. I can see her clearly and watch her study the menu like a remedial or English-as-a-second-language student—lip-reading, running her finger over the items. What a change. This is the teacher who had kindergartners cut apples into rings to shape the letter O, doled out pretzels as *B*’s, slit watermelon chunks into *Y*’s. All to spell BOY—who she liked best according to the women whispering in front of the sinks in the ladies’ room. Fruit as bait was a big part of the trial’s testimony.

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

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

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

“Mrs. Huxley. Open the door, please.”

There is silence then, “I uh. I’m sorta sick.”

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

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

“We need to talk.”

“Talk?” She blinks rapidly but doesn’t ask the real question: “Who are you?”

I push past her, leading with the Louis Vuitton bag. “You’re Sofia Huxley, right?”

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

“What do you want me to do?” she asks.

Such a soft, accommodating voice. Knowing after fifteen years behind bars that nothing is free. Nobody gives away anything at no cost to the receiver. Whatever it is—cigarettes, magazines, tampons, stamps, Mars bars or a jar of peanut butter—it comes with strings tough as fishing line.

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

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

“That was you?” She frowns.

“Me. Yes.”

“I know you?”

“My name is Bride.”

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

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

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

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

“Help me what?”

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

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

“Yeah.” I am still smiling. “Your new life.”

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

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

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

Police. There have to be some in this town. Igniting, shifting, steering with a left hand, while the other one lies dead next to my thigh, takes concentration. All of it. So it's not until I get farther into Norristown and see a sign with an arrow pointing to the police station that it hits me—the cops will write a report, interview the accused and take a picture of my wrecked face as evidence. And what if the local newspaper gets the story along with my photograph? Embarrassment would be nothing next to the jokes directed at YOU, GIRL. From YOU, GIRL to BOO, GIRL.

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

Brooklyn

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

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

"I'm ruined," she whispers.

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

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

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

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

"The guy who beat you half to death."

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

"Are you telling me a woman did this?"

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

"Was he trying to rape you?"

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

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

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

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

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

She is shouting and fake-sobbing so I back off. Her single open eye isn't up to it and her mouth must hurt too much to keep it up. For five minutes I don't say a word, just