

Song of
Solomon

A novel by

Toni Morrison

WINNER OF THE NOBEL PRIZE

—WITH A NEW FOREWORD BY THE AUTHOR—

SONG OF

SOLOMON

Toni Morrison

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Daddy

*The fathers may soar
And the children may know their names*

Foreword

I have long despised artists' chatter about muses—"voices" that speak to them and enable a vision, the source of which they could not otherwise name. I thought of muses as inventions to protect one's insight, to avoid questions like "Where do your ideas come from?" Or to escape inquiry into the fuzzy area between autobiography and fiction. I regarded the "mystery" of creativity as a shield erected by artists to avoid articulating, analyzing, or even knowing the details of their creative process—for fear it would fade away.

Writing *Song of Solomon* destroyed all that. I had no access to what I planned to write about until my father died. In the unmanageable sadness that followed, there was none of the sibling wrangling, guilt or missed opportunities, or fights for this or that memento. Each of his four children was convinced that he loved her or him best. He had sacrificed greatly for one, risking his house and his job; he took another to baseball games over whole summers where they lay in the grass listening to a portable radio, talking, evaluating the players on the field. In the company of one, his firstborn, he always beamed and preferred her cooking over everyone else's, including his wife's. He carried a letter from me in his coat pocket for years and years, and drove through blinding snow-storms to help me. Most important, he talked to each of us in language cut to our different understandings. He had a flattering view of me as someone interesting, capable, witty, smart, high-spirited. I did not share that view of myself, and wondered why he held it. But it was the death of that girl—the one who lived in his head—that I mourned when he died. Even more than I mourned him, I suffered the loss of the person he thought I was. I think it was because I felt closer to him than to myself that, after his death, I deliberately sought his advice for writing the novel that continued to elude me. "What are the men you have known really like?"

He answered.

Whatever it is called—muse, insight, inspiration, “the dark finger that guides,” “bright angel”—it exists and, in many forms, I have trusted it ever since.

The challenge of *Song of Solomon* was to manage what was for me a radical shift in imagination from a female locus to a male one. To get out of the house, to de-domesticate the landscape that had so far been the site of my work. To travel. To fly. In such an overtly, stereotypically male narrative, I thought that straightforward chronology would be more suitable than the kind of play with sequence and time I had employed in my previous novels. A journey, then, with the accomplishment of flight, the triumphant end of a trip through earth, to its surface, on into water, and finally into air. All very saga-like. Old-school heroic, but with other meanings. Opening the novel with the suicidal leap of the insurance agent, ending it with the protagonist’s confrontational soar into danger, was meant to enclose the mystical but problematic one taken by the Solomon of the title.

I have written, elsewhere and at some length, details of how certain sentences get written and the work I hope they do. Let me extrapolate an example here.

“The North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent promised to fly from Mercy to the other side of Lake Superior at 3:00.”

This declarative sentence is designed to mock a journalistic style. With a minor alteration it could be the opening of an item in a small town newspaper. It has the tone of an everyday event of minimal local interest, yet I wanted it to contain important signs and crucial information. The name of the insurance company is that of a well-known black-owned company dependent on black clients, and in its corporate name are “life” and “mutual.” The sentence starts with “North Carolina” and closes with “Lake Superior”—geographical locations that suggest a journey from south to north—a direction common for black immigration and in the literature about it, but which is reversed here since the protagonist has to go south to mature. Two other words of significance are “fly” and “mercy.” Both terms are central to the narrative: flight as escape or confrontation; mercy the unspoken wish of the novel’s population. Some grant it; some despise it;

one makes it the sole cry of her extemporaneous sermon upon the death of her granddaughter. Mercy touches, turns, and returns to Guitar at the end of the book, and moves him to make it his own final gift to his former friend. Mercy is what one wishes for Hagar; what is unavailable to and unsought by Macon Dead, senior; what his wife learns to demand from him, and what the townsfolk believe can never come from the white world, as is signified by the inversion of the name of the hospital from Mercy to “No-Mercy.” But the sentence turns, as all sentences do, on its verb. “Promise.” The insurance agent does not declare, announce, or threaten his act; he promises, as though a contract is being executed between himself and others. He hopes his flight, like that of the character in the title, toward asylum (Canada, or freedom, or the company of the welcoming dead), or home, is interpreted as a radical gesture demanding change, an alternative way, a cessation of things as they are. He does not want it understood as a simple desperate act, the end of a fruitless life, a life without examination, but as a deep commitment to his people. And in their response to his decision there is a tenderness, some contrition, and mounting respect (“They didn’t know he had it in him”), an awareness that his suicide enclosed, rather than repudiated them. The note he leaves asks for forgiveness. It is tacked on his door as a modest invitation to who-ever might pass by.

Of the flights in the novel, Solomon’s is the most magical, the most theatrical, and, for Milkman, the most satisfying. Unlike most mythical flights, which clearly imply triumph, in the attempt if not the success, Solomon’s escape, the insurance man’s jump, and Milkman’s leap are ambiguous, disturbing. Solomon’s escape from slavery is also the abandonment of his family; the insurance man leaves a message saying his suicide is a gesture of love, but guilt and despair also inform his decision. Milkman believes he is risking his life in return for Pilate’s, yet he knows his enemy has disarmed himself. These flights, these erstwhile heroics, are viewed rather differently by the women left behind. Both the quotation and the song of the title fairly shout that different understanding. To praise a woman whose attention was focused solely on family and domestic responsibilities, Milkman summons a conundrum: that without ever leaving the ground she could fly. My father laughed.