Song of Solomon

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TONI MORRISON

Toni Morrison was born in Ohio to a working-class family that had fled the South to escape racism and economic oppression. She attended Howard University from 1949 to 1953 and later earned a Masters Degree at Cornell. She was married to Harold Morrison, an architect, from 1958 to 1964; during this time, she gave birth to two children, who she raised on her own. Following her divorce from her husband, Morrison worked as an editor in New York City, where she was instrumental in publishing the first works of the political activist Angela Davis. In 1970 she published her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*. Thereafter, she completed *Sula* (1973), for which she was nominated for the National Book Award; *Song of Solomon* (1977), the novel that first brought her widespread acclaim; and *Beloved* (1987), which contributed to her being awarded the Nobel Prize in 1993. Morrison taught at Rutgers, Howard, Princeton, and many other colleges and universities. Her final novel, *God Help the Child*, was published in 2015. In 2019, at the age of 88, Morrison died of complications from pneumonia.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Song of Solomon alludes to many of the key periods in Black American history. Following the end of the Civil War in 1865, four million Black enslaved people were freed; for the remainder of the 19th century, the vast majority of them stayed in the South and worked on white farms for low wages, although some (including Macon's father) earned land and property. In the Great Depression of the 1930s, millions of Americans, including both Black and white people, were unable to find a job and fell into poverty; this prompted many Black Southerners to migrate to Northern cities. It was also during the Great Depression that Black Americans began supporting the Democratic Party (previously, they had overwhelmingly supported the Republicans, "The Party of Lincoln") – Morrison alludes to this change when she writes that Milkman identifies with President Franklin Roosevelt. The 1950s and 60s saw the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, led by nonviolent organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference. This era saw many political and legal victories for Black Americans, including the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which protected Black Americans' right to vote and study and work where they chose. In the mid to late 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement took a more violent turn, led by leaders like Malcolm X and Huey Newton – this shift parallels Guitar's embrace of violence to avenge the murder of innocent Black people. Morrison mentions many specific events of Black 20th century history, such as the lynching of Emmett Till in 1955 and the 16thStreet Baptist Church Bombing of 1963, in which four Black girls were murdered by Ku Klux Klan members.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The most obvious related literary work to *Song of Solomon* is the Biblical Song of Solomon, often called the Song of Songs, the book of the Old Testament immediately before Ruth. The Song of Solomon celebrates love, even erotic love (though this love is often read as a metaphor for the relationship between God and the pious Christian), and moves through a large timeframe and cast of characters in much the same way as Morrison's novel. The Uncle Remus folktales are another important work of literature for understanding Morrison's interest in language and naming. In these stories, passed down orally for more than a century before they were compiled in written form, the clever, quick-thinking Brer Rabbit uses wordplay to outsmart his enemies. (The title of one of Morrison's later novels, *Tar Baby*, explicitly alludes to the Uncle Remus stories.) Finally, the myth of flight back to Africa, again passed down orally by American slaves, echoes in *Song of Solomon*'s opening and closing scenes.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Song of Solomon*
- **When Written:** 1975-77
- **Where Written:** Washington, D.C.
- **When Published:** 1977
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism, Black American Literature
- **Genre:** Magical realism, Bildungsroman, epic
- **Setting:** Unnamed town in Michigan
- **Climax:** Milkman's discovery of his great-grandfather, Solomon.
- **Antagonist:** Guitar
- **Point of View:** Third person limited. The novel moves between dozens of characters' points of view.

EXTRA CREDIT

Late Bloomer: Morrison didn't publish her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, until she was almost forty years old. Over the next two decades, she had one of the most impressive runs of any American writer, publishing *Sula*, *Tar Baby*, and *Beloved*, within just a few years of each other.

Awards, awards, awards: Morrison has won virtually every honor available for an American writer: the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Pulitzer Prize, the American Book Award, etc. In 1993, she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. As of 2015, she is the most recent American, the only American woman, and the only Black American to win this honor.

PLOT SUMMARY

The novel begins in 1931 with the suicide of an insurance agent named Robert Smith. Smith jumps off the Mercy Hospital, located in an unnamed town in Michigan on the so-called Not Doctor Street. Shortly after this mysterious incident, a woman named Ruth, the daughter of Doctor Foster, for whom Not Doctor Street is named, becomes the first Black woman to give birth in Mercy Hospital.

Ruth is married to Macon Dead II, a cold, often violent man who has built up quite a bit of wealth and acts as a landlord for much of the town. In addition to the boy Ruth gives birth to in the hospital, they have two daughters, First Corinthians and Lena — Macon names the daughters by randomly choosing a name from the Bible. Macon was once close with his sister, Pilate, but a mysterious incident in a cave has left them estranged. Though Ruth makes some efforts to get close to Macon early in their marriage, she eventually gives up, retreating into her own memories of her father. When she's alone in the house, she breastfeeds her son, Macon Dead III, even though he's a bit too old for breastfeeding. One day, Freddie, a janitor and errand-runner who works for Macon Dead II, sees Ruth breastfeeding her son, and calls the son Milkman — the nickname sticks.

When Milkman is 12, he meets a slightly older boy named Guitar. Guitar takes Milkman to meet Pilate, whom Milkman has been forbidden to see and who lives with her daughter, Reba, and her granddaughter, Hagar. Milkman is instantly attracted to Hagar. Later, Macon is angry with Milkman for visiting Pilate, but Milkman stands up to his father. Macon calls Pilate a "snake," and reveals that he and Pilate grew up on a huge farm with their father. Their father was illiterate, and accidentally took the name "Macon Dead" because the registrar at the Freedman's Bureau misinterpreted what he said about his own father having died in Macon. Soon after, Macon puts Milkman to work as a rent collector.

Several years later, Ruth angers Macon while the family is eating dinner and he hits her. Milkman immediately pushes Macon into the radiator and tells him he'll kill him if he touches Ruth again. Macon is secretly proud of his son for standing up to him. That night, he tells Milkman that years earlier he caught Ruth kissing her dying father's fingers, and implies that the two of them were in an incestuous relationship. Milkman begins to feel disgust around all women, including Ruth. He has also been feeling tired of Hagar, with whom he has been having a relationship for years. He ends the relationship, leaving her devastated. He also learns that Guitar might be involved in a series of murders intended to avenge the deaths of Black people at the hands of racist white people. Guitar says that all white people are hateful and evil, even the supposedly good ones.

Furious with Milkman, Hagar tries and fails repeatedly to kill him. When Ruth learns that Hagar and Milkman were involved with each other romantically, she angrily confronts Pilate, who tells her about her life. After leaving her father's farm in Danville, Pennsylvania following his murder at the hands of a racist white family who wanted his land, Pilate traveled through Virginia, where she slept with a man and gave birth to Reba; she refused to marry the man because she was afraid he'd be afraid of the fact that she had no navel. She also tells Ruth that as she journeyed she met the spirit of her dead father, who told her, "Sing," which is why she continues to sing so often and joyously.

Macon, however, tells Milkman about a bag of gold that he believes Pilate keeps in her house. When he and Pilate were children, he says, they wandered through forests and caves because their father's death left them homeless. One night, they slept in a cave, where they discovered a mysterious man — afraid, Macon killed the man and then discovered that the man was carrying gold. Pilate insisted that they leave the gold with the dead man, and pushed Macon out of the cave — Macon ran off, and when he returned, Pilate and the gold were gone. He asks Milkman for his help in retrieving the gold. Milkman enlists Guitar's help, and the two of them sneak into Pilate's house and steal the green sack that hangs from her ceiling. When they open it, they're disappointed to find only bones. The two of them end up getting arrested and the police are suspicious of them because of the bones. Pilate covers for both of them instead of pressing charges, which makes Milkman feel guilty for stealing from her in the first place.

Milkman's sister, Corinthians, is forced to work as a maid, despite her college education. A poor man named Henry Porter, a yard worker and formerly a drunken tenant of Macon Dead's, makes her acquaintance and tries to woo her. At first, Corinthians is reluctant to marry someone with lower social status than she, but eventually she gives in, realizing that no one else wants her. The first time Corinthians goes home with Porter he has sex with Corinthians against her will, but afterwards she stays with him.

In the second part of the novel, Milkman travels to Danville, Pennsylvania to find the cave where he thinks Pilate left her gold. He meets people who remember his father and are glad to hear that Macon Dead II is now wealthy and powerful. Searching for the cave, Milkman also meets Circe, the tremendously old and devoted midwife who delivered Pilate and his father. Circe tells Milkman that his grandfather's real name was Jake, and that Jake's body was thrown in the river after the powerful Butler family killed him. She tells him where

to find the cave, but when he goes to the cave he doesn't find the gold there. Based on Circe's information, he decides that Pilate has been lying about returning to the cave, and decides to follow her path to Virginia to trace where she might have hidden the gold.

Milkman arrives in the town of Shalimar, where he learns that someone from Michigan — Guitar, he guesses — has been looking for him. The townspeople harass him for his snobbish attitude, and he begins to see that they have a point — he's spent his entire life caring only for himself. Milkman goes hunting with some of the men of Shalimar. During the hunt, Guitar tries to kill him. Though he doesn't yet know why Guitar wants to kill him, he guesses that he's motivated by the gold.

Milkman next traces Pilate to the house of a woman named Susan Byrd, who tells Milkman that his grandfather, Jake, married a woman named Sing, who had Indian blood. When leaving Byrd's house, Milkman runs into Guitar, who accuses him of trying to steal the gold for himself. Guitar wants Pilate's gold to fund his vigilante group the Seven Days, who kill white people in retribution for any murder of a Black person (regardless of whether the particular white people killed were involved in the original murder). Guitar warns Milkman, and then departs.

While walking through Shalimar, Milkman realizes that the nursery rhyme the children are singing is based on his own family. Inspired, he returns to Byrd's house, where he learns that he has a great-grandfather named Solomon who supposedly flew back to Africa, leaving his wife and children to fend for themselves. Though Byrd thinks this is all just a fairy-tale, Milkman is overjoyed with what he has heard and believes it. As he travels back to Michigan, he feels like a new man, thinking that every name tells a story.

Back in Virginia, Milkman learns that Hagar has died of grief after trying to make herself more beautiful for him. He feels horribly guilty, and goes to see Pilate, who hits him with a bottle and knocks him out, but doesn't kill him. Milkman then tells Pilate that the body she found in the cave when she returned there — the body she's been carrying for years — belonged to her own father. Together, they return to Shalimar to bury the bones. As soon as they bury it, Pilate collapses — she's been shot by Guitar, who was aiming for Milkman and is still bent on obtaining the gold that neither Pilate nor Milkman has. In the final scene, Guitar puts down his gun, and Milkman offers him his life. He leaps toward Guitar, flying through the air, leaving it unclear if he intends to attack him or embrace him.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Jake – The son of Solomon, father of Pilate and Macon Dead II, and husband to Sing. Though his real name is Jake, his legal name is Macon Dead I, because when he told a Freedman's Bureau official that his father was dead and lived in Macon, the official mistakenly wrote "Dead, Macon" as his name. Macon Dead I was a respected man in his Virginia community, but a powerful white family, the Butlers, murdered him and took his land when Macon Dead II was a child.

Macon Dead II – The son of Jake (Macon Dead I), brother of Pilate, husband of Ruth, and father of Milkman, First Corinthians, and Magdalene called Lena. Macon is the jealous, unhappy patriarch of the Dead family. He is perpetually suspicious of his wife, Ruth, since he suspects her of having an incestuous relationship with her own father, Doctor Foster. Macon Dead II names each of his daughters randomly by picking text from the Bible. He has risen to great wealth, acts as a landlord to many of the residents of the town, and focuses on his businesses and building even more wealth. He eventually pressures Milkman, into working for him, a job that Milkman comes to enjoy, and sets Milkman on the quest to recover the gold he believes Pilate has stolen from him.

Milkman – The protagonist of *Song of Solomon*, his given name is Macon Dead III but he gains the nickname after Freddie sees Ruth, his mother, breastfeeding him. Over the course of the novel, Milkman changes from a callow, selfish man, willing to do almost anything to gain independence from his family, into a deeply moral, selfless man who is almost completely indifferent to material things. Milkman both loves and hates his parents. His father, Macon, encourages him to love business and money, but he longs to free himself from his father's influence and travel far away from him. He protects Ruth, his mother, from Macon, but when he learns of his father's suspicion of Ruth's incest with her own father, his relationship with her is tainted. In fact, his relationship with all women becomes tainted, including with his unfortunate cousin Hagar, whom he leaves even after a long and loving romantic relationship. While searching for Pilate's **gold**, which he hopes to use to gain his independence, he has a spiritual awakening, and rejoices when he learns that his great-grandfather, Solomon, could fly. It's left up to us to decide how much Milkman has changed at the end of the novel — whether, after Guitar kills Pilate, Milkman will forgive Guitar or avenge Pilate's death.

Pilate Dead – Macon II's sister, and a Christ-like character who selflessly devotes herself to others, including Reba, Hagar, and Milkman. Her supposed possession of a huge fortune in **gold** provides the setup for the second half of the novel. Pilate seems free of the anxiety and claustrophobia of the novel's wealthier characters, such as Ruth, and she challenges gender norms by wearing men's clothing and taking a traditionally masculine job, bootlegging, for herself. A largely static character, Pilate displays boundless sympathy and love for her daughter, Reba, and her granddaughter, Hagar. On the few occasions when she shows any aggression or anger, she's proving her loyalty to her family.

Ruth Foster – The melancholy wife of Macon Dead II, Ruth attempts early in their marriage to forge a connection with her husband, but ultimately gives up and takes refuge in her own memories, particularly those of her father, Doctor Foster. It's unclear what their relationship was — at various times, it's characterized as a sexual relationship but at others as a close, non-sexual relationship. In either event, it's clear that Ruth feels unfulfilled with her seemingly happy life as the wife of a wealthy man — her big house is a prison for her.

Guitar Bains – Milkman's childhood friend, and later a member of the Seven Days, a group that enacts violent revenge on white people they perceive to be guilty. He despises all white people and resents Macon Dead II for charging his family too much rent. He comes to desire Pilate's **gold** as necessary to fund his group, and believes that Milkman seeks the gold in part to deny Guitar from getting it. Guitar thus tries to kill his friend and does murder Pilate, and the novel ends with Milkman having to make a choice whether to avenge Pilate's death and kill Guitar or to forgive him.

Solomon – Milkman's great-grandfather, whose near-mythical history, in which he supposedly flew back to Africa, brings great joy to Milkman when he learns of it — and of Solomon, whom he never knew or even knew of. Solomon had a huge number of children, including Milkman's grandfather, and in many parts of the country there are towns and people named after him, and songs sung about him.

Susan Byrd – Susan Byrd is a calm, middle-aged, part-native-American woman who lives near the town of Shalimar. Milkman finds her late in the novel as he is searching out the history of his family and lineage. Though careful not to tell much about his past on their first visit, when the judgmental Grace Long is present, on his second visit she tells him the story that unlocks his past. Her story suggests that she is Milkman's relative: that her father, Crowell Byrd, was the brother of Milkman's grandmother, Sing. She says that Milkman was descended from "those flying African children" and tells him of how his great-grandfather Solomon flew back to Africa, leaving behind his family, including Milkman's grandfather Jake. Susan Byrd then dismisses this entire story as a fantasy, but tells how after Solomon's disappearance her mother Heddy took him in, and he and Sing eventually moved to Boston together. Despite Susan's dismissal of the myth of Solomon, her story triggers an epiphany in Milkman and sets up the events of the rest of the novel.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Doctor Foster – Ruth's father, a rich, powerful Black man, for whom Not Doctor Street is named. Macon Dead II believes that Doctor Foster and Ruth had an incestuous affair, and maintains that he was a hypocritical man who despised the community that idolized him.

Lena – Macon Dead II's daughter, whose full name is Magdalene. She recognizes the way her father uses his daughters to make himself look more important, and eventually accuses Milkman of being as heartless as their father.

First Corinthians – Macon Dead II's daughter, who works as a maid and later lives with Porter. When her college education and family wealth don't bring her success or a husband, she's humiliated to be doing manual labor, and looks down on those who are poorer than her family, including Porter.

Robert Smith – A Black insurance agent whose suicide marks the beginning of the novel, and may cause the hospital to allow Ruth to become the first Black woman to give birth inside Mercy Hospital.

Hagar – Pilate's granddaughter and Reba's daughter, later a lover of Milkman's. When Milkman grows tired of her, she falls into depression and self-hatred, and tries and fails repeatedly to kill Milkman.

Freddie – A janitor, errand-runner, and gossip who works for Macon Dead.

Reba – Pilate's daughter and Hagar's mother. She supports her family with her preternatural ability to win guessing competitions and raffles, even selling her winnings so that Hagar can buy herself clothes and makeup.

Empire State – An unstable man who joins the Seven Days after his white wife leaves him for another Black man.

Circe – A gentle, nurturing woman who works as a midwife and later takes care of dogs.

Mrs. Bains – Guitar's mother.

Henry Porter – A drunken tenant of Macon Dead's who later courts Corinthians and lives with Corinthians. He also rapes Corinthians the first time they have sex.

Feather – The owner of a pool hall who dislikes the Deads.

Railroad Tommy – The co-owner, with Hospital Tommy, of the town barbershop.

Hospital Tommy – The co-owner, with Railroad Tommy, of the town barbershop.

Anna Djvorak – A former patient of Doctor Foster.

Emmett Till – A real-life Black teenager who was murdered in Mississippi for allegedly flirting with a white woman.

Winnie Ruth Judd – An insane white woman who killed multiple people and was put in an insane asylum.

Miss Graham – A somewhat successful, somewhat liberal poet, and First Corinthians's employer.

Michael-Mary – Miss Graham's assistant.

Nero – A member of the Seven Days along with Guitar.

Reverend Cooper – An old associate of Macon Dead II from Danville, who takes Milkman to the forest where Milkman

believes the gold is buried.

Nephew – Reverend Cooper's nephew.

Fred Garnett – A man who gives Milkman a ride to Danville.

Mr. Solomon – The owner of a General Store in the town of Shalimar.

Omar – An old man in Shalimar who takes Milkman hunting.

Calvin Breakstone – A resident of Shalimar who goes hunting with Milkman.

Small Boy – A resident of Shalimar who goes hunting with Milkman.

Sing – Macon Dead I's wife. When Pilate supposedly speaks to her dead father, she misinterprets "Sing," and learns to sing for the rest of her life.

Saul – A resident of Shalimar who picks a fight with Milkman.

Vernell – A hunter who refers Milkman to Susan Byrd.

Sweet – A woman who lives near Susan Byrd.

Grace Long – Slightly obnoxious woman who interrupts Milkman when he visits Susan Byrd.

Crowell Byrd – Susan's father.

Marcelline – Owner of a beauty shop.

Lily – Owner of a beauty shop.

Ryna – Solomon's wife. Milkman learns that she fell into deep depression after Solomon left her and flew back to Africa. As with Solomon, there are places named after Ryna, and songs sung about her.

Miss Butler – A white woman and a member of the family that murders Macon Dead I. She later kills herself. Years after Miss Butler's suicide, Circe cares for her dogs.

Heddy – In his search after his ancestry, Milkman learns from Susan Byrd that Heddy was Susan Byrd's grandmother. An Indian woman, Heddy also took care of Jake after Jake's father (Solomon) mysteriously disappeared.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE POWER OF NAMES

From the first page of *Song of Solomon*, it's clear that names have enormous power. Names tell stories, record history, and build community. The name Doctor Street, for instance, celebrates Dr. Foster, the first wealthy, influential Black man to live in the town. By repeating this name, the townspeople honor their hero and celebrate their race and their culture. Government officials are completely aware of the power of names — that's why they insist on calling the street Mains Street; Doctor Street would give Black people too much pride. The "compromise name," in which the Black community ignores the official name of the street and instead calls it "Not Doctor Street", is a way for Black people to mock government officials while both making clear white power's efforts to efface Black history and keeping that history alive. Names, then, aren't just arbitrary sounds describing arbitrary things. The right name, chosen for the right reasons, can change the way people think, and even change the thing it's describing.

Although names have power, much of the novel shows how names can also *imprison* people. Milkman, whose given name is Macon Dead III, feels trapped by his own family name. He's named after his grandfather, who was accidentally given the name "Dead" by the Freedman's bureau. By carrying the name "Dead," Milkman feels that he's been condemned to live the same life that his father and grandfather lived, working at the family business, living in the same town, etc. In part, Milkman's dissatisfaction with his name is just another way of saying that he feels trapped in his obligations to his family. But in another sense, it is the name itself that imprisons him. As he tells Guitar many times, he feels "Dead" because his name *is* Dead.

As he grows up, Milkman begins to see that his entire family is trapped by their names, too. Macon, like his father before him, names his children by randomly choosing a name from the Bible, even a very unusual name like "First Corinthians." Though Morrison doesn't explicit say this, this is similar to the method slave owners would use to name the people they enslaved. By repeating the slave owner's naming system, the Deads are effectively acknowledging that slavery continues to shape their thinking and their behavior.

When Milkman goes to Virginia in search of his aunt Pilate's **gold**, he comes to realize that learning his family's names is a far greater reward than the gold could ever be. After discovering that his great-grandfather's real name was Solomon — and that people and places all over the country are named after him — he's ecstatic, and thinks to himself that every name in the world tells a long, complex story. For most of his life, Milkman had no understanding of his own story — he had no history and no culture. Now that he understands the history of his names, he feels invincible.

Milkman's journey, then, brings him to the realization that learning a name can be a liberating experience. Where before the knowledge of his family name had made him feel small and confined, the knowledge of his family's "true" name, Solomon, makes him see that his family history is something to be proud of, and that like Solomon, he has the power to travel across the country, spreading his name and his culture to new places.

Yet it's important to note that Morrison also complicates the idea of the power of names. Consider Pilate, who has spent her entire life singing and bringing joy to her family because she misinterpreted what her father's ghost told her when it visited her and said "Sing," as "Sing" was the name of his wife, not a command for her to continue to sing. Pilate misinterpreted a name, but her misinterpretation *didn't* imprison her; on the contrary, it encouraged her to live a better life. Everyone enjoys her singing — even Macon, who doesn't speak to his sister.

In all, Morrison forwards a complex point about names, and their history and power. One must seek out the true meanings of names, she seems to suggest, and the rewards for doing so can be enormous. At the same time, she portrays deriving power from a name as an act of creation as well as investigation — to some extent, one can *invent* what names mean, one can give them *new* power beyond what they inherit from history, and so in this way names both carry the history and culture of the past to the present and act as vessels through which the present can interact with that past, engage it and build and shift it, and carry that culture and history into the future.

RACISM

Song of Solomon, set between the 1930s and the 1960s, alludes to many milestones for Black culture in the 20th century: the rise of the New Deal Coalition, the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, etc. It's no coincidence that many of these milestones are related to race and Black people's battle with racism — Morrison's novel is concerned with the many different forms that racism can take.

To begin with, it's important to note that there are almost no white characters in *Song of Solomon*. White racism, directed at Black Americans, is a real thing in the novel, but it's an offstage presence, a terrifying monster that affects how the Black characters talk, think, and behave. Morrison is concerned with the way white culture shapes and imprisons Black culture, and the way that white racism can cause Black people to be racist to other Black people — in other words, how Black people internalize racism.

One form that Black people's racism against other Black people takes is economic. Macon Dead, a wealthy Black businessman, uses his influence and power to squeeze money from the poorest townspeople. He does so because, in many ways, he looks down on Black people; he wants to live far away from them, in the largely white community of Honoré. In much the same way, Hagar comes to hate her hair and dark skin because they mark her as a Black woman. She envies Lena and Corinthians, and other light-skinned Black women, because they're not so obviously African; indeed, she dies of grief because she realizes that she'll never be able to look as light-skinned as the women she thinks Milkman likes. Even if they have nothing else in common, Hagar and Macon Dead share a common desire to be as white as possible. Though they're born in a Black community, they come to dislike their own Blackness, and gravitate toward the white people who oppress them and, ironically, regard all Black people as the same.

Guitar embodies another form that racism takes in *Song of Solomon*. Where Hagar and Macon try to be as white as possible, Guitar responds to whiteness by despising it as thoroughly as white people despise him. Ever since his father was killed in a white-owned sawmill accident, he has refused to accept any sympathy from the white community; on the contrary, he regards all white people, beginning with the man who owned the sawmill, as complicit in the murder of Black people. Milkman comes to realize that Guitar, along with his organization, the Seven Days, is responsible for murdering white people in retaliation for the murders of Black people in the area. Though most of the white people he kills weren't immediately involved in crimes against Black people, Guitar nonetheless considers them racists who deserve to die. Ironically Guitar's monolithic, unsympathetic attitude toward white people is itself a form of race-based prejudice.

So the novel portrays two ways that white racism against Black people affects Black consciousness. The former, that of Macon Dead and Hagar, is an almost unconscious internalizing of white racism which leads to a hatred of Black people, and thus, hatred of the self. The latter, that of Guitar, is a retaliatory hatred of all white people. Though diametrically opposed, both responses are warping and destructive to the individual and to society. Ultimately, Morrison suggests that the true antidote to racism isn't more violence and prejudice, as Guitar thinks: the antidote is love for oneself, the necessary precursor to love for other people. In this way, Milkman's transformation from a spoiled, myopic child to a mature, loving man might symbolize an alternative to the racism from white people that Black people endure, and the internalized racism of many Black people.

MEMORY AND STORYTELLING

All the characters in *Song of Solomon* are obsessed with and in many ways controlled by their memories of the past. The structure of the novel makes this very clear: Morrison often begins *in medias res* (in the middle of the action), and then loops back to describe how the characters got to this point.

In the first chapter, we see Macon walking through his town, unable to stop thinking about his painful experiences with his father and his sister. His memories are almost involuntary; they're a form of trauma, a set of experiences so intense that he can't help but relive them again and again. Throughout the later chapters, Morrison tells her story from the perspective of various characters; this requires telling the story out of order.

Indeed, she often begins a chapter at a later stage chronologically in the plot, then loops further and further back into the past before finishing where she started. Just as the characters' minds wander and are affected and pushed by their memories, Morrison's prose has to wander to keep up with them.

Memory can be a prison; it certainly is for Macon Dead. Memory is also a source of joy for Morrison's characters — often, while he's in the midst of a bad experience, Milkman remembers a better one. And memory is also a way to free oneself from self-imposed prison. Milkman travels the country, relying on others' memories of his father, his grandfather, and his great-grandfather. By putting these memories together, he creates a loose history of his family: his great-grandfather, Solomon, flew back to Africa, leaving behind his grandfather, Jake, who married an Indian woman, Sing. This story brings Milkman joy: he's proud of his great-grandfather's achievement, and eager to travel across the country telling everyone about it.

It's important to recognize that Milkman's interpretation of other people's memories isn't objective or scientific by any means. He believes what he wants to believe, and ignores the evidence that doesn't make for a good story; for instance, he decides to believe that Solomon flew back to Africa, while ignoring completely the possibility that his grandfather may have been enslaved. Memory poses a challenge, both to the people bearing the memories, and the people to whom these memories are passed. The challenge is to reshape memory into something satisfying and empowering, while still staying loyal to the basic outline of what happened. This requires creativity and imagination — one has to be a storyteller to reshape memory. Often, this kind of storytelling requires the suspension of disbelief. Milkman doesn't question that his great-grandfather flew back to Africa (though Susan Byrd certainly does).

For that matter, there are all sorts of magical scenes in *Song of Solomon* itself — a woman who must be about 200 years old, a father rising from the dead, Milkman flying at the end, etc. Toni Morrison doesn't seem to question any of these things — she offers them as the truth, and presumably, the reader is supposed to accept them in this way. While this may seem odd, one can argue that the same is true of the Bible: characters are described as living for centuries, rising from the dead, etc. The novel suggests that what's more important than questioning the likelihood (the literal truth) of magical events — in the Bible, in *Song of Solomon*, and in the family history Milkman assembles — is finding moral or spiritual truth in the stories, as Milkman clearly does.

By itself, memory never changes — it just repeats, endlessly and traumatically, causing pain and regret for the bearer of the memories. Memories can't always be forgotten, but they can be reshaped and assembled into a story; it's this difficult task that Milkman attempts for most of the second half of the novel.

MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY

As important as the relations between Black people and white people is to *Song of Solomon*, Morrison is equally interested in dramatizing the relationship between men and women.

In spite of (or even because of) the racism they endure from white culture, many Black men in the story are abusive and cruel to Black women. Guitar, for instance, regards women as inferior beings to men, even muttering to himself that Hagar is worthless because Milkman has decided that she is worthless. Most of the other women in the novel endure abuse from men: Reba, who's attacked by a man she brings home; Ruth, who's beaten by her husband, etc. Even Solomon, according to the history that Milkman constructs from talking to Susan Byrd and Circe, is a cruel man, who when he flies home to Africa also abandons his wife, Ryna, who goes insane with grief shortly thereafter.

Setting aside the specific actions that men take against women, it's clear that women and men are both, in a sense, trapped. Women are confined to the roles and places to which the rules of femininity confine them, while the same goes for men and the rules of masculinity. Most of the women in *Song of Solomon* are confined to the house, and occupy themselves with housekeeping duties. Ruth spends much of her adult life at home alone. At first she tries to use stereotypically feminine pastimes like decorating and cleaning as opportunities to bond with her husband, Macon. She makes decorative bowls full of fruit and flowers, but they do nothing to impress Macon — gender roles keep Ruth and Macon in their separate spheres. Similarly, Corinthians finds herself unable to find work after graduating from Bryn Mawr; she also finds it difficult to find a husband (Morrison hints that men are intimidated by intelligent women.) Eventually, she's forced to work as a maid — one of the most stereotypically feminized jobs there is — an occupation she finds humiliating.

If women tend to stick to feminine jobs and pursuits, then men do the same, and in much the same sense, they're trapped there. Milkman, for instance, doesn't get to go to college and see the rest of the country because, as the son of Macon Dead, he must stay behind to help his father run the family business. For years, he's imprisoned by his own devotion to money — both the company finances and his own greed. However, while men have many obligations and duties that women don't, they enjoy much greater freedom than women do. Business obligations aside, men have an easier time traveling safely than do women; both Guitar and Milkman venture to Virginia, for example. Men also have an easier time moving from one sexual partner to another. It is Milkman who tires of Hagar, not the other way around; perhaps this is because Milkman's culture encourages men to develop their sexual potency, while women

are demonized for infidelity.

If the world of *Song of Solomon* is split into feminine and masculine spheres, what to do about it? As usual, Pilate sets a good example. Though she's a devoted mother and grandmother, she also blurs gender norms by working as a bootlegger, a stereotypically masculine profession, and when Milkman first meets her, she's wearing men's clothing. Milkman seems to be following Pilate's example at the end of the book — instead of resorting to violence, a stereotypically masculine endeavor, he seems to be offering Guitar love and friendship. The rules of masculinity and femininity can't be changed overnight, Morrison suggests, but individual people can help to change them.

MERCY AND FORGIVENESS

As Morrison has written in her introduction to *Song of Solomon*, the novel moves from a state of no mercy to mercy. In the early chapters, we're confronted with a cold, cruel world where even the hospital nurses aren't very sympathetic when a man jumps off the roof. Macon is ruthless in collecting rent from his tenants, and Feather is equally stubborn in refusing to allow Milkman the child into his pool hall, simply because he hates Macon.

These last two examples of "no mercy" are significant, because they're identical: Macon's cruelty to Feather leads directly to Feather's cruelty to Milkman. It's the ancient principle of "an eye for an eye," and it's this principle with which mercy must be contrasted. We see "no mercy" in perhaps its most extreme form with the Seven Days group, which balances out every murder of a Black person with the murder of a white person. This is Guitar's harsh, unfeeling definition of justice: every crime must be countered with an equal crime.

The doctrine of "no mercy" has no conclusion— it just leads to an endless cycle of action and reaction, crime and punishment, revenge against previous acts of revenge. Guitar's revenge will never be finished, and neither will Macon's unpopularity in Michigan. If "no mercy" is to be converted into mercy, the novel suggests, the change must begin with individual people who, either through their own innate goodness or a sudden, spiritual epiphany, decide to forgive others.

The most compelling examples of mercy in the novel come from Pilate and Reba, who seem almost innately good. Even when they're victimized, they respond with as much mercy as they can muster. When Guitar and Milkman steal Pilate's bones, for instance, Pilate goes out of her way to think of a lie so that they wont be kept in jail. Even when Milkman's cruelty leads to Hagar's depression and death, Pilate doesn't kill Milkman; she hits him over the head with a bottle and later lets him go. If Guitar were in Pilate's position, he'd kill Milkman without a second thought. Mercy, then, is the suspension of "an eye for an eye," and it hinges on the principle of forgiveness.

The final scene of *Song of Solomon* sets mercy and no mercy — forgiveness and "an eye for an eye" — against one another. Either Milkman will avenge Pilate's death and restore a "balance" of justice, or he'll forgive Guitar for his sins, remembering all the love and help Guitar has given him over the years. Ultimately, mercy is a personal choice — there's no logic or argument that can "prove" that mercy is better than no mercy. In this way, Morrison ends her novel by passing moral responsibility from herself to us: Milkman has to choose between mercy and no mercy, and so does the reader.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

FLIGHT

Song of Solomon begins and ends with images of flight, and abounds with allusions to flying throughout its pages. The "flight" the opens the book is a failure: Smith tries to fly away from Mercy Hospital, but winds up killing himself. As Morrison has noted in her introduction, this episode with Smith suggests the imprisonment of Black Americans: their segregation from the rest of the country; their poverty, arising from racism and oppression; and of course their ancestors' kidnapping from Africa. Milkman falls into despair as a small child when he realizes that he cannot fly away; in other words, that he's imprisoned in his community and his family. As the story progresses, Milkman will achieve "flight" – freedom, escape – but also revise his definition of what flight can be.

GOLD

For much of his life, Milkman believes that flight is a form of escape. After growing tired of Hagar, he wants to escape their relationship, and in large part, he wants Pilate's **gold** so that he can escape his town and his economic dependence on his father and travel elsewhere. As he hunts for the gold, though, he comes to realize that the economic freedom gold could bring him is outweighed by the betrayal and jealousy the gold attracts. The broader point is that financial independence isn't "flight" at all – it's just a subtler, more psychological form of imprisonment, just as it has been for Milkman's father.

THE EARRING

In contrast to the economic interpretation of "flight," Morrison suggests a more internal, spiritual meaning for the word. One can fly by involving oneself in one's

community and one's friends; paradoxically, devotion to others yields *more* freedom, not less. Pilate devotes herself to Milkman and her daughter and granddaughter; Milkman later thinks that she can fly without leaving the ground, as if her love and sympathy give her a kind of independence that her brother, obsessed with his businesses, will never achieve. Whether Milkman achieves this second kind of flight is unclear. At the end of the novel, he seems to "fly" at Guitar, but we don't know if he'll kill his old friend or greet him with love. If we choose to believe that Milkman will do the former, we're subscribing the old principle of "an eye for an eye" – this would be a failed flight, by Pilate's definition. If, however, Milkman learns to overcome hatred and the desire for revenge – in essence, a kind of payment – then perhaps he's moved beyond financial concerns and achieved the flight that's eluded him all his life.

PILATE'S MISSING NAVEL

While **flight** is clearly the most important symbol in *Song of Solomon* – the most recurrent, the most evocative, the most clearly related to the protagonists' character arc – gold is nearly as important.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Song of Solomon* published in 2004.

Part 1, Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ Some of the city legislators, whose concern for appropriate names and the maintenance of the city's landmarks was the principal part of their political life, saw to it that "Doctor Street" was never used in any official capacity. And since they knew that only Southside residents kept it up, they had notices posted in the stores, barbershops, and restaurants in that part of the city saying that the avenue running northerly and southerly from Shore Road fronting the lake to the junction of routes 6 and 2 leading to Pennsylvania, and also running parallel to and between Rutherford Avenue and Broadway, had always been and would always be known as Mains Avenue and not Doctor Street.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

In the opening passage of the novel, we learn that in the town where the story is set (we're never told what town this is, exactly), there was a street that's important to the story. At various points, this street--which ran through a mostly Black neighborhood--was known as Doctor Street and Mains Street.

As Morrison makes clear, the two names of the street correspond to two different ways of looking at the Black community. "Doctor Street" is a testament to the hard work and professionalism of the community: there was indeed a Black doctor who operated in the area. "Mains Street," on the other hand, is a bland, forgettable name--an attempt by the white community to erase the culture and success of their Black neighbors. From the very beginning, names are important: by changing something (or someone's) name, one can entrench racist ideas.

❝ As she unfolded the white linen and let it billow over the fine mahogany table, she would look once more at the large water mark. She never set the table or passed through the dining room without looking at it. Like a lighthouse keeper drawn to his window to gaze once again at the sea, or a prisoner automatically searching out the sun as he steps into the yard for his hour of exercise, Ruth looked for the water mark several times during the day. She knew it was there, would always be there, but she needed to confirm its presence. Like the keeper of the lighthouse and the prisoner, she regarded it as a mooring, a checkpoint, some stable visual object that assured her that the world was still there; that this was life and not a dream. That she was alive somewhere, inside, which she acknowledged to be true only because a thing she knew intimately was out there, outside herself.

Related Characters: Ruth Foster

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

Ruth Foster, the frustrated, sheltered daughter of Dr. Foster, spends most of her time inside her husband's large, impressive house. Because she's so lonely, she tries to occupy herself with cooking and cleaning, but to no avail. In this quotation, we see Ruth fixating on a tiny water mark on her mahogany table. It's strange to imagine any adult obsessing over something so trivial. And yet Ruth is so lonely that her "friendship" with the watermark, pathetic though it may sound, is practically the only meaningful relationship in her life.

Moreover, Ruth's behavior in this scene indicates her pain

and frustration. Ruth is sad with her life, but she's too frightened to escape and find something better. Strangely, she's come to embrace her own pain and frustration--they are a part of herself. By the same token, Ruth embraces the watermark in her house: a tiny, maddening imperfection that she's nonetheless unwilling to do away with.

Part 1, Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ They had picture-taking people and everything waiting for the next person to walk in the door. But they never did put my picture in the paper. Me and Mama looked, too, didn't we?" She glanced at Pilate for confirmation and went on. "But they put the picture of the man who won second prize in. He won a war bond. He was white." "Second prize?" Guitar asked. "What kind of 'second prize'? Either you the half-millionth person or you ain't. Can't be no next-to-the-half-millionth." "Can if the winner is Reba," Hagar said. "The only reason they got a second was cause she was the first. And the only reason they gave it to her was because of them cameras."

Related Characters: Ruth Foster, Guitar Bains, Hagar (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Guitar and Milkman meet Reba and Hagar, the daughters of Pilate. Reba is renowned for her luckiness: she's always the first to win raffles and lotteries. Here, for example, Reba wins a prize for being the five-hundred-thousandth person to walk into a Sears and Roebuck store.

Reba's extreme luckiness tells us a few things about the style of the novel. Above all, her luckiness suggests the magical realism of the book. In real life, almost nobody is as lucky as Reba--and yet within the limits of the story nobody comments on Reba's fortune; it's accepted as a given (the very definition of magical realism). Furthermore, Reba's surreal good luck accentuates the racism of her society. As we learn here, Reba's picture isn't taken after she wins the prize, because the racist newspaper publishers don't want to honor a Black woman (they give her the prize money but don't put her picture in the paper). Even with all her luck, Reba *still* loses out to the racism of her society--a harsh reminder of the extent of all the other Black characters' "bad luck."

❝ "Boy, you got better things to do with your time. Besides, it's time you started learning how to work. You start Monday. After school come to my office; work a couple of hours there and learn what's real. Pilate can't teach you a thing you can use in this world. Maybe the next, but not this one. Let me tell you right now the one important thing you'll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too. Starting Monday, I'm going to teach you how."

Related Characters: Macon Dead II (speaker), Milkman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Macon Dead II, irritated with his son, Milkman, for spending so much time with Pilate, decides to give him some lessons in "being a man." Macon explains that Milkman must begin adulthood by aspiring to own as much as possible: ownership is the only way to be powerful and successful.

Macon's lessons for Milkman are a stark reminder of how many Black people in the U.S. tried to escape racism and gain independence by making money at all costs (a "tough" strategy famously exemplified by Booker T. Washington). Macon's advice seems harsh and deliberately un-spiritual, hence Macon's observation that Pilate's side of life is only fit for Heaven not Earth. Macon seems to believe that there's no point in being religious or hoping for the next world--the only way to get ahead in life is to own things. He has a point, as financial independence is one way for a Black man to escape many of the racist obstacles of society, but at the same time Macon's philosophy seems devoid of any real happiness or spiritual fulfillment.

Part 1, Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ "Since I was little. Since my father got sliced up in a sawmill and his boss came by and gave us kids some candy. Divinity. A big sack of divinity. His wife made it special for us. It's sweet, divinity is. Sweeter than syrup. Real sweet. Sweeter than..." He stopped walking and wiped from his forehead the beads of sweat that were collecting there. His eyes paled and wavered. He spit on the sidewalk. "Ho—hold it," he whispered, and stepped into a space between a fried-fish restaurant and Lilly's Beauty Parlor.

Related Characters: Guitar Bains (speaker), Milkman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61-62

Explanation and Analysis

Guitar, one of Milkman's friends, recalls his childhood, when his father was killed in a sawing accident. Guitar recalls what happened after his father's death in cinematic detail: the sawmill owner gave him sweet candy. Ever since eating the owner's sweet candy, Guitar has found himself unable to enjoy sweetness of any kind.

Guitar's quotation is important on many different levels. First, we have the evocative conceit of a white store owner offering candy to a Black child after the child's father dies. This incident is meant to symbolize the way that white Americans (even the well-meaning ones) deal with racism and oppression: instead of trying to solve the problem or make any fundamental change in their way of life, white Americans try to "paper over" the tragedy with sappy cliches or quick fixes--like giving a child candy. Furthermore, the incident forms an important part of Guitar's character: he's so disgusted with the white man's fake kindness that he seems to abandon kindness altogether (symbolized by his rejection of sugar). Perhaps Guitar goes too far in responding to the tragedy in his life: he becomes *too* brutal in his desire to obtain justice for the deaths of his friends and family, murdering white people as indiscriminately as his own family was murdered.

"In the bed," he said, and stopped for so long Milkman was not sure he was going to continue. "In the bed. That's where she was when I opened the door. Laying next to him. Naked as a yard dog, kissing him. Him dead and white and puffy and skinny, and she had his fingers in her mouth.

Related Characters: Macon Dead II (speaker), Milkman, Ruth Foster, Doctor Foster

Related Themes:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Macon Dead II tells his son, Milkman, the "truth" about Ruth and her father. Macon believes that he's seen Ruth kissing her father in a perverse, incestuous matter: he walked in on her naked and kissing her dying father's fingers. Macon interprets the incident as unambiguously sexual, suggesting that Ruth was locked in some kind of larger sexual relationship with her father.

As we come to see, however, the incident is far from unambiguous. While Macon continues to maintain that Ruth and her father were having an incestuous affair, Ruth herself maintains that her father never touched her, and in fact she was kissing her father's fingers because he was dying, and his fingers were the only parts of his body that he could still feel. Macon--whether he's right or wrong about his wife--has projected his own sexual insecurity onto the incident: i.e., he's so jealous of Ruth that he's assumed she's sleeping with her own father.

Part 1, Chapter 4 Quotes

She was the third beer. Not the first one, which the throat receives with almost tearful gratitude; nor the second, that confirms and extends the pleasure of the first. But the third, the one you drink because it's there, because it can't hurt, and because what difference does it make?

Related Characters: Milkman, Ruth Foster

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

Here Milkman thinks about Hagar, the woman with whom he's been having an affair. Milkman is attracted to Hagar, but he seems not to think of her as a full human being. As far as Milkman is concerned, Hagar is an "object" for his consumption, not really so different from a beer. Moreover, Hagar isn't even the "first beer"--he's so experienced with women that he thinks of Hagar as a mere indulgence, barely even worth talking about.

Milkman's behavior in this scene is surprising, in no small part because he's being so misogynistic about Hagar. Milkman has no real models for how to treat women: he's surrounded by sexist and women-hating men. Partly as a result, Milkman echoes the mistakes of his father and friends. (The sexism of Milkman's community certainly shouldn't excuse Milkman's behavior, but it provides a partial explanation.) It's also interesting to consider how harsh Morrison is being on Milkman: even though Milkman is the protagonist of the story, Morrison doesn't shy away from showing him in all his faults.

Part 1, Chapter 5 Quotes

"...because the fact is that I am a small woman. I don't mean little; I mean small, and I'm small because I was pressed small. I lived in a great big house that pressed me into a small package. I had no friends, only schoolmates who wanted to touch my dresses and my white silk stockings. But I didn't think I'd ever need a friend because I had him. I was small, but he was big. The only person who ever really cared whether I lived or died. Lots of people were interested in whether I lived or died, but he cared. He was not a good man, Macon. Certainly he was an arrogant man, and often a foolish and destructive one. But he cared whether and he cared how I lived, and there was, and is, no one else in the world who ever did.

Related Characters: Ruth Foster (speaker), Milkman, Doctor Foster

Related Themes:

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ruth tells her son, Milkman, the truth about her own father, Dr. Foster. Ruth claims--contrary to what Milkman has heard from his father, Macon II--that that there was nothing perverse in her relationship with Dr. Foster. Instead, she thought of her father as her protector and only true companion. Ruth knew her father well enough to realize that he wasn't a good man by any stretch of the imagination. But because Ruth was so lonely and sad, she turned to her father anyway; he was the only person who cared about her.

It's important to recognize that while Ruth never specifically talks about any kind of sexual relationship with Foster, she doesn't explicitly deny as much either. Overall, however, we see that she loved her father deeply because he cared about her and protected her. In a world full of sexist men, Ruth had no choice but to lean on her father for support and friendship.

Part 1, Chapter 6 Quotes

"There is a society. It's made up of a few men who are willing to take some risks. They don't initiate anything; they don't even choose. They are as indifferent as rain. But when a Negro child, Negro woman, or Negro man is killed by whites and nothing is done about it by their law and their courts, this society selects a similar victim at random, and they execute him or her in a similar manner if they can. If the Negro was hanged, they hang; if a Negro was burnt, they burn; raped and murdered, they rape and murder.

Related Characters: Guitar Bains (speaker), Milkman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

Here Guitar illustrates the iron law of "blood for blood" that he holds as a member of his secret society, the Seven Days. As Guitar sees it, there is a constant "exchange" between the white community and the Black community. Whenever a Black child is killed by racist white people, the Black community as a whole has a duty to avenge the child's death by killing a member of the white community. While most people in the Black community lack the determination to avenge their peers' deaths, the aim of Guitar's secret society is precisely to execute white people.

Guitar is calm and intimidating as he explains this violent rule to Milkman. He never stops to address an obvious moral flaw in the system: he and his peers may be executing innocent white people whenever they avenge the murder of an innocent Black person. It may be "just" to punish murder with murder, but it isn't exactly fair to group an entire race together and consider them all equally complicit in a crime. While white people can obviously still be racist and uphold racist structures without actually *killing* Black people, in practice the idea that an innocent white child should be killed in exchange for an innocent Black child seems brutal and unjust.

Part 1, Chapter 8 Quotes

He'd always believed his childhood was sterile, but the knowledge Macon and Ruth had given him wrapped his memory of it in septic sheets, heavy with the odor of illness, misery, and unforgiving hearts. His rebellions, minor as they were, had all been in the company of, or shared with, Guitar. And this latest Jack and the Beanstalk bid for freedom, even though it had been handed to him by his father—assigned almost—stood some chance of success.

Related Characters: Milkman, Macon Dead II, Guitar Bains, Ruth Foster

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

Milkman and Guitar have planned to work together to steal gold from Pilate's house. Milkman wants to steal gold for a number of reasons, but above all, he wants to gain a measure of freedom and independence for himself--he thinks that with the money the gold will provide, he'll be able to travel far away and start a life for himself.

As the quotation indicates, Milkman's desire for freedom and independence is psychological as well as geographic. He's learned a lot about his family in recent months: he knows about the possibly incestuous relationship between his mother and grandfather; his other grandfather's years as an enslaved person, etc. Milkman is, in short, haunted by his family's past, and by the nightmarish legacy of racism as a whole. For now, he thinks that the best way to escape his own past is to make money and use it to "start over."

❝ "How come it can't fly no better than a chicken?" Milkman asked. "Too much tail. All that jewelry weighs it down. Like vanity. Can't nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down." The peacock jumped onto the hood of the Buick and once more spread its tail, sending the flashy Buick into oblivion. "Faggot." Guitar laughed softly. "White faggot."

Related Characters: Guitar Bains, Milkman (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

In this symbolic passage, Milkman and Guitar, preparing to steal gold from Pilate's house, notice a large peacock strutting around outside. As Milkman and Guitar discuss the bird, they notice that it's unable to fly: it is so weighed down with its fancy plumage that it can't fly away from its home on the ground.

The peacock has obvious symbolic resonances for the characters--it's like an inkblot test, revealing the characters' psychology. From Milkman's perspective, the bird seems to symbolize the weight of the past. Milkman sees himself as being weighed down by the legacy of his family--slavery, incest, violence, etc. And yet we, the readers, recognize that the peacock is also an omen of the futility of Milkman's plans to free himself. Milkman believes that by stealing gold, he'll be able to "fly away" to a new place--but we suspect that he, like, the peacock, will get too weighed down by his new wealth to find any real freedom at all. Finally, we should note that Guitar thinks of the peacock as the symbol of white extravagance and complacency: the bird, like the average wealthy white man, is a ridiculous, incompetent figure (no match for a clever, motivated Black man like Guitar).

Part 1, Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ Amanuensis. That was the word she chose, and since it was straight out of the nineteenth century, her mother approved, relishing the blank stares she received when she told her lady guests what position her daughter had acquired with the State Poet Laureate. "She's Michael-Mary Graham's amanuensis." The rickety Latin word made the work her daughter did (she, after all, wasn't required to work) sound intricate, demanding, and totally in keeping with her education.

Related Characters: First Corinthians, Ruth Foster, Miss Graham

Related Themes:

Page Number: 187

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we catch up with First Corinthians, the daughter of Ruth and Macon Dead II. First Corinthians has gone to college, and had a wealthy upbringing. And yet after she graduates, she finds that she's unable to get any work for herself, except for humiliating housework. In the end, First Corinthians finds a compromise: she works as an amanuensis, i.e., a literary assistant or secretary, to Miss Graham, a wealthy white woman. Although the work is tiring and extremely basic, First Corinthians is proud that the *name* of her job is fancy and old-fashioned.

First Corinthians' desire to rename the job with Miss Graham betrays her vanity: she's concerned with how her peers perceive her, and doesn't want to be seen as a failure (a college-educated woman doing unskilled labor). Moreover, the very fact that First Corinthians would only be capable of getting work as an amanuensis suggests the continuing frustrations of racism--to most white employers, an educated Black woman is no different from an uneducated one, so when it comes to the practical realities of employment, all First Corinthians' work comes to nothing.

She was First Corinthians Dead, daughter of a wealthy property owner and the elegant Ruth Foster, granddaughter of the magnificent and worshipped Dr. Foster, who had been the second man in the city to have a two-horse carriage, and a woman who had turned heads on every deck of the Queen Mary and had Frenchmen salivating all over Paris. Corinthians Dead, who had held herself pure all these years (well, almost all, and almost pure), was now banging on the car-door window of a yardman.

Related Characters: First Corinthians, Ruth Foster, Henry Porter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 197-198

Explanation and Analysis

First Corinthians has begun a romance with an unlikely suitor, Henry Porter. Henry Porter has a reputation for being an old drunk (indeed, we first see him when he's urinating in public). But in this chapter, Porter seems like a pleasant, self-controlled, middle-aged man. First Corinthians is disgusted with Porter, since she is much younger than he, and comes from a much wealthier family. In the quotation, we see Corinthians repeating her family's legacy like a chant. Pathetically, Corinthians has to *remind* herself of her family's dignity--her mother's trip to Paris, her grandfather's purchase of a carriage, and other milestones that become increasingly irrelevant with each passing year. Corinthians has no job or husband to be proud of--her only real cultural asset is her family's fading legacy. So although Corinthians might seem snooty and arrogant in the passage, we can also feel sorry for her: she clings to the past because racist society has denied her the present she deserves.

Part 2, Chapter 10 Quotes

"Look. It's the condition our condition is in. Everybody wants the life of a black man. Everybody. White men want us dead or quiet—which is the same thing as dead. White women, same thing. They want us, you know, 'universal,' human, no 'race consciousness.' Tame, except in bed. They like a little racial loincloth in the bed. But outside the bed they want us to be individuals. You tell them, 'But they lynched my papa,' and they say, 'Yeah, but you're better than the lynchers are, so forget it.' And black women, they want your whole self. Love, they call it, and understanding.

Related Characters: Guitar Bains (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 222

Explanation and Analysis

Guitar makes this speech to Milkman, who's being chased by his jealous, spurned lover, Hagar. Guitar's speech is both self-serving and insightful: he argues that all of the United States looks to destroy "the life of a black man." White men and women think of Black men as scary and intimidating: they want Black men to be quiet and docile, i.e., dead. Guitar goes on to argue that Black women want Black men to love them completely--in other words, to commit to monogamy and marriage right away, and to not be angry about the racism they have to face.

Guitar's complaints that Black women are too "needy" sound like sexism, however: Guitar seems to have no real respect for Black women, meaning that he treats them like sexual objects, not human beings. Guitar's speech is designed to make Milkman feel better about ignoring Hagar. Yet in the process, Guitar makes it clear that his own views of women are quite twisted.

He loosened his collar and lit another cigarette. Here in this dim room he sat with the woman who had helped deliver his father and Pilate; who had risked her job, her life, maybe, to hide them both after their father was killed, emptied their slop jars, brought them food at night and pans of water to wash. Had even sneaked off to the village to have the girl Pilate's name and snuffbox made into an earring. Then healed the ear when it got infected. And after all these years was thrilled to see what she believed was one of them. Healer, deliverer, in another world she would have been the head nurse at Mercy. Instead she tended Weimaraners and had just one selfish wish: that when she died somebody would find her before the dogs ate her.

Related Characters: Milkman, Circe

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 246

Explanation and Analysis

In this moving passage, Milkman--traveling through the country to track down the mysterious gold and learn about his family history--comes face-to-face with a remarkable

woman, Circe. Circe is the nurse who delivered Pilate, as well as Macon Dead II, Milkman's father. Furthermore, Circe has spent her entire life caring for others--not just Macon II and Pilate, but children, dogs, strangers, etc. Milkman stops to contemplate the injustice of Circe's life: if she weren't Black, she probably would have ended up working as a prestigious nurse or a doctor. Instead, she lives in squalor, devoting herself entirely to helping others.

The scene is an important turning point, since it marks one of the first times in the novel when Milkman shows genuine sympathy for another person--and a woman at that. Milkman is beginning to change--transforming from a selfish, materialistic brat to a more enlightened, forgiving figure. (The passage is also a great example of Morrison's magical realism--it's almost mathematically impossible that Circe could have tended to the Dead family for so long and still be alive, and yet here she is.)

Part 2, Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ It sounded old. Deserve. Old and tired and beaten to death. Deserve. Now it seemed to him that he was always saying or thinking that he didn't deserve some bad luck, or some bad treatment from others. He'd told Guitar that he didn't "deserve" his family's dependence, hatred, or whatever. That he didn't even "deserve" to hear all the misery and mutual accusations his parents unloaded on him. Nor did he "deserve" Hagar's vengeance. But why shouldn't his parents tell him their personal problems? If not him, then who? And if a stranger could try to kill him, surely Hagar, who knew him and whom he'd thrown away like a wad of chewing gum after the flavor was gone—she had a right to try to kill him too.

Related Characters: Milkman, Guitar Bains, Hagar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 276-277

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Milkman comes face-to-face with his own selfish behavior. Milkman has spent most of his life believing that he doesn't deserve what's happened to him. He thinks of himself as the victim of an unjust universe: a Black man in a racist society; the victim of an angry woman (Hagar); the reluctant bearer of his family's tragic history, etc. At every point, Milkman has pretended that he's above such pain--he claims that he's entitled to better.

As Milkman studies the *language* of his own thoughts, however (the word "Deserve"), he comes to see how silly his beliefs have been. Milkman recognizes that he's not "entitled" to anything in life--he must accept his problems and pains. Furthermore, he realizes that he does, in fact, deserve some of the hardship he's experienced: he certainly deserves some pain for mistreating Hagar, for example.

Milkman's epiphany has an unmistakably religious flavor--his thought process is similar to that of Job at the end of the Biblical book of Job. Like Job, Milkman realizes that he doesn't automatically deserve anything in life--everything good in his life has been given to him by someone else, while his sins and misdeeds are partly his own, not just the products of a corrupt world.

Part 2, Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ Guitar looked at the cookie again, then back into Milkman's eyes. Nothing changed in his face. Milkman knew it sounded lame. It was the truth, but it sounded like a lie. A weak lie too. He also knew that in all his life, Guitar had never seen Milkman give anybody a hand, especially a stranger; he also knew that they'd even discussed it, starting with Milkman's not coming to his mother's rescue in a dream he had. Guitar had accused him of selfishness and indifference; told him he wasn't serious, and didn't have any fellow feeling—none whatsoever. Now he was standing there saying that he willingly, spontaneously, had helped an old white man lift a huge, heavy crate. But it was true. It was true. And he'd prove it.

Related Characters: Milkman, Guitar Bains

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 296

Explanation and Analysis

Here Milkman confronts Guitar, now his sworn enemy. Guitar believes that Milkman has run off with the gold which the two of them tried to steal from Pilate (in reality, there is no gold). Guitar, who wants the gold to fund his secret society, wants to kill Milkman for his betrayal. He confirms his belief that Milkman is a thief when he sees Milkman at the train station, helping an old white man lift a crate into the train. Although Milkman was only helping the man, he knows that from Guitar's perspective, it looks like he's taking Pilate's gold out of the city.

The irony of the scene is that Milkman has become a good man--but too late. Milkman really *was* trying to help the old man, but because he's spent most of his life refusing to help

anyone, he knows full-well that Guitar will never believe the truth. The passage conveys how greatly Milkman has changed in only a few days. The encounters with Circe, and the general spirit of traveling the country in search of his past have taught Milkman to be a stronger, kinder man--the very antithesis of his former self. Milkman's transformation is nothing short of miraculous--and so of course, Guitar (blinded by his hatred) doesn't believe it.

Part 2, Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ "Look at how I look. I look awful. No wonder he didn't want me. I look terrible." Her voice was calm and reasonable, as though the last few days hadn't been lived through at all. "I need to get up from here and fix myself up. No wonder!" Hagar threw back the bedcover and stood up. "Ohhh. I smell too. Mama, heat me some water. I need a bath. A long one. We got any bath salts left? Oh, Lord, my head. Look at that." She peered into the compact mirror again. "I look like a ground hog. Where's the comb?"

Related Characters: Hagar (speaker), Milkman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 308-309

Explanation and Analysis

Hagar--still in love with Milkman, and still furious with Milkman for abandoning her--tries to make herself prettier. She's convinced herself that the reason Milkman left her behind is that she's ugly; therefore, the only solution to her problem is to become more beautiful.

Hagar seems calm and controlled; paradoxically, though, her calmness makes her seem more frightening. Instead of lashing out at Milkman, she's begun to blame herself for her own pain and hardship--a poisonous mindset indeed. Milkman's indifference to Hagar's happiness has left her miserable and self-hating. The tragedy is that Milkman has become a better man as a result of his travels through the country--but too late to save Hagar from her fate.

❝ The people turned around. Reba had entered and was singing too. Pilate neither acknowledged her entrance nor missed a beat. She simply repeated the word "Mercy," and Reba replied. The daughter standing at the back of the chapel, the mother up front, they sang.

Related Characters: Pilate Dead, Hagar, Reba

Related Themes:

Page Number: 317

Explanation and Analysis

Pilate mourns the death of her own daughter, Hagar. Hagar has died, surreally, of a broken heart, largely because Milkman has romanced her and then abandoned her altogether. In church, Pilate and her other daughter, Reba, sing out on behalf of their dead family member. Notice that Pilate and Reba seem almost psychically aware of each other's presence--even without looking up, Pilate recognizes when Reba enters the church, and keeps singing in perfect time.

The scene shows Pilate at her most religious. Pilate sings beautifully on behalf of her dead daughter, and in general, we see her taking on the qualities of a Christ-figure as the novel nears an ending. Notably, Pilate doesn't show any signs of fury or anger with Milkman--unlike Guitar, she's not really concerned with revenge at all; her concern, above all else, is her love for her children.

Part 2, Chapter 15 Quotes

❝ "Yeah. That tribe. That flyin motherfuckin tribe. Oh, man! He didn't need no airplane. He just took off; got fed up. All the way up! No more cotton! No more bales! No more orders! No more shit! He flew, baby. Lifted his beautiful black ass up in the sky and flew on home. Can you dig it? Jesus God, that must have been something to see. And you know what else? He tried to take his baby boy with him. My grandfather. Wow! Woooee! Guitar! You hear that? Guitar, my great-granddaddy could flyyyyyy and the whole damn town is named after him. Tell him, Sweet. Tell him my great- granddaddy could fly."

Related Characters: Milkman (speaker), Guitar Bains, Solomon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 328

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Milkman embraces the knowledge he's just learned. His distant ancestor, Jake, was the son of a man named Solomon--a man who's so famous in some parts of country that his name can be found everywhere. Solomon,

according to legend, was an enslaved person who, dissatisfied with slavery, decided to fly back to Africa--and did. Solomon tried to take his favorite child, Jake, back to Africa with him, but failed. Now, Milkman realizes, he is the descendant of Jake--and therefore the inheritor of a rich, magical family legacy.

Milkman's joy in this scene stems from the fact that he's finally found a history for himself. After years of being tormented by the knowledge that his grandfather was a pathetic, abused enslaved person, and his *other* grandfather might have been guilty of incest, Milkman is overjoyed to finally have a family history to be proud of. The fact that this family history is bizarre and possibly imaginary is never addressed. In other words, it's never clear if Solomon's ability to fly is accepted as a fact according to the rules of the novel (i.e., Solomon's flight is an example of magical realism) or if Milkman is so desperate to find something to believe in that he *chooses* to believe in a myth. Ultimately, though, the reality of Milkman's family history matters less than the effect it has on him. Milkman has finally found a family for himself--one to be embraced, not despised.

❝ He closed his eyes and thought of the black men in Shalimar, Roanoke, Petersburg, Newport News, Danville, in the Blood Bank, on Darling Street, in the pool halls, the barbershops. Their names. Names they got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names that bore witness.

Related Characters: Milkman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 330

Explanation and Analysis

After "discovering" (in reality, more like, "choosing to believe") that his ancestor Solomon flew back to Africa, Milkman is in a state of bliss. He rides the bus all the way back to his hometown, no longer the least bit concerned with tracking down the gold that motivated his quest in the first place. As he rides the bus, Milkman stares out the window and sees a universe of names, each with its own special story and history.

Milkman has found something more valuable than gold: the power of language. For most of the novel, Milkman has tried to come to terms with his conflicted family legacy, a legacy full of betrayal, incest, and slavery. As we reach the end of the novel, Milkman seems to realize the truth: he's been struggling to find the right *words* all along. Finally confident in the strength of his family "name," Milkman can see, very clearly, that the struggle for power itself is a struggle for the right to name. Milkman's realization takes us back to the first lines of the novel, in which Morrison showed us how a seemingly trivial dispute over the proper name for "Mains Avenue" reflected the struggle for power between Black people and white people in the community.

❝ Milkman stopped waving and narrowed his eyes. He could just make out Guitar's head and shoulders in the dark. "You want my life?" Milkman was not shouting now. "You need it? Here." Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees—he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it.

Related Characters: Milkman (speaker), Guitar Bains, Solomon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 337

Explanation and Analysis

At the very end of the novel, Guitar--still furious with Milkman for supposedly stealing the gold for himself--tries to kill Milkman, accidentally murdering Pilate in the process. Here, Milkman asks Guitar if Guitar wants Milkman's life, and then runs toward him. It's left to us to decide what will happen next: will Guitar kill Milkman; will they embrace and forgive one another, will Milkman "fly away," etc.

Although Morrison ends the novel on a note of ambiguity, a few things are clear. In the second half of the novel, Milkman has become a better man: more selfless, forgiving, and loving. Here, he seems to be forgiving Guitar for his horrendous crime; indeed, Milkman seems to be surrendering all his anger and desire for revenge, preaching forgiveness and mercy to an extent that Guitar seems incapable of matching.

The key word of this final passage is "surrender." Guitar has lived his life based on the belief that surrender is always a sign of weakness: for example, the Black community has largely "surrendered" to the white community's authority.

In contrast to Guitar's desire for revenge and aggression, Milkman has surrendered completely: he's given up any desire for bloodshed, material wealth, or power. And yet

Milkman is anything but weak; on the contrary, his humility and spirituality give him power (here, for example, he's brave and eerily calm, not even shouting at Guitar anymore).

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1, CHAPTER 1

It is February 18, 1931, and an employee of North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance, Robert Smith, leaves a note on the door of his house saying that he plans to **fly** from Mercy Hospital to "the other side of Lake Superior"—from the South to the North—at 3 pm. News of Smith's "flight" travels fast by word of mouth, and a crowd of forty or fifty people, most of whom are unemployed or very young, shows up to watch.

In her foreword to Song of Solomon, *Toni Morrison says that the initial description of Smith's note is meant to sound dry and dull, like something you'd skim in the newspaper. She'll spend the rest of the novel unpacking this initial description. There is a great deal of symbolism in the idea of a "flight" from the South to the North as the journey from the American South to the North is the path that many Black people took during the period in which the novel is set and was associated with the idea of freedom. It's also no coincidence that Morrison's novel begins at a place called Mercy. Mercy is often strikingly absent from her characters' lives, but granting it is also a moral act that emerges as being critical to her characters.*

The flight takes place in "Southside," on the shore end of Not Doctor Street. Originally, this road was called Doctor Street, since it was located in a Black part of the city, and the only Black doctor in town lived there. Yet because the local post office listed the street as Mains Avenue, letters delivered to Doctor Street were discarded. During World War I, Black soldiers from the town listed their address as "Doctor Street," making the name more official, but after the war, local government officials concerned about the proper names for things ensured that the name "Doctor Street" was never used, and put up a notice saying that the street would always be called Mains Avenue and not Doctor Street. The locals henceforth called the area "Not Doctor Street."

Slowly, Morrison begins to explain Smith's flight. In the process, she establishes a key theme of the novel, the importance of names. In just a few paragraphs, she describes the history of a name: "Doctor Street." The first conflict between Black people and white people in the novel is a conflict over what to name a place: though Black people live on the street and want to name it after an important Black person who lived there, white people insist on giving it a bland, generic name. The message is clear: only powerful people have the right to name things — in short, naming is *power. Yet though the town's Black community fails to establish the name "Doctor Street," they find a way to rebel against the white officials by giving the street an informal name, "Not Doctor Street." Names can be a tool of oppression, but they can also be tools of rebellion, they can be a way of hiding a culture, but they are also things that a person or community can make their own. It's interesting, then, that Morrison doesn't (and won't) reveal the name of the town where her novel is set — it's as if it could be happening anywhere.*

The Black people of the town sometimes call the local hospital No Mercy Hospital, since before 1931 Black women are forced to give birth outside the building, not in it. The first Black woman to be admitted is the daughter of the doctor for whom "Not Doctor Street" is named, which happened the same year that Smith jumps from the cupola of the hospital. It may have been Smith's "flight" that encouraged the hospital to begin accepting Black mothers.

There are no named white characters in the novel. Yet the existence and oppressive power of institutional white racism is established in these earliest scenes of the novel. And in the fact that the hospital might have started taking Black mothers because of Smith's action, that Black people's attempts to "fly" can have impacts.

The doctor's daughter sees Smith, wearing blue wings, standing on the cupola and drops the pieces of red velvet cut to look like rose petals that she is carrying in a basket; her two children pick them up. Others join in helping her pick up the petals, and one woman begins to sing "O Sugarman done **fly**." Hospital officials gather outside, and though they think at first that they are witnessing an unusual ritual, they eventually come to their senses and begin giving orders. One nurse asks a stout woman if the young people gathered outside are her children, and then tells her to send a boy inside to the emergency admissions office, spelling out the word Admissions (incorrectly) to make sure he goes to the right place. The stout woman replies, "Guitar," much to the white nurse's confusion. The boy notes that the nurse misspelled "admissions."

For the second time so far, Morrison establishes a conflict between the novel's Black and white characters. The white characters run the hospital, and treat their Black patients and neighbors with contempt, dismissing their behavior outside the hospital as a "ritual." The white people also view the Black people as inarticulate and foolish, are clearly not —Guitar, a child, is a better speller than the nurse. It's important to note that when the nurse doesn't understand what "Guitar" means, neither do we — in fact, Morrison goes out of her way to confuse us, putting this proper name at the beginning of the sentence so that we're not sure if it's a proper name or not. This is a message to readers: the town community effectively speaks a different language, and it will take some time before we can understand it.

The crowd knows Mr. Smith, since he travels to their houses to collect money twice a month. The community mocks him when he arrives at their doors, since he represents death and sickness, but it also regards him as a "nice," if boring, man. Jumping from a roof, the people think, is the most interesting thing Smith has done. Smith loses his balance and tries to hold on. The same woman sings "O Sugarman" again. By the time the fire department arrives, Smith has heard the song and jumped.

It remains a mystery why Smith jumps; not even the community that watches him understands what's going on, so the reader certainly doesn't, either. This is a common tactic of Morrison's, to reveal an event and then loop around and slowly reveal its significance so that it resonates within the larger structure of the novel. In this case this opening gives Morrison the opportunity to introduce the community and its tensions and a sense of its history, and to establish the importance of the ideas of flight and of song and the specific song of "O Sugarman."

The next day, the doctor's daughter gives birth inside the Mercy Hospital, the first Black woman to do so. Her child grows up quiet and introverted, in part because he learns that he can't **fly**. His mother, Ruth Foster, lives in the large house that used to belong to her father, Doctor Foster. Most women in the community hate her, but some feel sorry for her, thinking that her large home is a prison, not a palace.

After Smith's failed attempt at flight, we begin to understand how imprisoned the townspeople are. They're imprisoned by racism, which keeps them poor and living in the same segregated community. But even with the Black community, some people are freer than others. Ruth, whose wealth seemingly gives her more freedom, is actually less free than her neighbors.

Ruth's son grows up with his older sisters. Ruth is married to an angry, imposing man, Macon Dead. Dead bullies his daughters and wife, and while his presence makes them quiet and unhappy, they come to expect it and derive excitement from it. When Ruth cooks for her husband, she expects him to complain about the food and criticize her for it. Whenever she passes by the dining room, she notices an old water mark on the wooden table; like the sun to a prisoner, the water mark gives Ruth comfort, and, as an external object, reminds her that she is alive. Ruth tries to remove the water mark from the table, but it becomes larger and more noticeable over time.

Ruth spends so many years with Macon Dead that she comes to expect and in some ways depend upon his abuse — this is a common occurrence among women in abusive relationships. One can take the water mark to symbolize a few different things. Ruth depends on this external, insignificant thing for her own worth — much as she relies on an unkind husband. At the same time, Ruth's decision to hide the water mark suggests the way she tries to repress her own sadness, an action, which only makes her sadder, just as the water mark only gets larger.

At many points throughout the year, Ruth fills a bowl with flowers, twigs, and berries and places it in the center of the table. It reminds her of the joys of her childhood, when her father was alive. Whenever she points out the beauty of the centerpiece to Macon, he only criticizes her cooking. Eventually she removes the bowl, exposing the water mark on the table.

By making a beautiful bowl, Ruth seems to be trying to connect with her husband, to share her own joy with him. Because Macon rejects the bowl, Ruth retreats into herself and gives up trying to connect him.


Ruth gets through her days by finding small pleasures, usually when her husband is absent. In the afternoon, she takes her son into her father's study and holds him in her lap, trying to avoid looking at his legs, which almost reach the floor. Ruth breastfeeds her son, despite the fact that he is slightly too old. When she does this, she senses that her son is drinking out of a sense of obligation. She feels as if he is pulling light or **gold** from her body. One afternoon, Freddie the janitor comes to Ruth's house and sees her breast-feeding her son. Ruth jumps up and covers her body, embarrassed but also sad that she will no longer be able to enjoy this activity, since by jumping up in embarrassment she has proven to her son that what she is doing is wrong.

Ruth's interactions with her son may be difficult to comprehend, since they both are and aren't typical motherly behavior. Ruth is close with her child, and seems to want him to stay a child forever, rather than grow into a man like her husband; this is why she tries not to look at his legs. At the same time, Ruth's relationship with her child seems intensely sexual; bizarre as it may sound, Ruth seems to turn to her child for sexual pleasure because her husband refuses her any. That she knows what she is doing is wrong is obvious — this is why she recoils when someone sees her.

Based on what he sees, Freddie calls Ruth's son a "milkman," and spreads the story of how Ruth nursed him around the Southside of the town. Eventually, everyone calls Ruth's son Milkman. Macon Dead never learns where Milkman gets his nickname, since Freddie never tells him, but he suspects that it is a "dirty" name, and has something to do with his wife, whom he views with disgust.

Again, we see the power of names. By spreading a nickname around town, Freddie inadvertently names someone else's child, and changes that child's relationship with his parents. We see the changes in particular between Milkman and his father — Milkman's name alienates Macon from his child. And it establishes Milkman in a way as someone who doesn't have his own name; and much of the second half of the novel will involve him searching into his past and finding names to connect it to.


Macon Dead spent fifteen years wanting a son; then when he had one — Milkman — he was still bitter. As a younger man, Macon Dead used to enjoy slowly undressing Ruth. He would remove her underwear and roll down her stockings, never revealing her feet, and then have quick sex, which both he and Ruth enjoyed. In the present, Macon remembers the underwear fondly, but nothing else. No one tells him how his son acquired the nickname Milkman. Most people don't because they're afraid of Macon, but one, Macon's sister, who he despises, doesn't tell him because she doesn't care.

The fact that Macon never fully undresses Ruth even during intercourse suggests the separation between them. Similarly, the fact that Macon remembers the underwear but not Ruth herself suggests that he was never attracted to Ruth herself, only to external things about her, like her wealth. The detail about Macon's unnamed sister establishes her as different as other people, and also as less affected by either fear or shame.


Macon walks down Not Doctor Street to his "office," which still bears a sign that says it's "Sonny's Shop." Thirty years ago, Sonny had run a shop there, and there is no point, Macon thinks, in removing the letters, since everybody will remember it anyway. He thinks that he must have an ancestor who had a "true" name, not a nickname or a joke, but he can't imagine what this name was. His parents, and their parents, were named by people who didn't take naming seriously, and now they have passed on to their relatives the same names they were given: Macon Dead, Lena Dead, First Corinthians Dead. Macon's son's name is Macon, too, but now everyone knows him as Milkman Dead. Macon's sister, named Pilate Dead, will never tell him how Milkman got his nickname because it gives her too much pleasure to keep the secret from him.

The persistence of the obsolete "Sonny's Shop" sign is yet another signal that Song of Solomon *is about the importance of names and, more specifically, about the disagreement between names and the things they're supposed to describe. Macon believes in the existence of "true" names, but it's unclear if such a thing is even possible. Morrison's characters live in a world where they don't have access to "true" names; in other words, they either have to make do with the names they're given, or find a way to create new names. Macon's family uses randomly chosen Christian names, a clear echo of the way slave masters used to name the people they enslaved. By preserving this naming system, Macon seems to accept the structures of power and domination that kept his ancestors in bondage just as he accepts and never changes the "Sonny's Shop" sign. It's not totally clear why Macon has so much respect for a naming system that's clearly a relic of slavery, but based on what we know about him, it seems that Macon is in favor of power and domination. Even if white people dominate him, he'll dominate his wife and children.*

As a young father, Macon followed the same naming process that his parents used: randomly pointing to a name from the Bible. He remembers his father using this process to name his sister after his mother died in childbirth. Because his father was illiterate, he had no idea what the name was until the midwife told him he had chosen Pilate, the name of an evil Christ-killer. But Macon's father insisted that his child keep the name. When Pilate grew older, she tore out her name from the Bible and made it into an **earring**.

Macon's father's attitude toward the process of naming is important to understand: he's more devoted to the process itself (randomly choosing a Bible character) than he is to the "rightness" of the name itself. Since the process of naming he uses is essentially the process the slave masters used, Macon's father indicates that he's unable to shake off the ways of thinking he learned as an enslaved person. It's here that we first get a sense of how people might better deal with the problem of naming. Pilate over time "reshapes" her name into art — she doesn't reject it (it's still her name), but she doesn't respect it as something handed to her and therefore unchangeable. Her engagement with her name is more active. She makes it into her own.

When Macon Dead's son was born, Pilate was extremely interested in the child. She acted like an in-law, helping Ruth and later singing to the child. Pilate used to be Macon's closest friend, but Macon remembers arguing with her outside a cave. When Pilate visited Ruth and her nephew, Macon angrily criticized her for working as a bootlegger, selling wine and dressing like a sailor. As a result, Pilate left and never returned.

Pilate remains a mystery in the first chapter. Macon doesn't like Pilate, but since Morrison presents Macon as clearly flawed, we as readers are not sure how to feel about her. The argument at the cave is a mystery that the novel will slowly unravel. Meanwhile, Pilate here is also established as less conventional than other female characters, as she engages in typically male work and is also the head of her own family of women.

Macon arrives at his office, and meets several of his tenants: he is a landlord. A woman named Mrs. Bains tells Macon that she can't pay rent because she has grandchildren to take care of, but Macon insists that she pay by Saturday. Bains leaves the office and tells her grandchildren that "a nigger in business is a terrible thing to see."

The Black townspeople may be the victims of white oppression and racism, but they also victimize each other. Morrison's novel isn't a simplistic study of Black versus white; it's a nuanced look at the clash between women and men, the rich and the poor, as well as white people and Black people.

Macon thinks of the first time he met Ruth's father, Doctor Foster. He was less successful as a landlord at the time, but successful enough to meet the Doctor in his office and propose marriage to Ruth. Doctor Foster tells Macon that he dislikes his name, but will allow Ruth to make her own decision. In private, he is glad that someone is marrying Ruth. Since her mother's death, Ruth has taken care of Doctor Foster, and Doctor Foster has felt "discomfort" when he kisses Ruth goodnight, perhaps because she looks like his dead wife, her mother.

Morrison hints at Doctor Foster's incestuous desire for his own daughter, a desire that we've already seen echoed in Ruth's apparent desire for her own child. Macon thinks he needs to be successful and prosperous to marry Ruth when in fact Dr. Foster would accept any suitor. That Dr. Foster dislikes Macon's name is interesting (presumably he dislikes the "Dead" part of it). Macon's name really is dead, in the sense that it was forced on him and he has done nothing to make it alive.

As Macon sits in his office and thinks, Freddie, the town gossip, tells him that Porter, a tenant of Macon's, is drunk and threatening to kill someone with his shotgun. This reminds Macon that he disapproves of Pilate's bootlegging. He tells Freddie that he'll get his rent from Porter, though he doesn't care if Porter kills someone or not. The narrator notes that Freddie is slightly wrong about his facts — Porter isn't threatening to kill someone else; he's threatening to kill himself if someone doesn't have sex with him.

Freddie's mistake is one that various other characters in the novel will make: mistaking internal anguish for external aggression. Thus, Porter's anger at the world begins as anger with himself. We see Macon's inner sadness in this section: everything reminds him of his sister. Macon's insistence that he get his rent shows how cold and callous business has made him.

Macon arrives at Porter's home and tells him to turn over his rent. Porter points his gun at Macon, but Macon threatens to kill him, and Porter turns his gun on himself. He is so drunk that he can't shoot. He urinates from his window, and spends the next hour pleading for sex. Eventually, he falls asleep, accidentally firing his gun into the roof. Macon orders Freddie to run into the house and collect the rent.

Porter's behavior in this scene might symbolize the failure of masculinity. We're given various signs of masculinity — a gun, for instance — that don't work. Porter's gun doesn't shoot straight, suggesting, perhaps, his weakness and impotence. More broadly, though, Porter's clumsy handling of his weapon (it goes off after he falls asleep) suggests how people who hate themselves become a danger to others.

Macon walks by Pilate's house, where she and her daughter survive without electricity. He remembers that she has no **navel**, a peculiarity that convinces others that she wasn't born normally. Macon remembers watching Pilate's birth: after being born, her birth cord shriveled up and left no trace behind. It wasn't until Macon was 17 that he learned how unusual his sister's lack of a navel was.

The navel is a symbol of lineage — it's the first sign that a human being has parents. We've seen Macon imprisoned in issues of his lineage — repeating the same naming ceremony that his father used before him — so for Pilate to lack a navel suggests that she has a kind of freedom. Yet her freedom also makes her strange, almost frightening to other people.

Macon walks toward Pilate's house and hears his sister singing along with Reba, her daughter, and Reba's daughter, Hagar. They don't make any money, Macon thinks. But he remembers Pilate's habit of chewing seeds or rubber, so that her lips were always moving. He continues to listen as his sister, niece, and grandniece sing, until Pilate falls silent.

Macon tries to convince himself that Pilate is suffering; in this way, he's trying to convince himself that he needs to be wealthy and powerful to be happy. But it's clear that Macon doesn't entirely believe this — the way he looks wistfully at Pilate and listens to her singing shows that he's secretly dissatisfied with his life and wishes he could escape from it, as Pilate seems to have done.

PART 1, CHAPTER 2

Magdalene, called Lena, and First Corinthians are Macon Dead and Ruth's daughters. On a Sunday afternoon drive, they sit in the back seat of their parents' car, enjoying the ride as if they're princesses in a chariot. Milkman sits up front, between Macon and Ruth. He isn't allowed to sit in his mother's lap because Macon forbids it.

After the sadness of the first chapter — sadness that's rooted in adult experiences like marriage, employment, etc. — it's both refreshing and poignant to see two young children enjoying themselves on a car ride. They're too young to regard the car as a prison, as their mother does. Though Macon's disgust toward and control over Ruth and the family is still evident.

As Macon drives the car down Not Doctor Street, some Black people in the street envy his wealth — in 1936, there are only a few Black people who are as rich as Macon. Others laugh at him, since they think he's not using his car right — never driving fast, picking up friends, or rolling down the window to greet people. Privately, these people call the car Macon's hearse.

The people on Not Doctor Street know what Lena and First Corinthians are too young to know: Macon's car doesn't bring him any real freedom; it's a prison.

Lena asks where they are going, and Ruth explains that they're driving to a beach community. Lena objects that only white people live there, but Corinthians tells her that a few Black people can afford to live there. Ruth tells Macon to slow down, and Macon angrily tells her to stop, or she can walk home.

In this scene, Lena and Corinthians almost seem more realistic and insightful about Blackness than their own parents; for all their innocence, they're already learned a fundamental rule of their society — Black people are poorer and less powerful than white people.

Corinthians and Lena ask Macon if he's going to buy a summer house. Macon replies that he might buy and rent out property there, and that Black people might have the money to live in the area in the next five or ten years. Milkman asks to use the bathroom, and Lena, annoyed, takes him out of the car. Corinthians asks whether there will really be enough Black people in the area to justify buying a summer house, noting that Black people don't like the water. Meanwhile, Milkman accidentally urinates on Lena. He has a bad habit of turning around before he's finished, as if he's unconcerned with his future.

It's remarkable, and chilling, that Lena and Corinthians have already learned as much as they know about racist Black stereotypes: Black people are poor, Black people don't like to swim, etc. This illustrates the concept of "internalized racism" — in other words, Lena and Corinthians don't learn these things because white people tell them directly; they hear them from other *Black people. Milkman's behavior while urinating parallels Porter's in the last chapter, but it also (explicitly) symbolizes his uncertainty about what he'll grow up to be.*

Milkman goes to school. When he is twelve years old, the narrator explains, he meets a boy who will free him by taking him to a woman who will shape his future. The boy, Guitar, tells Milkman that he's been inside Pilate's house, and takes him to see Pilate, Milkman's mysterious aunt. Guitar greets Pilate with a "hi," and Pilate sternly corrects him telling him to say, "Hello" instead. Guitar asks Pilate if it's true that she has no **navel**. Pilate replies that it is. Guitar introduces Milkman, and Pilate casually asks if he talks. When he greets her with a "Hi," she calls him dumb. Milkman is ashamed, and surprised at his shame, since he has previously heard that Pilate was dumb, poor, drunk, dirty, and ugly. He notices that Pilate is surprisingly clean, clearly sober, and wearing men's shoes.

Morrison deftly moves through a large chunk of time — in one sentence, she takes us almost a decade into the future (she'll repeat this technique many times in the novel). Pilate's behavior, correcting Guitar and Milkman over something as trivial as the word "Hi," proves that she's not only concerned with words and names, but also thinks critically about them (as opposed to Macon, who simply repeats the names his father gave him). This suggests that the rumors are wrong about Pilate — she's intelligent and sharp.

Guitar asks if Pilate is Macon Dead's sister, and Pilate tells him that she is one of only three Dead's left alive. Milkman, who has been silent since saying "Hi," suddenly exclaims that he has sisters — in other words, other Deads. Pilate laughs and escorts Guitar and Milkman into her house. She explains that the correct way to soft-boil an egg is to heat the water and egg "on an equal standing." She tells Milkman that his father used to be a good friend to her, and mentions that her father — Milkman's grandfather — was shot. Milkman asks who, when, why, and where. Pilate is vague on all counts: she tells him that her father was shot on his farm in Montour County in Virginia in a year when many Irishmen were also killed. She doesn't know who shot him or why he was murdered.

Pilate's description of the correct way to boil an egg is full of symbolism. To begin with, the egg itself is a classic symbol of maternity and womanhood, suggesting that Pilate is a mother figure to the young Milkman. Moreover, Pilate's attention to "equal standing" contrasts sharply with the way Macon views the world: Macon doesn't believe in the concept of equal standing at all — everything is a hierarchy (rich over poor, man over woman, etc.). Pilate's behavior, then, exposes Milkman to a different, perhaps more feminine, way of looking at the world. Meanwhile, the interaction also elliptically introduces more of the family backstory.

As Pilate and Milkman talk, a girl comes into the house, back first, dragging a basket of brambles. Milkman is attracted to the girl, Hagar, who Pilate introduces as Milkman's sister. Reba, who is helping Hagar move the basket, corrects Pilate — Hagar is actually Milkman's cousin — but Pilate says there's no difference. Milkman helps Hagar move the brambles, and thinks that Hagar is the prettiest woman he's ever seen. She is older than he, and as strong as he is.

It's crude but important that Milkman falls in love with Hagar before he's seen her face. Like his father, he's perhaps less attracted to women's mind or personality than to their superficial qualities, such as their looks.

Pilate asks Guitar where he gets his name, and Guitar explains that his mother took him downtown when he was a baby and noticed a contest: whoever could guess the number of beans in a jar would win a guitar. Guitar cried for the guitar, but didn't win it. Pilate notes that Reba, who's excellent with raffles and guessing games, could have won the guitar for him. Reba shows Guitar a diamond ring that she won for being the five hundred thousandth person to walk into Sears and Roebuck — because she was Black, her picture wasn't taken, and her victory wasn't mentioned in the papers. Instead, the second-place winner's photograph was published, which Guitar finds bizarre, since there can be no second place in such a challenge. Reba's luck also has kept Pilate and Hagar alive — on one occasion, she won a hundred pounds of groceries that fed them through the winter.

Finally, we understand fully why the stout woman in the opening chapter called the young boy "Guitar." That it's taken us this long to get the full story proves that names take time to understand. Reba's description of the racism she endured after winning a prize at Sears and Roebuck paints a sobering picture of the U.S. in the middle of the 20th century — with mass media on the rise, Black people weren't allowed to appear in photographs, much less in print. Morrison's novel could be seen as an antidote to all this: where Black people were largely kept out of the literary world, Morrison will write a book about their experiences.

The conversation turns to wine making, and Guitar asks Pilate if her wine is any good — surprisingly, Pilate replies that she has no idea, since she never drinks it. Hagar mentions that business hasn't been good lately, since the Depression is over, and she has been hungry. Reba and Pilate gently ask her if she wants food, but eventually Pilate realizes that she isn't talking about food at all. Together, she, Reba, and Hagar sing, "Sugarman done **fly** away."

For the second time, we hear "Sugarman done fly away," though it's still not entirely clear what its significance is. Reba and Pilate's gentle attention to Hagar suggests how different their way of life is from what Milkman is used to — it's hard to imagine Macon treating his son as gently as Reba treats her daughter.

Milkman enjoys spending time with Reba, Pilate, and Hagar, in part because he's visiting his aunt in secret, defying his father. When he returns home, Macon Dead accuses him of drinking, but Milkman insists that he hasn't drunk anything. Macon reminds Milkman that he was told to stay away from Pilate, but refuses to explain why when Milkman asks. Milkman is intimidated by his father, but remembers that Pilate is as tall and impressive as Macon, and makes him feel happy, too.

Milkman's coming of age in this section is closely linked to his developing secrets — in other words, developing an inner life, of the kind that Macon and Ruth clearly have. Pilate's presence has clearly changed Milkman; when he sees his father, the memory of his aunt is enough to make him bravely talk back to Macon. His memories give him power.

Milkman asks Macon if his father treated him like a baby when he was twelve, and in spite of himself, Macon remembers his father, who died protecting his farm. He tells Milkman that he and Pilate worked together on their father's farm in Montour County. The farm was a huge, beautiful place, which their father called Lincoln's Heaven. Macon remembers learning about history via the names his father gave the farm animals: a pig named General Lee, a cow named Ulysses S. Grant, a horse named President Lincoln.

Macon's memories occur almost involuntarily — even in the middle of a simple argument with his child, he can't help think about Pilate. We begin to sympathize with Macon — clearly he's more than just a cold-hearted bully (though he is also a cold-hearted bully). The informal "schooling" Macon gets on his father's farm, learning about the Civil War via the names of his animals, shows how important play and whimsy — naming animals after people — can be in passing on history.

Milkman notices that Macon seems more relaxed and easy-going than usual. He asks how Macon's father died. Macon remembers that his father, who was illiterate, was tricked into signing a contract that left his property in the hands of white people, and that everything bad that ever happened to his father happened because he was illiterate. Macon's father had been enslaved, he recalls, and when after the Civil War it came time for him to register with the Freedman's Bureau, he told the registrar that his father was dead, and had been born in Macon. The registrar accidentally wrote, "Dead, Macon," in the Name section, and Macon's father was unable to correct the error — thus, he became Macon Dead I.

Macon knows first-hand how important words and names can be — his own father lost everything because he didn't understand names. The story of how "Macon Dead" became a family name is amusing but also tragic, since it shows how little control Black Americans had over their own lives after the Civil War. It's especially poignant because Macon Dead refuses to change his name, even though he understands exactly how absurd a name it is. In some way, Milkman, who was named Macon Dead III, actually breaks away from this enforced history via enforced name through his nickname.

Milkman asks what Macon's father's real name was, and Macon replies by reminiscing about his father, who died when he was four. Milkman feels closer to his father because he's learned information about his past, but Macon repeats that he doesn't want Milkman visiting Pilate. When pressed again for a reason, Macon only says that she is a snake. He tells a story about a man who saves a dying snake by feeding it and taking care of it. One day, the snake bites the man and kills him; when the dying man asks the snake why it did such a thing, the snake replies that it's a snake. Milkman is unsatisfied with this parable. Macon responds by saying that its time for Milkman to learn to work, and that he will start working for Macon.

Macon either doesn't know his father's real name or doesn't want to share it with Milkman. This makes one wonder if Macon's father could be said to have a "real" name at all – whatever name he was born with was presumably given to him by his slave master, meaning that it's not any more "real" or valid than the name "Macon Dead." The anecdote about the snake suggests essentialism — the belief that people are born a certain way, and never change. Morrison will question this idea — indeed, by paying close attention to Milkman's development, she already has questioned it.

PART 1, CHAPTER 3

Milkman's life gets better after he begins working for his father. He runs errands to the houses Macon is renting, which gives him opportunities to visit the wine house where Pilate lives. Milkman is friendly, the opposite of Macon, and so renters are more open with him than they are with his father.

Milkman is coming of age under the influence of both his father and his aunt. This creates a conflict with him between the gentleness he learns form Pilate and the stern masculinity Macon teaches him.

One day — one of the few days when Milkman has opportunities to see Guitar anymore — Milkman and Guitar go to a pool hall, owned by a man named Feather. Feather, who rents from Macon, tells Milkman to get out, on the grounds that he's Macon's son. Guitar tries to convince Feather to let them both stay, but Feather insists that they leave. Guitar and Milkman wander through town, eventually reaching a barbershop owned by Railroad Tommy and Hospital Tommy. Hospital Tommy, an articulate man with a good vocabulary, scolds them for skipping school, and Railroad Tommy warns them not to drink or gamble.

Milkman is still growing — he doesn't know what kind of man he'll grow up to be — but this doesn't matter to the people in town. Milkman is Macon's son, and as far as Feather is concerned, this means that Milkman isn't worth knowing, or even allowing into his pool hall. Feather responds to what he sees as Macon's aggression with aggression of his own, and applies that aggression to Macon's son. Such behavior allows no way for anyone to ever change or escape the cycle of reprisal. The two Tommy's are clearly concerned with the moral behavior of Black boys.

Guitar mentions that he doesn't like to eat sweet foods, and Milkman is amazed. Guitar can't explain why he doesn't like them, except that they make him think of dead people and white people, and reveals that when his father died in a sawmill accident, the sawmill's boss responded by stopping by Guitar's house and giving him candy. Guitar and Milkman pass by a beauty shop, and notice that, unlike the male-populated barbershop, the beauty shop has curtains, since women don't want others to see them getting their hair done.

We begin to get a better sense of Guitar's personality. His distaste for sweet foods arises from his hatred for white people, which itself arises for the way that white people responded to his father's death (which they were at least partly culpable for) not with respect but with insulting paternalism, as if Guitar's grief could really be assuaged by candy. The curtains on the beauty shop provide another symbol of women's rich, secret inner life.

At the age of fourteen, Milkman notices that his left foot is slightly shorter than the other. This makes him seem to strut in a showy, arrogant way — Milkman tries to disguise his shorter foot, though fewer people notice it than he imagines. He feels a secret connection to President Roosevelt (who can't walk because of having caught polio when he was young), often thinking that he has more in common with FDR than with his father. While he fears and respects Macon, he deliberately tries to be different from him.

Where Guitar despises white people and wants to separate himself from them altogether, Milkman identifies with white people, recognizing that they're not all the same. This might suggests that Pilate has influenced his thinking more than Macon: like Pilate, Milkman is more interested in union than separation, more interested in what seemingly unlike people have in common than what distinguishes them.

Macon enjoys teaching his son his business, since it means that his son belongs to him and not to Ruth. While Milkman collects rent, Macon contemplates ways to grow his business. Because he's Black, it's difficult to find new properties, but he is optimistic that he will be able to find properties that no one knows are valuable yet. The year is 1945, and life is good for Macon, with the exception of Ruth. She is now 50 years old, and still disappears from Macon's house, though no one knows where she goes. Macon is suspicious that Ruth has lovers, but he doesn't hit her anymore.

As a Black businessman, Macon has to contend with his white competitors, who have better access to prime real estate. At the same time, Macon has to endure the hatred of the town for his efforts to make money, because the money he earns comes from the other Black people of the town— people like Feather despise him for charging what they see as extreme rents. The Black community expects to be put in positions of lack of power by white people, but find it infuriating to have it done to them by Black people. And Macon's wealth still doesn't bring him or Ruth happiness.


The last time that Macon hits Ruth occurs when Milkman is 22 years old — and Milkman hits Macon back. Milkman is a mature young man and has been having sex for years. He sees his mother as a sad, weak woman taking care of small, weak things like flowers and goldfish. Ruth resents Macon, and feels that their marriage somehow inspired her father to kill himself. She provokes Macon in small ways; Lena doesn't notice her manipulation, but Corinthians does.

Milkman protects his mother but doesn't fully understand her — the images of flowers and fish are clichés, indicating that Milkman doesn't have any real access to Ruth's inner life. Corinthians is more insightful about how Ruth thinks — she sees that she's not a saint, and that she deliberately provokes Macon.

One example of the way Ruth provokes Macon occurs when the family is eating dinner. Ruth describes going to the wedding of Anna Djvorak's granddaughter. Anna Djvorak was a former patient of Ruth's father's and was always grateful to him for keeping her son out of the tuberculosis sanatorium, where he surely would have died. At the wedding, Ruth was offered communion and asked if she was a Catholic; she replied that she was a Methodist, and thus unfamiliar with communion. It is a simple anecdote. As Lena listens to it, she notices her mother's attention to detail. Corinthians waits for Ruth to use the story to provoke Macon, while Milkman barely listens at all.

It's remarkable how the same story provokes such different reactions from different members of the same family, but this reinforces how great the differences between seemingly similar human beings can be. The scene is something like the old story about the blind men touching different parts of the elephant's body — none of them has a total understanding of what the elephant — Ruth — really is, but they all catch different aspects of it.


Macon doesn't believe that Ruth didn't know about communion, and shouts that Anna Djvorak doesn't even know Ruth's name — Ruth is only her father's daughter. Ruth smiles and agrees. In response Macon hits her in the jaw. Milkman then grabs Macon, pushes him into the radiator, and threatens to kill him if he hits Ruth again.

It's unclear, both to us and to Milkman, why Macon dislikes Ruth talking about her father so intensely. Of course this doesn't mean that Macon is right to hit his wife, but the truth about why he does so, as always in Song of Solomon, *is more complicated than it seems.*

Macon is humiliated and surprised that another man is dominating him, but is also a little proud of Milkman. Milkman is angry with Macon, but is also saddened to have so easily defeated a man whom he once thought unbeatable. Milkman asks Ruth if she's all right, and notes his sisters, who are 35 and 36, staring at him with hatred. He goes to his room, and realizes that he hasn't changed the relationship between his parents at all.

Milkman's actions change the way people around him — Ruth, Macon, Corinthians — perceive him, but he ultimately concludes that they do nothing to change the way Ruth and Macon think about each other. Thus, his action is more important to himself than it is to either Ruth or Macon — he's growing up.

Milkman has been sleeping with Hagar, and thinks that it has made him kind and generous. He remembers talking with Ruth about going to medical school; Ruth had encouraged him to use his middle name, Foster, instead of going by "Dr. Dead." Macon wants his daughters to attend school, since they'll be able to meet husbands there, but he sees no point in Macon attending, since he helps out in the office. Macon also uses his influence with bankers to transfer Milkman out of the draft for World War II.

Macon and Ruth are fighting with each other for control of Milkman's future. Macon uses his influence to protect him and keep him working at the family business, while Ruth wants him to leave town and follow in her father's footsteps by taking on her father's name as his own.

Macon enters Milkman's room and tells him to sit down, which Milkman does. Macon explains that he married Ruth in 1917, when she was 16 years old. He wasn't really in love with her, but wanted a good wife. Ruth's father didn't like him, Macon continues. Dr. Foster was a rich, respected Black man, but he was also an ether addict and didn't care about Black people at all; indeed, he was happy when his granddaughters Lena and Corinthians were born with lighter skin. Macon recalls a time when a railroad was being built through town; Macon had deduced where the tracks would be laid, and needed to borrow money from Dr. Foster so that he could buy the land cheap and then sell it for a huge profit. Dr. Foster refused to lend him any money, and when Macon asked Ruth to convince her father to do so, she said that it was her father's decision. At this time, Macon began to wonder who Ruth was married to — him, or her own father.

Dr. Foster has the respect of the Black people in town, but he doesn't return this respect; indeed, he treats them much as a white man would treat them. The powerful Black men in Song of Solomon *are in an uncomfortable place: many of them want to be white — witness Macon buying property in a white, beachfront neighborhood. Meanwhile, Macon seems to see marriage as a relationship commanding loyalty above all other loyalties, and in all things. He believes that because Ruth is married to him she must support and help him. And it isn't at all clear that he owes her any such loyalty.*

Macon then adds that after Dr. Foster died, Macon came upon Ruth lying next to her father's body, kissing him and putting his fingers in her mouth. After this, Macon grew paranoid that Lena and Corinthians might be Dr. Foster's children, not his own, but eventually he decided that Foster wouldn't have been so concerned about their skin color unless Macon were the father. Macon concludes by telling Milkman that he isn't a bad man, but that he couldn't stand Ruth smirking about being her father's daughter. He walks out of Milkman's room before Milkman can say a word.

What Macon witnesses is certainly out of the ordinary, and it is also totally possible that his interpretation of it is accurate. But it is also interesting that his interpretation fits with the concerns he already has. Later in the novel we will hear Ruth's side of this story. Now, in telling the story to Milkman, Macon is both passing on his version of events so as to show that he is not a bad man—he is "controlling the narrative"—and he is also passing along his distrust of women in general along to his son.

Milkman doesn't know what to think. He tries to convince himself that he defended Ruth because he loves his mother, but knows deep down that this isn't true: he begins to think of her as a complicated woman, a separate person with thoughts and emotions. Milkman leaves the house and goes in search of Guitar. He is angry that his father told him about his mother, and feels that he isn't ready to talk to any woman, even Hagar. As Milkman thinks about Dr. Foster, his grandfather, having sex with his own daughter, he remembers the way Ruth breastfed him as a child.

Now, under the influence of his father's story, Milkman begins to doubt his own relationship with his mother. We've been given hints that Milkman already didn't love his mother, but now there's no ambiguity: Milkman can't force himself to love his mother because he sees himself as a victim of her incestuous desires, just as she was a victim of her father's desires. And his disgust with his mother spreads also to his feelings for and about Hagar.

As Milkman walks down Not Doctor Street, he realizes that no one else is on the other side of the street; when he asks a stranger why, he doesn't get an answer. He thinks to himself that he is thinking coldly and rationally: he's never loved Ruth, but he sensed that she loved him. He had thought of his visits to Pilate as extensions of his mother's love for him. Now he begins to question all women's love for him: his sisters, his mother, Pilate, Hagar.

Milkman is alone, both literally (on the street) and metaphysically: he's cut off from his mother and his father, and doesn't know what kind of man he's going to be. The tragedy of this scene is that Milkman begins to question his relationship with all women because of what Macon has told him. Milkman here feels himself cut off from all women's love.

Milkman finds Guitar in Tommy's Barbershop. Everyone in the shop is listening to a radio report about a Black boy named Till who was killed in Mississippi after whistling at a white woman. His killers, white men, have boasted of their murder. Freddie takes the view that Till was foolish and arrogant to have whistled; Guitar, on the other hand, is furious that Till was murdered for something as trivial as a whistle, and calls Freddie a coward.

That this scene follows upon the moment when Milkman feels cut off from women's love is important, as the story now steps into the "masculine" sphere of murder and vengeance. The story of Emmett Till and his murder is true, it happened in the real world. Freddie's belief that the Black boy was "asking for it" indicates the level of internalized racism that exists in the town — Black people are so used to white oppression that they've come to believe that they're in some ways responsible for their own oppression. Guitar's response here seems noble and principled, a refusal to accept white dominance and aggression, but it is just beginning the novel's arc regarding Guitar and the direction his stand against white oppression takes.

Milkman and Guitar walk to a nearby bar, Mary's, where Milkman asks Guitar where his name comes from and tells him that he punched his father. Guitar responds by telling a story about how he used to go hunting in Florida. He had no guilt about shooting at rabbits or birds, but when he shot a doe, he found himself regretting his hunting. Guitar compares shooting a doe to hitting a woman, but his words don't change Milkman's state of mind at all. Guitar adds that the deck is stacked against Black people, and as a result, they do unfortunate things. The conversation turns to Till, and Milkman says that he was crazy to whistle at the woman, a statement that Guitar disagrees with. Milkman concludes that he hates his name, and asks to stay with Guitar; Guitar instead suggests that he stay with Hagar. As they walk to the wine house, Milkman wonders what his grandfather's real name was, and guesses that Pilate has it in her **earring**. He condemns his grandfather for accepting the name the Freedman's Bureau accidentally gave him, and Guitar puns that his grandfather was already "Dead" when white men shot him.

Guitar's attempts to console Milkman fail spectacularly. The story about killing a doe has an unclear relevance to Milkman's own experiences — it's as if Guitar is struggling to find anything he can say to console his friend. The lack of significance in the story of the doe is itself significant — the crimes of incest that Milkman is now thinking about are beyond comprehension; no story could rationalize them. In a sense, Milkman "grows up" in this scene — he begins to understand his father's mistake in accepting his own father's name. Guitar's pun, then, is funny but also serious — by accepting the name "Dead," Macon's family accepts the racism that white people direct at Black people, and that by accepting it they cease to be alive.

PART 1, CHAPTER 4

It is Christmas, and Milkman is consumed with boredom. His mother is obsessing over Christmas decorations, even though they're exactly the same as they always are, and his father, as usual, gives everyone money instead of presents. Milkman quickly buys presents for his family, but isn't sure what to get Hagar. It's been more than 12 years since he began his relationship with her, and he's beginning to tire of her. She is the "third beer," the drink one drinks simply because it's there. He looks for a gift for her, but plans to end their relationship before the end of the year.

Once again, Morrison jumps ahead a number of years. She signals this in a number of ways: she explicitly tells us how many years have passed, but more subtly, she shows how Milkman's thinking has changed. As a younger man, Milkman was more confused about women and his own place in town — now Milkman is more rigid and blunt in his thinking: dismissing a woman as a "third beer" sounds like the kind of thing his father would say. This indicates how important Macon's story about Ruth's possible incest has been to Milkman: it's made Milkman uncomfortable around women, a little afraid of them, and therefore self-protectively condescending and dismissive.

As Milkman shops, he remembers his relationship with Hagar. They first met when he was 12 and she was 17, and he loved her immediately. As he grew older, he continued to feel this way, and once, when he was 17, he visits the wine house when Reba is arguing with her boyfriend, who starts hitting her. As Milkman watches, Pilate takes a knife and gives the man a shallow wound near his heart. Still holding the knife inside the man, Pilate warns him to leave her daughter alone, and man, in immense pain, leaves after promising never to touch her again.

Milkman thinks back to his childhood, when he met Hagar. The fact that he's thinking of the past at all it significant: it shows that he's grown into a man, and it also echoes Macon's thoughts in the first chapter, suggesting that Milkman is becoming more and more like his father. Meanwhile, Pilate shows that she's tougher than she might seem: she can do stereotypically "masculine things" without being brutal or bloodthirsty. Her actions are just as effective, but do not end in vengeance.

Afterwards, Milkman talks with Hagar about Pilate's impressive display of toughness, and tells her that he's waiting to marry her. Hagar is skeptical, and tells him that she doesn't love him. Milkman responds that she's naïve to wait for love. Hagar leads Milkman into her bedroom and removes her blouse; the narrator implies that they make love.

Milkman doesn't protect Reba himself — in this memory, he's not the brave, slightly reckless man who pushes Macon against the radiator. But even as a young, innocent man, he's unwilling to believe in love.


Milkman and Hagar then began semi-secret relationship. They go through periods when they don't see each other for months, and then see each other every day. Over that time, Milkman begins to care less and less for her, while she thinks she is in a serious relationship with him. He is now 31 and she is 36. Milkman tries to think of a way to end his relationship with Hagar. He will remind her that they're cousins, he thinks, and give her money instead of a present. He writes Hagar a letter in which he coldly thanks her.

Milkman shows signs that he's becoming — or has become — as cold and insensitive as his own father. He comes to see his relationship in financial terms, and thinks he can "buy" Hagar out of the relationship (in a kind of parallel to the way that the white sawmill owner tried to "buy" Guitar by giving him candy after his father's death). And yet at heart all of Milkman's absurdly cold ideas about how to end the relationship show his inability to actually talk about or confront feelings, or even to feel love.

Milkman sits at his father's desk and thinks about a white teenager who was recently killed by being strangled to death and then having his head bashed in. In Tommy's Barbershop, those old enough to remember joke that Winnie Ruth Judd, a criminally insane white woman who committed multiple murders in the early 1930s and then kept escaping from the insane asylum to which she was committed has struck again. Everyone agrees that a white person must have committed the crime, because Black people kill for clearer-cut reasons: adultery, impoliteness, rudeness, etc., or they kill in the heat of the moment. Bizarre murders like Judd's are merely amusing to the barbershop's inhabitants, unless the victims are Black.

Again this is a scene that Morrison jumps into, the significance of which will become more clear as the novel continues. The distinction that the Black characters draw here between "white crime" and "black crime," with "black crime" perceived as somehow more normal seems dubious at best. Also note the difference in the way the people in the barbershop respond to this murder of a white teenager to the earlier murder of Emmett Till. The suggestion is that the racism that the Black characters have experienced has made them cold to the deaths of all people who are not Black.


Police officers, however, suspect a Black man of committing the murders, which worries Railroad Tommy and Hospital Tommy. Hospital Tommy remembers killing people in "the war." Beneath the jokes, Milkman realizes, the Black men in the barbershop are worried for their safety, since they know they could be arrested for the murders, even if they have perfect alibis. Milkman also notices that the two Tommys mention details of the crimes — a mention of saddle shoes — that suggest that someone they know had detailed knowledge of them.

The anxiety that the men feel attests to the institutional racism that they have experienced throughout their lives. At the same time, Milkman's attention to the details of what the Tommys say shows that he's learned well from Pilate, and notices people's choice of words. It also suggests that perhaps what is going on in the barbershop is not entirely what it seems.

As the Tommys are closing up their shop, Milkman asks them about their mention of saddle shoes. Guitar, who is still standing in the shop, tells Milkman that there's information he doesn't need to know. This infuriates Milkman, who accuses Guitar of treating him like a child. Guitar reminds Milkman that they've been friends for a long time, even though Milkman's father unsympathetically kept Guitar's family poor. Milkman reminds Guitar that he's invited him to come to Honoré, where his family owns beach houses. Guitar angrily calls Milkman rich and entitled, claiming that he has no concerns other than women and vacationing.

Milkman begins to feel distant from his best friend, Guitar, as well as his family and lover. We don't entirely understand what makes Guitar tick, and neither does Milkman — we've been given hints that he despises white people, to an even greater degree than other people in town, but it's not clear if he's capable of murder. In any case, Guitar shows that he's willing to stick with Milkman and, unlike Feather, overlook his father's cruelty.

Almost involuntarily, Milkman begins to describe "a dream" he'd had about his mother, in which he watched her digging holes in the ground to plant flowers. The flowers grow so quickly that soon they're taller than she is. Milkman senses that Ruth is in danger: she won't be able to breathe. Guitar asks Milkman why he didn't help his mother in the dream, but Milkman can only answer that it looked like Ruth was enjoying herself. For reasons he can't fully explain, Milkman then remembers the evening when he walked alone after hitting his father, with everyone else walking in the opposite direction. Guitar wishes Milkman merry Christmas and departs.

Milkman's dream, like Guitar's anecdote about the doe, clearly symbolizes something, *but it's hard to say exactly what it symbolizes — this is precisely Morrison's point. As her characters get older and their thoughts get more complicated, symbolism breaks down into ambiguity. Even if this is the case, it's clear that Milkman is concerned that his mother is "suffocating" in her husband's presence, insofar as Macon is restricting her freedom.*

Milkman thinks that Guitar no longer enjoys music or drinking; the only things he likes anymore are sports and politics. He also thinks that Guitar may have been right to suggest that his life is dull, nothing but sex and visits to Honoré. Finally, Milkman thinks that Guitar should get married and that perhaps he should, too. The racial and political problems that Guitar is fond of talking about bore Milkman.

Milkman's friendship with Guitar seems to be breaking down. In part, this is because Guitar is more political than Milkman. Milkman, who is already well off, seems satisfied to settle down and inherit his father's business, even if he is not necessarily happy. Guitar does not have Milkman's wealth, and so it is not that surprising that he would be more political as he has a more personal motivation to change the status quo and fight racism.

Milkman then notices Freddie, who is looking for a warm spot in the middle of his work errands and Christmas shopping, and offers him coffee. He asks Freddie how long he's lived in town. Freddie says that he was born in Jacksonville, Florida, where there was never even an orphanage for Black babies, and adds that ghosts killed his mother: his mother went into labor pains immediately after seeing a "white bull" – a white cop – and died immediately after giving birth to him and looking at him. He adds that his father had died two months previously.

In the past, Freddie has been a nuisance, spreading gossip about Ruth and getting his facts wrong about Porter. Here, though, he seems more serious and thoughtful. Freddie blames white people for his mother's death, but he also blames himself (indeed, it's not clear what killed his mother: fear of the police, or childbirth). This helps to explain why Freddie is less forgiving of the Black man who whistled at a white woman — he has considerable experience for blaming himself for white racism and oppression.

Milkman laughs, and Freddie is surprised that Milkman doesn't believe him. He then advises Milkman to ask Guitar why he's spending time with Empire State, a mentally unstable janitor, and hints that Guitar knows about the strange murders that have occurred lately. Freddie tells Milkman that the description of the man who fled the scene of the murders matches a description of Empire State. Several years ago, Freddie recalls, a Black man was killed, and a white man was murdered shortly after that — it's possible that Empire State was the killer. Milkman doesn't take Freddie seriously, thinking that Freddie is angry at him for laughing at his story.

Milkman may not take Freddie seriously, but we do — we know that Guitar is political in his thinking, energetic in his hatred of racist white people, and potentially capable of taking revenge on them. Freddie's story here establishes the idea that members of the Black community have been carrying out eye-for-an-eye killings of white people. Milkman, insulated as he is, doesn't even consider the possibility of such actions being true.

Freddie remembers the insurance man who jumped off the roof, and remembers Milkman as a baby, without explaining what has reminded him of either thing. He gives Milkman one final hint: he should talk to Corinthians about what's been going on. With this advice, he wishes Milkman a Merry Christmas and leaves.

With Freddie's parting words, we're reminded of how little we know about the town, and about the character's we've met so far. It's not clear, for instance, why Smith killed himself, just as it's not clear what Corinthians knows. But in this uncertainty Morrison continues to slowly connect the various events of the novel, here connecting Smith and Corinthians, at least tangentially, to the murders.

PART 1, CHAPTER 5

Six months have passed since Milkman argued with Guitar. Milkman lies in Guitar's bed, thinking about being stabbed by an icepick. Five hours earlier, he came to Guitar's home, and the two of them talked playfully. Since their argument, they've been friendlier with each other, largely because Guitar has kept Milkman safe in the last six months, though the narrator doesn't explain how.

The beginning of Chapter Five is disorienting — we don't know when we are, we don't know what's happened, and we don't know what sort of danger Milkman is in.

As Milkman and Guitar talk, it becomes clear that Guitar has traveled through the North. Guitar muses that the North is only north because the South is south, even though they're all part of the same country. Northerners, he admits, are different from Southerners in being pickier with their food. Guitar makes tea, and Milkman jokes about being a soft-fried egg, prompting Guitar to point out, half-jokingly, that a Black man can be a crow or a baboon, but not an egg.

Beyond the fact of Guitar having traveled, Morrison doesn't give details of what he did or why he traveled. At the same time, Guitar's discussion of the relationship between North and South, and his comments on what a Black man can and can't be, shows that he has a sophisticated understanding of race relations. There is no white without Black, just as there is no North without South. White people try to control what Black people do, but also what they imagine; thus, they portray Black people in crude stereotypes of apes and others animals.

Milkman asks Guitar if he can have Guitar's room for the night. Guitar doesn't believe that Milkman would want to be alone the night before his own murder; Milkman responds that he's already "Dead." Guitar mentions a woman with a knife who tried to kill Milkman, but doesn't name the woman. He leaves Milkman alone in the room.

Milkman seems weirdly unconcerned with the prospect of being killed; this is especially disconcerting because we don't know who the killer would be (we might guess that it's Hagar, since the breakup probably didn't go well, but we still don't know for sure). Milkman is becoming increasingly hopeless, resigned to the "Deadness" in his name.

Milkman thinks about the time he hit his father years ago. He hasn't done anything truly independently since then, he realizes. He thinks back to the previous week, when he followed his mother, who is now over sixty, at night. Milkman was coming back from a party when he saw Ruth boarding a bus. He followed the bus to a train station, where he sees Ruth climb onto a train — Milkman does the same, and gets off at Fairfield, where he follows Ruth to the cemetery where her father is buried.

The mystery of where Ruth spends her nights promises to be solved in this chapter. We had initially thought that she was seeing other men, but this seems unlikely now. Milkman plays the part of the "private eye," much as he did when investigating the Tommys knowledge about the saddle shoes in the previous chapter.

Milkman confronts Ruth and asks her if she's here to "spend the night" with her father. Ruth, addressing Milkman as Macon, explains that her father wasn't a good man, but he was the only man who ever cared about her. She and Milkman's father stopped having sex after her father died, before Milkman was born; it was at this time that Ruth began visiting her father's grave to talk to him and feel at peace. Shortly thereafter, Pilate moved to town, and gave Ruth aphrodisiacs to put in Macon's food. They worked, Ruth says, and Macon began having sex with her once again. Macon was suspicious, and threw Pilate out of the house. Ruth admits to kissing her father's fingers, but says that she did so because they were the only part of his body unaffected by disease. When Milkman reminds her of how she nursed him after he was too old, she insists that she did no harm to anyone.

Here Ruth tells her version of the events leading up to the moment when Macon found her kissing her dead father's fingers, and it is very different from Macon's version. Further, her story revolves not around female sexual infidelity or incest, but rather around male coldness and control and how that resulted in a life of loneliness for her. Further, Ruth makes an important point in her argument about nursing Milkman. Macon and other men seem to see such things as "breaking rules of morality." But Ruth argues that since she didn't harm anyone, then what sort of importance is there in breaking the rule? This way of looking at the situation seems kindler, and gentler, and perhaps one might say more feminine. And yet, at the same time, it also isn't clear that Ruth's version of events is the "real" version either. Perhaps there is no "real" version.

Milkman sits in Guitar's room, thinking about his mother. He hears footsteps, and knows that Hagar is coming to see him. After Milkman broke up with Hagar, he began seeing another woman; the sight of this made Hagar so furious that she tries to kill him multiple times, failing on every occasion. Hagar thinks of Empire State, who married a white woman from France, then found her sleeping with another Black man, and was henceforth silent and mentally unstable.

Here, Milkman's life becomes almost theatrical — the stereotypical story of the jealous lover seeking revenge becomes real. This "story'" is paralleled with that of Empire State, whose relationship with a white woman comes crumbling down when it becomes clear that she is more interested in Blackness than Empire State himself.

Milkman listens as Hagar enters the house, and thinks that either she or he will die. Hagar approaches Milkman and gives him a small cut with a butcher knife. She raises the knife again, but can't force herself to stab him. Milkman senses that he won't die. He thinks back to the previous week, when Ruth learned from Freddie that Hagar was trying to kill Milkman, and that the two of them had been having an affair for years. Ruth is hurt, because she realized that Milkman had been keeping secrets from her for years. She remembers giving birth to him when he was only a pain in her body, nursing him until Freddie caught her, and admiring his beautiful hands, the only thing he inherited from Dr. Foster. She's so upset by the realization that she doesn't know Milkman at all that she tries repeatedly to close the cabinet door under the kitchen sink, angrily slamming it shut when it opens each time.

Milkman seems resigned to his "deadness" once again. Hagar's cutting parallels Pilate's action in the earlier chapter, except that unlike Pilate, her choice not to kill stems from her love for Milkman, not her prudence. The changes in perspective here are almost dizzying: Milkman to Hagar to Milkman to Ruth to Pilate — it's almost impossible to keep up. Along the way, though, we learn new information about all the characters. That Ruth thinks that Milkman has her father's hands oddly echoes her kissing of Dr. Foster's fingers, and suggests that maybe there was something odd there. Her frustration with herself and her relationship her son is aptly symbolized by a door that won't shut — she may be trying to forget her desires (the things hidden beneath the sink) , but she can't close them off altogether.

Ruth goes to Pilate's house to talk with her. She hopes to learn that Freddie was wrong, that Hagar and Milkman aren't having an affair. At Pilate's house, she finds Hagar herself, and tells her that if she hurts Milkman, she'll kill her. As she and Hagar argue, Pilate enters the room and tells them that they're ridiculous for arguing over a man. The narrator notes how different Pilate and Ruth are: one is dependent on money, while the other is indifferent to it.

Pilate plays the part of the critic, pointing out that the story Ruth and Hagar are acting out — jealous lovers vying for the same man — is corny and clichéd. In further pointing out how Ruth is dependent on money the novel seems to connect money to the masculine world. Ruth is dependent not just on money but on that world, while Pilate is not.

Pilate tells Ruth that some people choose when they want to die, and others choose to live forever. Ruth thinks to herself that her father wanted to die, but doesn't admit that Pilate is right. Pilate says that she can barely remember her own mother. She tells Ruth about being 15 years old, living in a camp of migrant farmers, and sleeping with a man. The man told his friends that Pilate had no **navel**; later, a woman asked her about her body, and Pilate realized that she was different from other women. Afterwards, Pilate traveled to Virginia to look for her family, working as a washerwoman along the way. In Culpeper, Virginia, Pilate slept with a man who wanted to marry her; Pilate refused, since she was afraid that he'd be afraid of her missing navel. Still, she gave birth to a child, which she named Rebecca, or Reba for short, after asking others for a good Biblical name.

We learn a great deal about Pilate in the remainder of this chapter. One of the most important points of information is that Pilate is well-traveled. Unlike the other characters in the novel, who seem imprisoned in particular places or states of mind, Pilate travels freely, seemingly enjoying herself. Her lack of a navel symbolizes her freedom — she doesn't have any connection to her father or mother, meaning that, unlike Milkman or Ruth, she doesn't have to worry about pleasing her family. At the same time, Pilate must deal with the way her lack of a navel makes her different from other people and her shame at that fact.

While traveling through Virginia, Pilate claims to have seen the ghost of her father, who told her, "Sing," which she did, beautifully. She remembered her father's death, and thought that she and Macon were responsible for it. Nevertheless, she continued to take good care of Reba, and acted the part of a healer and a peacemaker during her travels, frequently breaking up fights between women. She began making wine and whiskey to make a living.

Pilate learns to overcome her shame through art — in this case song, and through her vision of her father this singing connects her to her past. It's not clear if we're supposed to believe Pilate truly had this vision or not — perhaps it's more important to think about what it accomplishes (it teaches Pilate to be optimistic) than to debate whether or not it's literally true. Pilate develops the skills that Milkman later loves her for, such as healing, peacemaking, etc. Finally, she blurs gender norms by adopting a stereotypical man's job — bootlegging. Her ability to stand outside of norms of all kinds brings her great freedom.

As Reba grew older, she gave birth to her own child, Hagar, and so Pilate decided to find her brother Macon, who she thought would help to provide for them. She finds him, and is able to pay for travel to his town, since the wine-selling business is thriving during the Great Depression. In the present, Pilate sits with Ruth, telling her all this to distract her from Hagar.

The perspective shifts suddenly back from Pilate's life to the present, when Ruth is talking to Pilate in Pilate's house. We remember that the story we've been listening to has a purpose beyond memory itself — it's supposed to calm Ruth down and distract her from her anger, to forestall any act of anger or revenge.

PART 1, CHAPTER 6

Milkman is talking to Guitar about the latest of his many encounters with Hagar, who is still trying, clumsily, to kill him. Suddenly, he changes the subject and asks why Guitar was spending time with Empire State last Christmas. Guitar is reluctant to explain himself, but Milkman reminds him that they're close friends, who tell each other everything. Guitar gives in and explains to Milkman that he has been "keeping the numbers even" — avenging dead Black people by killing white people, many of whom have nothing to do with the original crime. Milkman asks how Guitar could kill innocent people, but Guitar responds that all white people are capable of killing Black people, whether they've actually done so or not.

In this short chapter, we come to understand what Guitar has been up to. The form of "justice" he practices resembles the Code of Hammurabi — an eye for an eye — except that he kills innocent people, reasoning that no white person is truly innocent. In response to white racism, Guitar practices his own form of racism, treating all white people as villains who must be punished for their actions. In a sense, Guitar is turning white racism against Black people back around toward white people. The racism itself is an eye-for-an-eye.

Milkman tries to name "good whites," but his examples — John F. Kennedy, Albert Schweitzer, Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt — Guitar dismisses. Guitar concludes that he may be arrested for his crimes, but he doesn't care — he's already accomplished plenty with his life. Milkman asks Guitar why he doesn't follow the example of the Jews, trying his persecutors in court; Guitar replies that the Jews have money and power, while Black people are forced to take the law into their own hands. Milkman compares Guitar to Malcolm X and says that he's afraid for Guitar. Guitar replies that he's scared for Milkman, too.

Instead of focusing on the differences between white people and Black people, Milkman tries to find commonalities, naming white people who wouldn't hurt Black people. But there's a joking quality to his list, as if he doesn't really take the challenge of naming a good white man seriously (he doesn't really care about politics, anyway). It's significant that Guitar rejects FDR, who Milkman had previously regarded as a hero. Guitar also echoes white anti-Semitism by implying that Jews are rich and powerful. Milkman's comparison between Guitar and Malcolm X reminds us that decades and decades have passed since the novel began, and that the relationship between white and Black communities is at its most volatile.

PART 1, CHAPTER 7

Milkman waits for the day when he'll inherit his father's business, and have the money to be "free." As it is, he still lives at home, working for Macon. At times, he begs for some money, so that he can leave town, but Macon refuses on the grounds that he depends on Milkman. Milkman mentions to his father a green sack of money that Pilate keeps in her house without ever spending it – she calls it her "inheritance" – and Macon seems darkly amused. He tells Milkman to meet him for lunch.

Milkman subscribes to what his father has taught him: money is freedom. By reading the novel, we've seen that this plainly isn't true: Macon is hardly free at all — he's obsessed with his tumultuous past, and his material possessions don't seem to make him very happy.

Milkman meets Macon for lunch, where Macon tells him about his teenage years with Pilate. After the death of their father, Macon and Pilate went to live in secret with Circe, the midwife who delivered both of them, who works in a white family's mansion. While there, Pilate makes an **earring** for herself; but shortly after she pierces her ear, she and Macon leave, since they're afraid that Circe's master will find them and fire Circe.

Macon provides information that we've been waiting to hear for a while — how Pilate got her earring — but it's not yet apparent why she stuffs names into it. At this point in their lives, Macon and Pilate are extremely close, taking care of each other in the absence of a father.

Homeless, Macon and Pilate survive on fruit and live in a cave, in which at one point they think they see a terrifying figure who looks like their dead father. Another morning, Macon wakes up and sees an old man sleeping in their cave. Scared, he throws a rock at the man's head. The man runs toward Macon, and Macon stabs him in the back. As the man dies, he seems to mutter, "What for?" Soon, Macon discovers that the old man was carrying **gold** with him. Pilate insists that they leave the gold, since they'd be stealing from a dead man. Macon insists that they take the gold and use it to take care of themselves. They fight, and Pilate gains the upper hand, holding Macon's knife to his heart and then pushing him out of the cave. He waits outside for her, but some hunters come near and Macon is forced to run away. When he returns to the cave, Pilate and the gold are gone. Pilate took the gold, Macon concludes. He begs Milkman to get the gold.

Here is the event that seems to have come between Pilate and Macon: Macon murdered a man who he perceived as a threat (though he probably wasn't, as evidence by his dying words), and then tries to take his money. Even as a young man, Macon is anxious for material possessions, though his anxiety is rooted in need, not greed. And this desire of his for safety helps to establish just why he has become so focused on wealth as an adult, even if that focus made him cold and unattractive. Pilate seems like the more moral sibling, at least until she apparently takes the gold. It's not clear what happened, however, since Macon, the witness to the scene, wasn't there when Pilate left the cave and the novel has already shown multiple occasions when Macon's interpretation of events turned out to be affected by his worldview and not always accurate. Macon's continued desire for the gold speaks to his greed, but also his obsession with the past — he wants to right an old wrong by reclaiming what he sees as his property.

PART 1, CHAPTER 8

Guitar thinks about the four Black girls who were blown up in a church. To avenge this atrocity, he will need explosives or guns. Milkman approaches him with a plan to steal **gold**, so Guitar eagerly agrees to help him, thinking that he'll be able to use the gold to finance his revenge group, called Seven Days. Milkman and Guitar will steal the gold and split it three ways, leaving a share for Macon. Macon thinks that he and his son will split the gold down the middle, but Milkman says that he'll tell Macon about Guitar later. Since he believes the gold is in Pilate's house, Milkman is worried that Hagar might use a gun to protect the gold, but Guitar points out that she's been trying to kill him for half a year and hasn't gotten a gun yet.

The murders Morrison alludes to are real (Martin Luther King Jr. made a famous speech about the four girls). As the crimes against Black people become increasingly despicable, the revenge Guitar seeks becomes increasingly despicable as well. White racism is making him a more and more dangerous criminal; indeed, it's making him into the kind of demonic Black law-breaker that white *racists use as a justification for their own behavior. The name of Guitar's group, Seven Days, reflects the Old Testament and its eye-for-an-eye ethos, which was overturned by Christ in the New Testament.*

Guitar and Milkman try to think of a way to get Reba, Pilate, and Hagar out of the house while they steal the **gold**. While they're talking, they see a beautiful white peacock, which can't **fly** because its feathers are too heavy. Guitar calls the bird a "white faggot." Ignoring the bird, Guitar and Milkman talk about what they'll be able to buy with their gold. Guitar wants gifts for his family; Milkman wants vehicles for himself, such as boats, cars, and airplanes. Milkman thinks that Guitar can't resist money because he's never had any, but the narrator notes that Guitar is actually thinking of buying TNT.

The white peacock that appears while Guitar and Milkman symbolizes different things at the same time. Guitar sees it as the symbol of the weak, effeminate white people he will murder. Yet one could also say that the white peacock represents Milkman, whose wealth doesn't help him fly, but rather keeps him grounded and depressed.

Guitar wants to run into the house and steal the **gold**, while Milkman wants to get the three women out of the house first. But because neither one of them can think of a way to empty the house, they ultimately decide to sneak in at 1:30 AM, while the women are sleeping. They find the sack hanging from the ceiling, which is hung by wire, and cut it down, making a great amount of noise in the process. As Guitar helps Milkman, he thinks he sees a man standing behind Milkman. Together, Guitar and Milkman quickly run out of the house. At they go, Pilate looks after them and wonders why they'd want her sack.

It's clear enough why Milkman wants Hagar, Reba, and Pilate out of the house — even if he's stealing from them, he can't bear for them to see him betray them, especially after everything Pilate has done for him. This section is arguably the funniest in Song of Solomon *— Pilate doesn't get why they'd want her sack, and we sense (as we have for a while now but these men blinded by gold have not) that the sack isn't full of gold.*

PART 1, CHAPTER 9

Corinthians works as a maid for a white poet, Miss Graham, but she calls herself an amanuensis. She spent three years at college, including one year in France, so it's unfortunate that her education doesn't lead to a better profession. Her parents thought she would marry well because of her education and beautiful skin, but bachelors didn't like her lack of "drive" — she was too pampered, and unwilling to work hard at anything. Many men avoid Corinthians because she is more educated than they are. Eventually, she and Lena accept that they're probably not going to marry anyone, much less doctors.

We're finally given a tour of Corinthians's inner thoughts, and discover that she's miserable. Raised in a prosperous household, she has to go through the humiliation of remaining single and then working as a humble maid. This isn't entirely her fault — her college degree, supposedly an asset in finding a career and a husband, actually keeps her apart from others.

Corinthians attended Bryn Mawr, which has prepared her for a life of idleness by making her feel that she's too good to do any work. Eventually Corinthians becomes a maid, deliberately not telling her family what she does. The woman she works for, Miss Graham, is relatively liberal, and is proud of herself for hiring a Black maid. Corinthians never tells Miss. Graham that she's a college graduate. After a point, she realizes that working as a maid is good, even if it's sometimes humiliating — she's paid decently, and more importantly, has her own money.

This is a pretty devastating attack on the college education, but it's important to take it with a grain of salt (Toni Morrison has spent the last two decades teaching at Princeton, after all). What we're reading here isn't Morrison's opinion, but Corinthians' — in other words, this is how she *sees college. Morrison also describes other characters' thoughts in free indirect discourse here — for instance, Miss Graham, who is a caricature of the "weak liberal" who hires a Black servant, but still treats her as a servant.*

Miss Graham is a poet whose work has brought her minor success, culminating in her winning the State Poet Laureateship, though her publishers are reluctant to publish her complete works. Her assistant, Michael-Mary, hires Corinthians almost entirely because of her unusual name, and later offers to teach her to type.

Miss Graham's weak liberalism doesn't absolve her from racism — Corinthians is only hired in the first place because she's exotic, a fact which Michael-Mary freely admits. And Graham is a victim of bigotry as well as a practitioner of it — we sense that her publishers might be unwilling to publish her collected poems because of sexism (though it's certainly possible that it's because she's a lousy poet; indeed, Morrison might be poking fun at all the mediocre, pseudo-liberal writers she's come across in her long career!)

Corinthians rides the bus to work, and finds herself sitting next to the same man every day. One day, he gives her an envelope containing a poem about friendship. Corinthians ignores the envelope at first, but eventually she starts to talk to the man, named Henry Porter. While she begins to like him, she is glad she hasn't told anyone about him, since he is a yard worker. She allows Porter to take her to drive-in movies, but can't hide her shame at going out with a poorer man. When Porter points this out to her, Corinthians tells him that she's worried that her father won't approve.

Corinthians' misery is in some ways self-imposed. She holds herself aloof from other people, condemning herself to loneliness. She also reveals herself to be a grown child — still dependent on her father, even after she's no longer financially dependent on him.

Porter drives Corinthians home from a drive-in movie, and tells her that he doesn't want to go out with a woman who's still afraid of her father. Corinthians realizes that she can't think of a single "grown-up woman." She storms out of the car, but then runs back to where he is still parked, realizing, with great shame, that she can't do any better than a yardman. She remembers carrying rose petals as a small child and watching Smith jump off the roof of the hospital.

Corinthians's failure to think of a grown-up woman indicates the extent of sexism in America in the 20th century, but it also indicates how sheltered Corinthians has been. There are plenty of grown-up women out there (Pilate?); Corinthians is just too sheltered to search for them.

Corinthians climbs in front of Porter's car, so that he can't drive away. Eventually, Porter lets her back into the car; she cries, and he takes her to his home, which Macon owns. The narrator notes that this is the same home where Porter had urinated and waved a shotgun while begging for sex years and years ago.

Morrison confirms what we already suspected — Porter is the same man who made a drunken fool of himself years and years ago.

In Porter's home, Porter has sex with Corinthians, despite her protests. They fall asleep, and the next day Corinthians notices that Porter keeps old calendars; when she asks him why, he just says that it passes the time.

In one of the darkest sections of this book, Porter — who had seemed to be a fairly nice, charming man — rapes Corinthians. There's an important lesson here: just because Corinthians holds herself aloof from others doesn't mean that the "others" are automatically good. Relationships between men and women are never easy in this novel, and women nearly always have it worse.

Porter drives Corinthians back to her house, where she walks in to hear Milkman arguing with Macon. Macon is angry that Milkman has included Guitar in their scheme to steal the **gold**, but Milkman points out that since the sack they stole contains no gold, there's no point in arguing over whether to include Guitar or not. Milkman mentions that he and Guitar were thrown in jail for two hours, because the sack they found contained human bones — Macon reveals that he used his money and influence to pay off the cops and free Guitar and Macon. Milkman says he's grateful, but then laughs — Macon has spend fifty years believing the falsehood that Pilate stole his gold.

Corinthians's plotline merges and then transitions to the plotline involving the gold. It takes us a while to pick up what's going on, exactly, but when we do, it becomes clear that Macon and Milkman have become closer, since Macon has used his power to free Milkman from jail. Though Milkman laughs, it's tragic that Macon has spent all this time hating his beloved sister because of his own irrational greed.



Milkman contemplates his time in jail. Pilate had been called down to the police station, where she confirmed that he and Guitar had stolen the sack — Milkman says that they did so as a joke, to which Pilate adds that the bones belong to her late husband, Mr. Solomon, who had been lynched years ago. After Milkman was released from his cell, Pilate meets Macon and tells him a different story about the bones: after their clash in the cave, Pilate waited until Macon left, and then walked away, singing the whole time. Three years later, she says, the spirit of her father told her, "You just can't **fly** on off and leave a body." Interpreting this to mean that she can't leave the dead body in the cave, she returned and took the bones back to the town.

For all his greed and respect for his father's power, Milkman has enough decency to feel ashamed that Pilate covers for him and Guitar, if not enough to refrain from robbing her. Again, Pilate mentions the spirit of her father. It's not clear if we're meant to take this literally — which would make Song of Solomon *a work of magical realism, where supernatural events comingle with realistic ones — or figuratively (Pilate doesn't actually believe she saw her father, or she does but we shouldn't take her seriously).*

Milkman goes home and thinks about the shame he felt in front of Pilate, mostly the fact that she was willing to lie for him instead of pressing charges. He thinks about everything Pilate has done for him — made him food, shown him beauty, etc. He thinks about Guitar and realizes that he has murdered and will murder again. Shortly thereafter he sees a car in which sit the Tommys, Empire State, a man named Nero, and another whose name he doesn't know; Milkman realizes that they must belong to Guitar's Seven Days group.

Pilate's presence in the novel becomes increasingly Christ-like (ironically, considering her name, that of the Christ-killer). She has a boundless capacity for good and forgiveness, and in her presence, the sins of other people become more apparent: Milkman sees, as if for the first time, that Guitar is a murderer, and that his accomplices are people Milkman knows well.

Soon after, Lena takes Milkman and brings him along to a place where she shows him a tree. Years ago, she had taken Milkman out of Macon's car to urinate, and planted some twigs she found there. In the years since then the twigs have grown into a tree, but now the tree is dying. Milkman dismisses this sight and makes a joke about it. Lena is so angry that she hits Milkman in the mouth, saying that Milkman is destructive and cruel. She also accuses him of telling Macon that Corinthians has been seeing Porter, a charge which Milkman admits to immediately. Lena insists that Porter is the best Corinthians can do, but Milkman replies that he's not a good man.

The tree in this passage seems to symbolize the way childish optimism — both Milkman's and Lena's — can eventually turn into disillusionment and despair. In another sense, the tree symbolizes Milkman himself — he's squandered his potential for goodness and happiness, betraying Pilate. It's unclear who's in the right here: Lena (with whom we've spent little time thus far) seems deeply moral at first, criticizing Milkman for his callousness, but then turns practical, reasoning that Corinthians can't do any better than Porter (though we know full well that Porter is a rapist). Conversely, Milkman seems petty for tattling to Macon about Porter, but we know that he's right to protect his sister from Porter, even if he's doing it for the wrong reasons.

Furious, Lena tells Milkman that for years, Macon has been treating his daughters like jewels to be shown off, and then humiliating both of them. Now, Milkman has turned out much the same way as his father— he has grown into a cruel, selfish man.

It's not clear how much we're supposed to like Milkman. Certainly, he can be cruel and callous toward others, especially women. But if Lena refuses to forgive Milkman for his sins, perhaps we should do better, accepting his faults but also encouraging him to be a better man, as Pilate does.

PART 2, CHAPTER 10

Milkman is struggling through a thick forest, thinking of the **gold** he will shortly obtain. The narrator compares him to Hansel and Gretel, hungry and tired but spurred on by the promise of a reward. He thinks about the car that took him to the forest, driven by Reverend Cooper's teenage nephew, who's name is Nephew. Milkman has come to Danville, Pennsylvania, where Macon and Pilate used to live with their father before he was murdered, and made up a lie to disguise his true purpose of finding the gold.

This chapter opens with Milkman in the middle of a dense, claustrophobic forest that resembles a prison. This suggests the mental prison he's in — he's traveled across the country, to a place we're not yet familiar with — to find gold that, we sense, may not be there at all. For the time, though, he's more than happy to continue searching — his desire for wealth eclipses everything else, even something as basic as hunger.

Milkman thinks about his journey to Danville. He flew in a plane, which dazzled him, though he was saddened that Guitar wasn't coming with him. Guitar had wanted to join, but Milkman told him that it would be suspicious if two men were searching in the woods. Before saying goodbye to Guitar, Milkman explains that he needs the **gold** to escape from his town and family. Guitar replies that everyone wants the life of a Black man: white men want Black people to be quiet and docile, and even other Black people — Milkman's father, for instance — want to control Black men. Guitar adds that many Black people live in a state of self-imposed slavery; for instance, Pilate carried the bones of a white man instead of taking his treasure. Guitar recalls how nauseated he felt after his father died in a sawmill accident: his mother cheerfully accepted money from the foreman, and bought her children candy. He reminds Milkman that Macon has evicted him from his home.

Morrison gives us another "flight" — a literal plane flight across the country. It will become significant, and poignant, that Milkman wanted Guitar to accompany him on his journey. For all his selfishness, Milkman isn't all bad — he loves his friend, Guitar, in spite of the rocky relationship between Guitar and Macon. For his part, Guitar shows great willingness to overlook Macon's greed, and stays friends with Milkman. It's ironic that Guitar is so insightful about the self-imposed prisons in which other people put themselves when it's clear that he and Milkman are in their own prison of this kind — they have no choice but to look for gold because of their own desires.

Milkman flies into Pittsburgh and from there takes the bus to Danville, where he realizes how difficult it will be to find the cave Macon told him about. He asks a man if he knows where Circe lived, and the man refers him to Reverend Hooper. Milkman finds Reverend Cooper, who knew Macon and is overjoyed to meet his son. Cooper asks Milkman about Pilate, and recalls that his own father made Pilate's **earring**.

Throughout Milkman's journey in the second half of the novel, he will encounter wild coincidences. One can stop there and accept them as coincidences, or interpret them more spiritually — it's almost as if something (Morrison might even call it God) is guiding Milkman in his quest. This is a classic trope in Christian literature — even at the protagonist's greatest point of confusion, God is pointing him in the right direction.

Over dinner and whiskey, Reverend Cooper tells Milkman about the Dead family's history. The Butlers, a wealthy white family for whom Circe worked for many years delivering babies, were the people who murdered Macon's father. No trial or investigation was ever held, because the Butlers were influential in the community, and nobody with any power cared about a Black man's death. After Macon's father's death, Circe secretly sheltered Macon and Pilate at the Butlers' house. Milkman is confused that no one tried to prosecute the Butlers or take revenge; Cooper is amused and asks if things are different for Black people where Milkman comes from. Milkman doesn't answer, but asks if he could see the farm where the Butlers lived, thinking that this will be a good time to look for the **gold**. Cooper agrees to drive him there in four days time.

Milkman's innocence is plain when he asks Cooper why his grandfather's murderers weren't brought to justice. In part, this is because he lives in the North, where there is slightly more equality for Black people, but for the most part, he's confused because he's been brought up wealthy and powerful, and doesn't have much exposure to the way Black people are really treated. (There are barely any white people in Song of Solomon.*) In this way, Milkman's journey isn't only a quest to find gold; it's also, if inadvertently, a personal journey, during which Milkman learns about himself, and about how his race is treated in other parts of the country.*

While Milkman waits the four days for the trip, he meets other men who remember Macon Dead and Macon's father as powerful, successful men who overcame racism and poverty. They're delighted to hear that Macon owns an expensive car and multiple houses, and Milkman is happy to give them details about his success.

By this point, we know that Macon's wealth and power don't bring him, or the other people in his family, much happiness. In fact, they're a barrier to happiness. It's touching to hear others praising Macon for his success — clearly, it's more attractive from a distance.

Cooper and Nephew accompany Milkman to the farm, where Milkman wanders through the forest. He imagines himself as his father and aunt, thinking that the Butlers' house looks like a dark, murderous place. He goes into the Butler house and climbs up the stairs, remembering the nightmares he had about witches as a child, which would always end in his waking up with an erection.

Milkman's nightmares encapsulate his contradictory relationship with women. He's afraid of them, but also strangely attracted. Also in the section, Milkman begins to lose his narcissism and egocentrism, imagining himself in other people's position. It's the first step toward the selflessness he'll eventually embody.

Upstairs in the Butler house, Milkman is surprised to find a pack of well-groomed dogs and an old, crazy-looking woman. Milkman wonders if the woman is Circe and notices that she is speaking, despite her great age, with the voice of a young woman. The woman, who calls herself Circe, tells Milkman she knew he'd come one day. Milkman tells Circe that Macon is now 72 years old. Circe seems both interested and uninterested; she tells Milkman that the dogs she's taking care of belonged to Miss Butler, who committed suicide. Circe claims that she brought Miss Butler into the world just as she brought Miss Butler's mother and grandmother into the world.

Song of Solomon *blends psychological and social realism with moments like this, which, by any reasonable estimate, can't possibly be real. Circe would have to be older than anyone on the planet to have delivered Macon and Pilate, as well as the Butlers. This is another example of Morrison's magical realism — the extraordinary in this section arguably isn't meant to be extraordinary; we're supposed to accept it and focus on the interaction between the characters instead.*

Circe mentions Macon's mother, a woman named Sing who was of Black and Native American descent and bragged that she was never enslaved. Circe asks Milkman if Pilate ever married Reba's father; Milkman says no. She remembers Pilate's shame at her lack of a **navel**, mentions that Pilate lived in a Virginia town called Charlemagne after her father died, and recalls that Pilate "birthed herself" without Circe's help. Finally, she mentions the cave where Pilate and Macon lived after leaving the Butler house; it's called Hunters Cave, and Macon's father was supposedly left there after he died — he was originally dumped in a river, but men pulled him out and left him in the cave.

Circe's perspective on Pilate reinforces her Christ-like aura — it seems as if she was immaculately conceived. Circe doesn't ask any questions about why Milkman wants to go to the cave where his father ended up; it's not clear if this is because she doesn't care or because she wants Milkman to go there whatever his motives are. The way others treat Macon I's corpse is a grisly reminder of Black people's inferior place in the United States — a reminder of the kind Milkman has been avoiding for most of his life. We also begin to sense that there's a connection between Macon I's corpse and the bones Pilate carries — even if Milkman doesn't.

Milkman thinks to himself that Circe, a woman who has spent her entire life selflessly caring for other people, will die poor and surrounded by dogs. In another life, he thinks, she would have been the head nurse at Mercy Hospital. He offers Circe money, which she refuses, and asks her why she's caring for the dogs of a racist white woman. Circe insists that she's not loyal to Miss Butler herself; she merely wanted to help the dogs and preserve the house. Before Milkman leaves, Circe tells him Macon's father's real name: Jake.

Milkman's interactions with Circe broaden his perspective on life, and make him aware of racial injustice to an extent he's never shown before. This section also reminds us of the novel's opening scene, in which the actual head nurse of Mercy seems oblivious to other people's suffering — we know first-hand that Circe would have done a better job than she. It's also here that Milkman begins to learn the "real names" of his family members. It's not yet clear what this accomplishes.

Milkman leaves the Butler house and heads for Hunters Cave, noting that he has plenty of time before Nephew will be looking for him. He travels through the woods and rocks, thinking with disgust about the white men who stole his grandfather's property. He enters the cave, but after a great deal of searching, doesn't find the **gold**. Furious and starving, he realizes that many hours have elapsed, and Nephew must have left without him. He hitchhikes back to Danville with a man named Fred Garnett, who gives him a Coke. Back in Danville he feeds himself, and walks back to Reverend Cooper's station house, where he discovers that he's just missed Cooper.

Almost as soon as Milkman fails to find the gold, he begins to feel hungry. It's as if the thought of gold distracted him from his most basic human needs, and now he has to confront them once again. Yet even after Milkman fails in his quest, the universe continues to smile on him — it seems highly unlikely, for instance, that a stranger would offer Milkman a ride back to town and give him a Coke.

Dejected at having failed to find the **gold** and annoyed with Reverend Cooper's friends, Milkman boards a Greyhound bus to Virginia. He remembers that Pilate told him she'd returned to Hunter's Cave to collect the dead body four years after finding the gold; this would mean that she entered the cave after men dragged her own father's body there. Milkman concludes that Pilate lied: if, as she says, she returned to the cave four years later, she would have noticed that there were two bodies there. Instead, she must have entered the cave shortly after her brother left her, and taken the set of bones there, along with the gold. With this in mind, Milkman resolves to trace Pilate's travels and go to Virginia to look for the treasure.

Milkman seems to regress morally at the end of the chapter. Where before he had enjoyed the company of strangers, and felt a selfless sympathy for Circe, he now thinks only of gold. Throughout the novel, we've been given access to Milkman's most secret thoughts, but here, we begin to see that his thoughts are delusional. It's unlikely, for instance, that Pilate lied about the gold, particularly when one considers what Circe said — all sorts of people come into the cave, and could have moved the bodies or the gold before Pilate returned there. Milkman continues to believe what he wants to believe, because he's obsessed with money.

PART 2, CHAPTER 11

In the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, Milkman, who is used to seeing women carrying purses, is struck by the lack of possessions women carry with them: no purses, keys, wallet, etc. He has arrived in this place by trying to track down the town where Pilate lived: it's called Shalimar, not Charlemagne, as Circe had previously told him. After leaving Pennsylvania, he bought a cheap car and has begun to enjoy his travels. In Shalimar, his car breaks down. While he waits for the car to be fixed, he rests at Solomon's General Store. As he speaks to the owner of the store, Mr. Solomon, he learns that someone from Michigan drove to Shalimar looking for him; Milkman realizes that Guitar must have come to the store, and thinks that he must be in trouble.

As Milkman goes further along in his quest, he becomes less and less focused on material things. At this point, however, he's a fish out of water — he can't believe how un-materialistic other people are (which is, of course, a way of saying that he's too materialistic). As selfish as Milkman's behavior has been in the preceding chapters, we get a reminder that he's loyal to his friends the point of naiveté — he doesn't suspect any foul play from Guitar whatsoever.

As Milkman walks outside the General Store thinking of Guitar, he sees children playing and chanting a nursery rhyme about Solomon. He remembers that he never played so happily when he was a child, and this makes him think of getting in a fight as a boy and being rescued by Guitar. Guitar beat up the four boys who were attacking Milkman, and then lent Milkman his baseball cap so that he could wipe the blood off of himself; when Milkman was finished doing this, Guitar put his cap back on his head.

The memory of Guitar running to Milkman's defense is supposed to be soothing to Milkman — a reminder that Guitar is always looking out for him, even with the odds against him — but as Morrison conveys it, it's more properly described as terrifying. One gets the sense that Guitar loves to fight more than he loves Milkman.

Milkman walks back into the General Store, and makes the mistake of complimenting the women of the town on their beauty. Mr. Solomon becomes hostile, and tells Milkman that there are no places to stay in town. Milkman also remarks that he might have to buy a new car; this makes the other men regard him as a rich snob. One of the men in the store, Saul, picks a fight with Milkman, and pulls a knife on him; Milkman fights back, but winds up with cuts on his face and hand. Mr. Solomon breaks up the fight, and Saul leaves the store.

One common trait of all the places Milkman travels to is their patriarchal culture — the men are extremely protective and possessive of their women, to the point where even a (fairly innocent-seeming compliment) provokes the townspeople. Milkman also comes to grasp how much of an outsider his wealth makes him — it's really his comment about the car, not the women, that sets Saul over the edge.

An old man named Omar asks Milkman to go hunting with them; Milkman lies and says that he's a good shot. Omar tells him to meet them the next morning at a nearby gas station called King Walker's. Milkman sleeps in his car that night, dreaming that Guitar is looking down on him. The next morning, he goes to meet the other hunters, Calvin Breakstone and Small Boy.

Omar's behavior around Milkman could be seen as either friendly or sinister, since it comes after Milkman offends a large portion of the town. Similarly, Milkman's thoughts about Guitar are both soothing and disturbing — it's as if Milkman's subconscious knows that Guitar is out to get him even before he's consciously aware of the fact. Though Milkman continues to stand out because of his wealth, he's getting less and less fancy the further he goes — tonight, for instance, he sleeps in his car.

During the hunt, Calvin is cheerful, and assures Milkman that they're in no danger from bears or other animals, since they're armed. As the day passes and the light fades, and the hunters use lamps. Milkman thinks to himself that he shouldn't have participated in the hunt; he doesn't know what the people he's hunting with are capable of. Calvin runs after a bobcat, and in the chase, Milkman falls behind, and sits down to rest. He thinks that the people in Shalimar are wrong to despise him because of his wealth. As he thinks this, he realizes that he has a bad habit of claiming not to deserve bad luck or abuse; he's always assumed he deserves to be loved by everyone around him, even when he's not lovable at all. He realizes also that all the things he liked about his life back home — his father's reputation, his money, his car — are useless to him in Shalimar; only instinct and cleverness can help him as he walks through the forest.

Though the hunt is meant to be a fun group activity, for Milkman, it becomes an opportunity to think about his life and his relationship with other people. The hunt is enormously successful in this way — Milkman confronts the fact that he thinks he's better than everyone around him, and thinks he deserves others' love even when he's done absolutely nothing to deserve it. The question, then, is why Milkman arrives at these conclusions so quickly in the middle of the hunt. One answer is that Milkman's epiphany isn't sudden at all — he's been building up to it throughout the trip, stripping away the layers of wealth and entitlement that have kept him from connecting with others and understanding himself throughout his life.

Milkman walks through the forest thinking of women, especially Hagar. As he walks, he hears a voice say, "Your Day has come," and feels a wire slip around his neck. Milkman is quick enough to put his hand between his neck and wire, and he fires his gun into the trees. Guitar, who has been trying to murder Milkman, runs away, startled.

In a sense, Guitar is right — Milkman's day has cone, in the sense that his perspective on life has changed. That Guitar would try to kill Milkman, his best friend, comes as a shock, but it wasn't entirely unforeseeable — we already know that Guitar is violent, and we know also that Guitar now is under the influence of needing the gold as Milkman was before.

The other hunters run toward Milkman; they find him alone on the ground. Milkman claims that he tripped and his gun went off, not mentioning Guitar. The hunters laugh and display the bobcat they've caught. They leave the forest and travel to King Walker's Gas Station, where they meet a man named Vernell. He cuts the bobcat open, slicing off its genitals and offering Milkman the heart. Milkman accepts, thinking about what Guitar told him about how everyone wants the life of a Black man. As he contemplates the disgusting sight of the dead bobcat, a peacock flies onto a car.

Milkman's claim that he slipped and dropped his gun is a lie for which there's no clear motive — perhaps he's shocked by what Guitar has tried to do that he can't begin to put it into words for the other hunters. This episode also recalls the scene at the beginning of the novel when Porter drunkenly fires his gun into the ceiling. The presence of the peacock in this moment takes us back to the peacock's earlier scene in the novel. Where before the peacock's ostentatious appearance weighed it down, it's able to fly here. The message is obvious — Milkman is no longer weighed down with his greed and his entitlement, so that his soul can feel free in a way it couldn't back in Michigan.

Milkman asks the hunters if they knew Pilate, Sing, or Macon's father. Vernell, remembers Sing as a light-skinned girl; he reveals that her last name was Byrd, and that she lived in a nearby area. Vernell thinks that Susan Byrd, another member of the family, still lives there, near a rock formation called Solomon's Leap. At first, Milkman wants to go there immediately, but the other hunters convince him to spend the night resting first. Milkman stays with Sweet, a woman who lives nearby. Sweet feeds Milkman and takes care of his injuries from the past two days. He pays her for sex and says he'll see her again soon.

Milkman doesn't linger on Guitar's betrayal; very quietly, his interest in his family history has eclipsed his interest in anything else, including the gold. It's unclear if Milkman is any different than he was before in his attitude toward women, though — he seems to treat Sweet fairly well, but at the end of the day, he's still treating her like a prostitute.

PART 2, CHAPTER 12

The day after Guitar tries to kill him, Milkman travels to Susan Byrd's home. He thinks that Guitar won't try to kill him in broad daylight, and tries to imagine why Guitar would want him dead — he guesses that it has something to do with the **gold**.

Guitar's betrayal not only shocks Milkman; it distances Milkman from the original purpose of his journey, to find the gold. If Guitar was willing to kill for gold, as Milk correctly guesses, then maybe the gold isn't worth the trouble.


Milkman arrives at Susan Byrd's house and introduces himself as Macon. Susan appears to be around the same age as Ruth; she invites Milkman into her home and introduces him to her friend, Miss Grace Long, a schoolteacher who asks Milkman various trivial questions, and hints that she's looking for a husband. Ignoring Grace, Susan explains that her father, Crowell Byrd, had a sister named Sing; Milkman deduces that this must be his own grandmother. He's confused when Susan tells him that Sing never married. He asks Susan about Pilate, but Susan can't remember anyone by this name. Grace admires Milkman's **gold** watch, and asks to see it; Milkman takes it off and hands it to her. He thanks Susan, noting that his visit has been valuable if only because he now knows where not to look.

The presence of Grace Long in this chapter, along with Pilate's question, "no why would they want that?", is a comic highlight of Song of Solomon. *Clearly, she's flirting with Milkman, and seems to be planning to marry him. This is funny, but also strangely appropriate — as Milkman tries to figure out his lineage, Grace tries to join his lineage with hers. Milkman continues to act as a detective in this scene, building on the aptitude for the job he's shown in some earlier chapters. We don't know exactly what the information he learns here tells him, but it's impressive to see him forging ahead with his questions, not in the least because it suggests that he's becoming more interested in finding his family history than finding the treasure Pilate supposedly took.*

As he leaves Byrd's home, Milkman thinks that he feels the same pleasure in Shalimar that he felt at Pilate's house. He has dozens of questions about his family history, and is particularly curious if the Sing whom Susan mentioned is the same Sing who married his grandfather. Since Pilate really didn't have a **navel**, he thinks, anything is possible. He remembers that he left his watch behind, but can't muster enough enthusiasm to go back to retrieve it.

In this section, Milkman proves how much he's changed in a short time. Where his business training taught him to think rationally and critically, he's now willing to expand his willingness to believe, no matter how fantastic it sounds. Most noticeably, Milkman doesn't care enough about his gold watch to retrieve it — even though the point of his journeying here was to find gold!

As he walks away from the house, thinking about his family, Milkman runs into Guitar, who is casually trimming his nails, and seems to have been waiting for Milkman. Stunned and angry, Milkman demands that Guitar tell him why he tried to kill him; Guitar accuses Milkman of stealing the gold for himself, noting that he saw Milkman unloading a heavy crate at the freight station in Danville; Milkman remembers helping an old man lift such a crate, but knows as he explains this to Guitar that he'll never believe him — Guitar knows Milkman well enough to know that he never helps anyone unnecessarily. He tries to convince Guitar that he wouldn't ship the gold anywhere unattended, but Guitar refuses to believe him. Having learned that the crate at the freight station is headed for Virginia, Guitar has come to the Blue Ridge Mountains to wait for its arrival. As Milkman leaves, he asks Guitar why he left a message at the General Store, alerting Milkman to his presence; Guitar says that it was the least he could do for his old friend.

Milkman's confrontation with Guitar illustrates how much his thinking has changed in the last few chapters. He correctly predicts that Guitar tried to kill him over the gold, but he himself seems uninterested in gold at this stage. The fact that Milkman can't convince Guitar that he's innocent of the crime Guitar suspects him of demonstrates that he's grown more compassionate in this time — he would never have helped another person previously. The confrontation ends on a sad note, with Guitar saying that he tried to warn Milkman — though Milkman treats this information with contempt, it suggests that some part of Guitar continues to regard Milkman as a friend.

Milkman returns to Sweet's home, where he spends the night with her. He dreams about **flying**, and feels invincible. The next day, he wakes up early to find that Omar and Solomon are repairing his car. As he waits for them to finish, he strolls through town, noting that Southerners wake up early before the sun is hot. He sees children playing and singing the same song Pilate used to song, "O Sugarman," except the children sing "Solomon" instead of "Sugarman." He thinks fondly of Pilate, but then remembers his father. Milkman realizes that he's imitated his father and his father's desires — money, power, property — without ever deriving any happiness from these things. He remembers Hagar, and realizes that he has treated her horribly.

Milkman's behavior has changed. He is engaging with and noticing the world. He is kind to Sweet, and regretful for his treatment of Hagar. He is empathetic, connected, and self-reflective, and recognizes how the pursuit of money has harmed him. Here also we see how the tradition and song of Solomon has spread and changed, through Shalimar and among all Black communities. The name has changed through misinterpretation—otherwise it wouldn't have changed—but in many ways those changes haven't been harmful, they have been liberating, they are like evolution: the story has changed as it has needed to.

It occurs to Milkman that everything in the town of Shalimar is named after Solomon: Solomon's General Store, Solomon's Leap — even "Shalimar" itself sounds like "Solomon." The children sing about "Jay the only son of Solomon," and Milkman wonders if the song is a reference to his grandfather, Jake. The song continues, "Heddy took him to a red man's house," which Milkman concludes must be a reference to Susan Byrd's grandmother, an Indian.

Milkman performs the act to which the entire book has been building — the interpretation of names. That his interpretation begins with a children's song suggests that mystery and enlightenment are hidden in plain view sometimes.

Quickly, Milkman interprets the rest of the children's song, realizing that they're singing about his own family. Jake, his grandfather, was the son of a man named Solomon, who seems to have loved a woman named Ryna. Jake and Sing lived in Shalimar, just as Circe had suggested, and Sing must have had a brother named Crowell Byrd, whose real name was probably Crow Bird. Giddy with his own detective work, Milkman decides to go back to Susan Byrd's house, certain that she knows more than she told him. He feels as happy as he's ever felt in his life.

At times in Song of Solomon, *it's seemed as if names are arbitrary, almost accidental things that bear no relation to the thing they're naming. But now, Milkman comes to see that names do tell a story — he traces his family's location and race simply by analyzing their names. He's also seeing how names grow and change over time, through engagement, interpretation, and even misinterpretation, just as stories do. By engaging with names and stories Milkman is finding the history he had been cut off from.*

PART 2, CHAPTER 13

We are back in Michigan, some unclear amount of time after the events of the previous chapter. Hagar has given up her attempts to kill Milkman. Guitar, who has returned from Virginia, finds Hagar waiting at his home. He tells her to sit while he goes to borrow a car so that he can drive her home. As he looks for the car, he thinks about Hagar, driven mad by her unrequited love for Milkman. She's devoted her entire life to Milkman, meaning that she doesn't value it very highly — if so, Guitar thinks, why should Milkman value it either? He says aloud that Milkman didn't lose interest in her because she's worthless; she's worthless *because* Milkman lost interest in her. He doesn't think that Hagar hears him say this.

Though his friend Milkman comes to respect women more and more, Guitar's attitude toward women is no better than it ever was — he seems to believe that men have the power to decide whether women have value or not, and thus, that women aren't inherently valuable at all.

Guitar's thoughts turn to his own life. Everything he has loved left him, he tells Hagar: his father, his mother, his aunt, his grandmother, and his uncle. It's difficult for him to love anything because he's been trained to expect it to disappear. He adds, cryptically, that he only managed to love one woman. Hagar is so distraught that she isn't listening to anything Guitar says.

The "one woman" who Guitar has managed to love may be Hagar herself, but even here, he's more interested in criticizing women themselves than in loving one particular woman. As brutal as Guitar's views are, Morrison doesn't treat him entirely unsympathetically — he's been through more tragedy than most people ever experience, and in this sense, might be forgiven for some of his hostility.

Guitar drives Hagar back to Pilate, and Pilate and Reba treat her with great sympathy, cooking food for her and tending to her every need. Hagar says that Milkman lost interest in her because she looks ugly, and asks Pilate for money to buy new clothing. With the money from the diamond Reba won, and then pawned for a fraction of its real value, Hagar buys a huge number of dresses and other pretty clothes. She then goes to Lilly's Beauty Parlor, where she insists on getting her hair done immediately. Lilly and Marcelline, the shop's two owners, are reluctant to take on another customer since it's so late, but Marcelline eventually gives in and tells her to come back later. Alone, Lilly and Marceline laugh about Hagar's reputation for trying to kill Milkman, and say that it's shameful for two cousins to be sexually involved with one another.

Pilate and Reba are selfless here — they give Hagar their time and their attention, not to mention their money. Earlier in the novel Pilate commented on Ruth's dependence on money (which made her dependent on men). Here Hagar's devotion to appearance is also connected to an even greater dependence on Milkman. Hagar is not dressing up to feel better about herself; she's dressing up to make up to try to hide those aspects of herself that she believes have made Milkman fall out of love with her. For all his cynicism, Guitar has a point — Hagar has come to value Milkman's love so highly that she no longer respects herself.

Hagar walks home carrying heavy bags with her purchases from the day. It begins to rain, and one of her bags splits; she has to carry everything in her arms. When she arrives at Pilate's house, she runs to her room, where she applies her makeup and puts on new clothes; when she emerges from her room, she realizes that her purchases don't make her look any better: she's applied too much makeup, and her dress is torn. She bursts into tears, and cries for so long that she develops a fever. As Pilate and Reba take care of her, she asks them why Milkman doesn't like her hair, and notes that he only likes silky hair and light-colored skin. Certain that Milkman will never love her, she dies.

Hagar, like the peacock weighed down by its feathers and Milkman weighed down by his car and suit, finds that material possessions get in the way of happiness instead of leading toward happiness. Part of her sadness is racially based — Hagar clearly thinks that Milkman prefers light-skinned Black women, in other words, Black women who look as white as possible. This reflects Milkman's desire for prestige and power — in a sense, his desire to become as white as he can.

Shortly thereafter, a funeral is held for her. Much of the neighborhood donates to it, since Hagar has spent all of Pilate and Reba's money on clothing. At the funeral, Pilate bursts in and shouts that she wants mercy. She walks through the church, asking, half-rhetorically, half-seriously, if anyone has mercy. Eventually, Reba answers her — together they sing a song of mercy. Pilate next sings directly to Hagar the same soft song she sang for her when she was a child. Suddenly, Pilate shouts "And she was loved!" so loudly that a man who has been drinking in the church drops his bottle of wine.

Pilate's behavior at the funeral demonstrates her love but also her capacity for anger. The song she shouts, "And she was loved," is both mournful and angry. We've seen these two sides of Pilate before — for instance, when she protected Reba from a man's advances by stabbing him just enough to make him bleed, but not enough to kill him. We might say that Pilate's anger is a kind of love; it is never a kind of hate.

PART 2, CHAPTER 14

Milkman returns to Susan Byrd's house, noting that it looks different than it did the last time he was there. He knocks, and Susan invites him in. Grace Long is not there this time.

Milkman thinks that the house looks different, but of course, it is he who has changed. His quest for names has refocused him and made him turn away from his quest for gold.

Milkman asks Susan about Jake, and Susan tells him that Jake married Sing, and may have traveled to Boston with her. Milkman asks Susan why she told him that Sing went to school in Boston, and Susan tells him that she answered him differently because Grace was present. Now, Susan tells him that Jake was one of "those **flying** African children."

Grace's presence wasn't just obnoxious; it actually interfered with Milkman's investigation. Now his return to see Susan Byrd, which had nothing to do with the gold and instead focused on his history, begins to pay off as she seems to know about his family's past.

Milkman asks Susan about Heddy; he learns that Heddy was Susan's grandmother, an Indian woman, who took care of Jake after Jake's father mysteriously disappeared. Heddy later gave birth to Susan's father, Crowell. Susan had previously refused to talk about Heddy because Grace was around — Heddy never married, which would have scandalized Grace. Susan continues that Heddy raised Jake and Sing, neither of whom ever met their biological fathers.

Milkman's family is full of strong, nurturing women who put their love for others before their own interests. As Milkman gets closer to the truth, Susan, for all her helpfulness, shows that she's more committed to the appearance of politeness, and perhaps a desire to avoid shame, than to telling the truth. Grace's presence kept her from giving Milkman everything she knew.

Milkman asks Susan about the "**flying** African children," and she mentions the folktale of the enslaved people who fly back to Africa. Solomon, also known as Shalimar, was a man who was rumored to have successfully flown back to Africa, leaving behind him a wife and twenty-one children. Though he tried to take Jake with him, the young boy was knocked from his arms by some branches and Solomon left him behind and returned to Africa by himself. Ryna, Solomon's wife, went insane with grief after Solomon left her, and, Susan implies, threw herself off a ravine, know as Ryna's Gulch. Susan then dismisses this entire story as a fairy tale.

Solomon's return to Africa reflects a long-standing Black folk tale that engages both the idea of Black power and the escape from racist slaveholders in the U.S. In that regard, Solomon's flight seems triumphant, but it also causes his wife to go insane with grief. This suggests that flight is a little more complicated than it would seem — it's not just a matter of leaving everything one knows behind, as Milkman seems to think. Flight can be deadly for other people — Solomon effectively kills his wife, just as Milkman can be said to have killed Hagar. Susan Byrd doesn't believe that the story is "true" in the sense of having happened, but Milkman seems not to care about truth is precisely that way, and in a novel where so many interpretations of events have turned out to be inaccurate, what is "true" turns out to be something of debate.

Milkman pieces together Susan's information and his own. Jake and Sing must have traveled to Boston but taken a wrong turn (no doubt because Jake was illiterate) and ended up in Danville, Pennsylvania. Remembering the children's nursery rhyme he heard yesterday, he asks Susan why Jake is said to be the only son of Solomon. Susan isn't sure, but guesses that it's because Jake was the son Solomon tried to take back to Africa with him.

Again, Jake's illiteracy changes the course of his life. Understanding language is no mere party trick — it's real power, representing the ability to take control over one's own life.

Milkman asks if Jake was enslaved; Susan reminds him that no one in her own family was enslaved, but also notes that Jake registered with the Freedmen's Bureau before he left the state of Virginia, as all enslaved people were required to do. On this uncertain note, Milkman leaves, thanking Susan for her time. He asks her if she still has his watch, explaining that he left it with Grace the other day. Susan laughs and tells him that he'll never get it back — Grace will have told everyone that Milkman gave her a beautiful watch.

Milkman leaves Susan on a note of ambiguity — it's clear he's learned something, but it's hard to put one's finger on what it is. We don't know about Jake's experiences with slavery, and we're unclear on what conclusions Milkman draws from the new information. But it's clear that something has changed — Milkman is never getting his watch back, and, symbolically, he'll never be the same materialistic person he was.

PART 2, CHAPTER 15

Though Milkman's car has been repaired, it gives out once again while he is driving through a small town near Shalimar called Jistann. Milkman sells the car for twenty dollars and takes the bus instead.

Milkman no longer cares about money; he's progressed to less material concerns, such as his family's name and history

Milkman thinks of his behavior after he left Susan Byrd's house. He returned to Sweet's home in Shalimar, where he ecstatically told her that he wants to swim in the "sea! The whole goddam sea!" Even when Sweet tells him that a man came by to see him, Milkman isn't perturbed, though he assumes that it must have been Guitar. Together, Sweet and Milkman walk to the nearby river, with Milkman chanting the children's nursery rhyme. At the river, Milkman encourages Sweet to jump in. They swim and kiss.

Milkman's desire to bathe in the "sea" suggests a new expansiveness to his vision of himself and the world. Now that he has a past he wants to connect with all the world, rather than protect himself behind money. Bathing in the water suggests a Christian baptism — he's born again. Yet even with this happy news, there's a shadow of menace cast over the scene, since we know that Guitar is still looking for Milkman, and still thinks he stole the gold.

Milkman tells Sweet that his great grandfather, Solomon, could **fly**. He can't wait to tell everyone what he's learned: Pilate, his father, and even Reverend Cooper and his friends. He also tells Sweet that if Guitar is still in Virginia and looking for Milkman that she should tell him about Solomon.

The news that brings Milkman such great pleasure is empowering for a few reasons. He seems to believe that flight is literally possible, but what's equally empowering for him is the knowledge that he comes from somewhere, that he descends from a family with a notable history. Milkman wanting to share this news with Guitar, who he knows wants to kill him, shows his changing worldview, how he wants to share this history with others as an empowering thing.

As Milkman rides the bus back to Michigan, he sees signs along the road. Each sign is a name, and each name has its own meaning, just as Not Doctor Street is a name with a meaning: it refers to his grandfather, the first influential Black man to work in the area. He thinks of all the Black men he has met in Danville, Shalimar, and other towns, and how every man's name arose for many different reasons, including weakness, ambition, and random chance.

Milkman's bus ride gives us more information about why he's so happy about his great-grandfather — he's finally learned his name, and thus taken control over his own life. What's remarkable about this section is that it doesn't tell us anything we don't already know — Morrison has made it clear from the first page of Song of Solomon *that names are power — names can be a form of political rebellion, a form of subjugation, a form of liberation. The realization, then, is Milkman's not ours.*

Milkman tries to convince himself that when he returns to Michigan, he'll be able to convince Guitar to be friends with him again — Guitar will see that no crate has arrived, with or without gold. But Milkman realizes that this isn't the truth. Guitar has always secretly despised him, associating him with his father and the other wealthy, entitled Black people. Guitar's belief in revenge against white people, Milkman decides, is immoral — he's already killed four innocent woman and one innocent Black man.

In the past, Milkman has been optimistic about his friendship with Guitar, thinking that Guitar is benign even when he's clearly bloodthirsty. After his baptism, Milkman is more honest with himself, and his honesty is rooted in a more acute sense of right and wrong. Thus, he's not afraid to think that Guitar is wrong to kill innocent white people. Even more basically, he recognizes what he'd refused to acknowledge before: Guitar must be responsible for the recent murders in Michigan.

As Milkman arrives back in Michigan, he thinks that everyone in his life would seem to prefer him dead, with the exception of Reba and Pilate — two people for whom he's never done anything. Rather than go home right away, he decides to go to Pilate's home to greet her. When he does, she hits him over the head with a bottle, knocking him out.

Pilate's act of knocking out Milkman might at first seem shocking, especially as he was coming to her to bring such good news. But it is important to look at it in context. Pilate knows that it was Milkman's abandonment of Hagar that killed her. But Pilate does not kill Milkman in return—she does not practice an eye-for-an-eye. Guitar wants to kill Milkman over money. Pilate only knocks him out in response to Milkman's role in her granddaughter's death.

Milkman wakes up in Pilate's cellar and tries to figure out why Pilate hit him. At first, he thinks that it's revenge for stealing her bones, but then he realizes that Hagar must be dead. Without trying to deduce how she died, he feels guilty for driving her away from him.

Milkman's ability to figure out what happened marks his increased empathy. His guilt speaks to his growing sense of responsibility. Both of these new traits stem from his journey and his discovery of his family history.

Milkman remembers the words Pilate claims her own father told her: "You just can't **fly** off and leave a body." He shouts from the basement to Pilate upstairs that Jake wasn't talking about the dead body in the cave; he was talking about his own father, Solomon, who flew back to Africa, trying to take Jake with him but ultimately leaving him behind. He also realizes that her father wasn't telling her to "sing" songs; he was referring to his own mother, Sing.

Once again it is revealed that a character has misinterpreted an event. But while previous misinterpretations seemed damaging, this misinterpretation isn't at all: Pilate has continued to sing, bringing joy to others, even Macon Dead. Just as the song about Solomon became a song about Sugarman, the ghost of Jake's reference to his wife has become Pilate's inspiration to sing. The past and its traditions and stories, the novel suggests, are not static: they can change and grow, and whether they grow toward something bountiful and joyous or the opposite depends on what one does with them.

Pilate hears Milkman's voice and comes down to the cellar. Milkman tells her what he's come to realize: the body Pilate found when she returned to the cave wasn't that of the old man Macon killed — it was the body of her own father, whose bones she has been carrying for years. Milkman tells Pilate, who can only repeat, "Papa," that she must bury her father. Pilate agrees to do so. She also produces a small shoe box, which she says she must bury, too. Milkman insists that she give him the shoebox. Later, as Milkman walks back to his home, the narrator reveals that the shoebox is full of Hagar's hair.

Again, Milkman guesses what's happening with very few clues — he seems to know what the shoebox contained right away. This contrasts sharply with his mistaken theft of the bones (which he now recognizes to be his own grandfather's). Hagar despised her own hair, seeing it as a symbol of her Blackness and her separateness from Milkman and white culture — but in death, it's how Pilate wants to remember her.

Milkman drives Pilate to Virginia, since she refuses to ride in a plane. Before he does so, however, he returns to his family. His return isn't triumphant, as he had hoped. Lena doesn't forgive him for his cruelty. Corinthians has moved in with Porter. The Seven Days, Milkman guesses, will be looking for a new member — the narrator notes that they'd had to find a new member when Smith jumped off the hospital roof. When Milkman tells his father what he's learned, Macon is indifferent to the fact that Solomon flew, but he likes to hear that people in other states respect him, and he's proud that there are parts of the country named after his family. He says that he'd like to go to Danville, noting that Freddie can run his business while he's away. He and Pilate don't reconcile, but he's happy to learn that his father will be buried.

Milkman's reunion isn't as purely happy as he'd thought it would be, showing that epiphanies don't solve everything. Ruth and Macon will continue to mistreat each other, and Lena will continue to hate him. Milkman can't make up for the things he's done wrong; he can only try to be a different person now that he knows better. Most of all, then, his epiphany is of use to himself, not to other people. The revelation that Smith, whose jump from the hospital began the novel, was a member of the Seven Days vigilante group is interesting. It suggests a number of possibilities: that being in the group drove Smith crazy, perhaps. Or that Smith felt that by being in the group that responded to white racism with eye-for-an-eye vengeance gave him some sort of power that mirrored the abilities of "Sugarman" (i.e. Solomon). Yet Smith's jump failed, and Smith died, suggesting that the logic of the Seven Days leads not to flight but to destruction, that it is a dead end.

Once Milkman arrives with Pilate back in Shalimar, everyone is happy to see him again, and Pilate gets along with everyone. One night, they go to Solomon's Leap, an outcropping of two rocks from which Solomon began his flight to Africa, to bury Jake. After they've finished, Milkman wants to put a rock or a cross on the grave, but Pilate removes her **earring** and buries it on Jake's remains. As she is finishing doing this, a gunshot rings out, and Pilate collapses.

Pilate's mysterious earring, which contains all the names of her family, is finally being put to rest. It's as if she's been carrying a burden (a cross?) for her entire adult life, and now, thanks to Milkman's help, she doesn't have to anymore. What was this burden? One could say that Pilate was carrying the burden of her family's legacy — all the troubled relationships and affairs and deaths that had characterized her ancestors, and which, perhaps, could not be laid to rest because there was no past in which to rest them without a link to Solomon. Now that Milkman has traced these things back to a starting point — Solomon — she doesn't need to carry them.

As Milkman holds the dying Pilate, she begs him to watch Reba, and says that she wishes she'd met more people, since she would have loved all of them. She asks Milkman to sing her a song, and Milkman sings the nursery rhyme about Solomon, but changes the words to "Sugargirl don't leave me here." He realizes why he loves her — she could **fly** without leaving the ground.

As Pilate undergoes a Christ-like death (and Milkman holding the dying Pilate in his arms is purposefully similar to the image of the dying Christ in the arms of Mary), Milkman realizes that she lived unencumbered by the circumstances of her life – her soul is "free," even though her body has obligations to work, eat, sleep, and help other people. Pilate responded to the world with love – the opposite of both Macon's cold search for safety in money, and Guitar's balancing of hate with hate through eye-for-an-eye vengeance, and here this love is connected to flight. It is a different flight than Solomon's, which involved abandonment. It seems like a more feminine flight, of freedom without leavetaking.

Milkman understands that Guitar is the one who shot Pilate, and was in fact trying to shoot him. He knows that when he stands up, Guitar will kill him. Nevertheless, he stands up and yells to Guitar, asking if he wants Milkman's life. Guitar, who is standing by some rocks, smiles and puts down his gun.

Milkman risks his own life — curiously, Guitar doesn't shoot him. Will the two former friends reconcile, even after the enormous evil Guitar has committed? Milkman's question alludes to the speech Guitar has made about how everyone wants a Black man's life. Previously, Guitar has used this mantra as a justification for his violence against white people and Black women — the two groups he deems most guilty of wanting a Black man's life. Here, Milkman makes it very clear that Guitar is no better than the people he criticizes: he, too, wants "a black man's life," insofar as he wants to kill Milkman.

Milkman, weeping, runs toward Guitar, asking, "You want my life? You need it? Here." He **jumps** into the air, and the narrator says that it doesn't matter which of them dies. Milkman has learned what Shalimar knew: "If you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it."

Morrison leaves it up to us whether or not Guitar and Milkman will fight or reconcile. What's clear from Milkman's final words, though, is that he no longer cares about himself — he's become as selfless as Pilate. And, in contrast to Smith who jumped and died to start the novel, and who as a member of Seven Days certainly surrendered to nothing, Milkman finds that flight comes not from force of will but by giving yourself to the wind, just as being a part of history and community comes by giving oneself to those things, by surrendering to them as Pilate did.

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