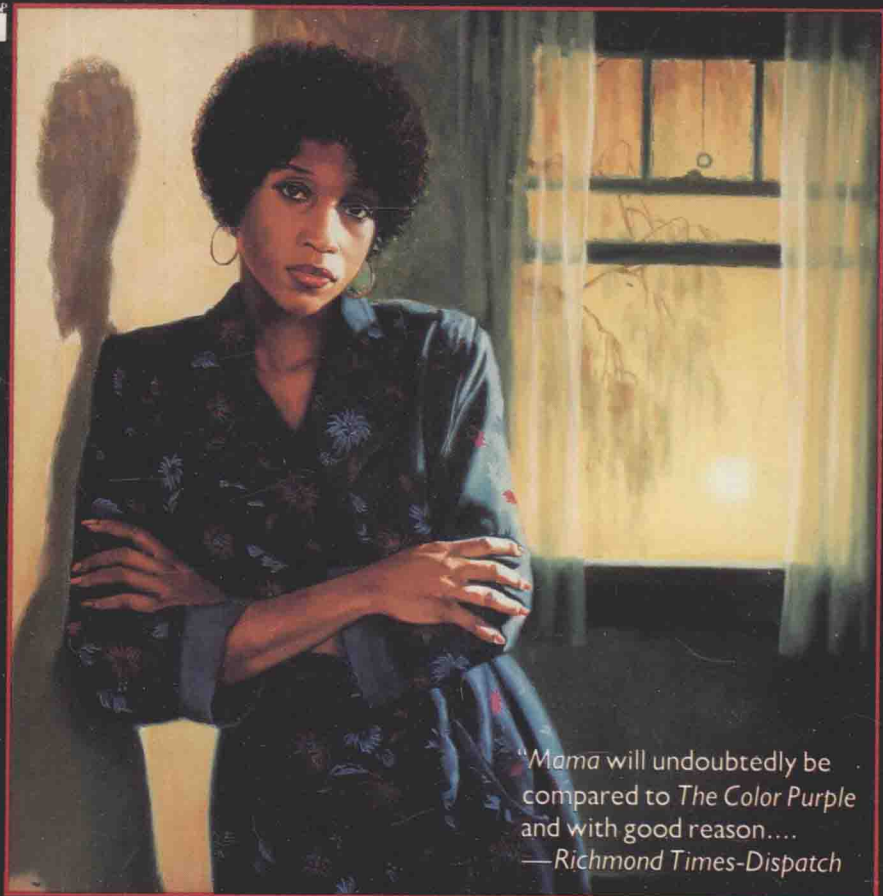


A N O V E L B Y
TERRY McMILLAN

Author of the New York Times Bestseller **Waiting to Exhale**

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"Mama will undoubtedly be compared to *The Color Purple* and with good reason....
—*Richmond Times-Dispatch*

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The poetry on page ix is from the poem "When I Have Reached the Point of Suffocation" in Gerald Stern's *Rejoicings*, published by Metro Book Co., Los Angeles.

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"When it comes to portraying the authentic style of marginal Americans, Terry McMillan has few peers. HER PROSE IS BRILLIANT AND EXHILARATING." — Ishmael Reed

"MAMA IS RAUCOUS, RAUNCHY, AND FREQUENTLY TOUCHING...." — *Baltimore Sun*

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"Terry McMillan's novel is a laudable effort for its hands-on realism....McMillan has created earthy, realistic characters who can walk out of the pages and onto the streets of black America....AN ADMIRABLE NOVEL." — *San Francisco Chronicle*

One

MILDRED HID THE AX beneath the mattress of the cot in the dining room. She poured lye in a brown paper bag and pushed it behind the pots and pans under the kitchen sink. Then she checked all three butcher knives to make sure they were razor sharp. She knew where she could get her hands on a gun in fifteen minutes, but ever since she'd seen her brother shot for stealing a beer from the pool hall, she'd been afraid of guns. Besides, Mildred didn't want to kill Crook, she just wanted to hurt him.

She hated this raggedy house. Hated this deadbeat town. Hated never having enough of anything. Most of all, she hated Crook. And if it weren't for their five kids, she'd have left him a long time ago.

She sat down at the kitchen table, crossed her thick brown thighs, and rested her chin in her palms. An L&M burned slowly in the plastic ashtray next to her now cold cup of coffee. At twenty-seven, Mildred was as tired as an old workhorse and felt like she'd been through a war. Her face hurt. Her bottom lip was swollen and it would stay that way the rest of her life, so that she'd have to tuck the left corner in whenever she wore lipstick, which was almost always. It would serve as her trademark, a constant reminder that she had quick-firing lips.

Her left foot was swollen, too, from the tire Crook had backed

over it last night when she wouldn't move. She had gotten up at five o'clock this morning and soaked it in Epsom salts for a whole hour but that hadn't done much good. Now the combination of this pain and the crisscrossing of her thoughts irritated her like an unreachable itch, so she went ahead and took the yellow nerve pill Curly Mae had given her last week. Then she wrapped her foot in an Ace bandage, covered it with a fake-fur house shoe, and pulled another chair in front of her to prop it up. She took a sip of her coffee.

As Mildred waited for the pill to work, she stared out the kitchen window at the leafless trees and drew deeply on her cigarette, one strong puff after another. She twirled her fingers around her dyed red braids, which hung from the diaper she had tied on her head. She patted her good foot against the torn linoleum, something she always did when she was thinking.

The way she figured it, there'd been no sense trying to be too cute last night and get herself killed thoroughly. Crook had smacked her so hard outside the Red Shingle that she had forgotten her name for a minute or two.

He was the jealous type.

Everybody knew it, but Mildred had made the mistake of carrying on a friendly two-minute conversation with Percy Russell. Crook had always despised Percy because, as rumor had it, their oldest daughter, Freda, wasn't his, and could've easily been Percy's. Both men had skin the color of ripe bananas and soft wavy hair, which Freda had inherited. And both men had high chiseled cheeks, which, as time passed, emerged on Freda's face too.

Mildred ignored the rumors and knew that in a town as small as Point Haven people ran their mouths because they didn't have anything better to do. Crook never did come right out and accuse her of cheating because he'd been having an affair with Ernestine Jackson off and on for the past twelve years, before Mildred was even showing with Freda. And before they got settled good into their marriage. He wasn't whorish, except when he had more than eight ounces of liquor in him, which was just about every day.

And while Crook ran the streets, it was Percy who nailed plastic to the windows in the winter, bought Mildred mater-

nity clothes, fixed the drip in the bathtub, and paid the plumber to fix the frozen pipes. It was Percy who had shoveled the heavy blocks of coal from the shack in the back yard and carried them to the house when Crook was too drunk to stand up, and then waited for the fire to pop and crackle in the stove. It was Percy who made sure Mildred was warm, who bought her cigarettes, aspirin and vitamins, lard and potatoes, and even paid her light and gas bills when Crook had done something else with the money, but pleaded amnesia.

The three of them had grown up together, though both men were six years older than Mildred. Percy had always had a crush on her, but he was so shy and stuttered so badly that she didn't have the patience to hear him out when he tried to express his true feelings for her. So Percy was forced to demonstrate his feelings rather than making them audible, which was a lot easier on both of them. And although Mildred always thought of him as kind and mannerly, his slowness and docility annoyed her so much that she never took his intentions seriously, except once.

Last night at the Shingle, Crook had barged in and broken up their conversation, grabbed Mildred by the arm, and pushed her outside through the silver doors. He'd ordered her to get in the car — a pink and gold '59 Mercury — and he jumped in and started gunning the motor. When she didn't budge, he backed the car up so fast that it stalled and ran over her left foot. Drunk and aggravated because his anger was being diverted, Crook leaped from the car and hauled off and slapped Mildred's face until she thought it was in her best interest to go ahead and get in.

She had pushed her platinum wig back in place, pulling on the elastic bands and pushing bobby pins against her skull to make sure it was on tight again. Mildred always wore this wig when she went out. It made her feel like she was going someplace, like she was an elegant, sophisticated woman being taken out on the town by the man of her dreams. She got into the back seat of the car and pushed herself as far as she could into the corner of the soft pink seat because she didn't want to be within smelling distance of Crook. He climbed behind the wheel without saying a word and slammed the door.

"Just take me home, Crook," she'd said, trying hard not to scream or cry, but tears were already streaking her cocoa-colored foundation so that her own lighter skin tone showed through. She rolled her eyes at Crook until the pupils stuck in the corner sockets hard, but Crook couldn't see her or else he'd have hauled off and smacked her again. All she could think of now was how she was going to get him when she got home.

It only took five minutes to drive home from the Shingle, straight down Twenty-fourth and a left on Manual to Twenty-fifth. Mildred's mind was clicking like a stopwatch, trying to remember exactly where she'd situated the cast-iron skillet among the other pots and pans. Was it underneath the boilers? Or in the oven with chicken grease still in it? Didn't matter. She'd find it. She pressed her forehead against the cold wet glass and stared at the clapboard houses, most of which belonged to people she knew, some even family. Crook was barely staying in his lane. Mildred knew he was drunk on Orange Rock, but she didn't dare say anything to him. She'd been on the verge of being tipsy herself, but the lingering sting of Crook's hand on her face had slowly begun to break down her high. Anyway, there were no oncoming cars. Not at this time of night. Not in this hick town.

"I'm taking you home all right, don't worry about that," Crook said, trying to keep his eyes focused on the wiggling white line cutting through the two-lane street. "You think you're grown, don't you? Think you're just so damn grown." He wasn't expecting an answer and Mildred didn't give him one.

"You know you're gon' get your ass tore up, don't you? Gon' get enough of flirting with that simple-ass Percy and all the rest of 'em. You my wife, you understand me? My woman, and I don't want nobody talking to you like you ain't got no man. Especially in front of my face 'cause the next thang you know, I'll be hearing all kinds of mess up and down the streets. You understand me, girl? You listening to me?" He looked at Mildred through the rearview mirror, his eyes dilated so big that it looked like someone had just taken his picture with a flash cube. Mildred simply stared back at him, her tears all dried up now, and kept fumbling with her wig. Her fingers smelled like Evening in Paris, probably because she had sprayed it every-

where — between her legs, under her arms, on the balls of her feet, and beneath the fake skull of her wig. She didn't utter a word, just tried to ignore the pain in her foot and hissed and sucked saliva through her teeth.

Crook pulled into the cement driveway, and the right headlight barely missed the bark on the big oak tree as he cut the wheel and brought the car to an abrupt halt.

Mildred opened the door before they'd come to a complete stop, jumped out, slammed the door, and screamed, "Kiss my black ass!" She limped up the side steps toward the porch, turned, and yelled, "I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!" like a cheerleader.

All the lights were out in the house, but Mildred knew the kids weren't really asleep. She knew that as soon as they'd hear the car pull up the driveway, Freda had sprinted to the TV and flicked it off and ordered the rest of the kids to "hit it." Money Bootsey, Angel, and Doll would have scattered like mice to their two bedrooms, closed their doors, and dived into bed to hide under the covers and wait to hear the boxing match they knew was sure to come. It was something they always dreaded when their parents came home from the bar. They'd squeeze their eyes tight pretending to be asleep, just in case Mildred or Crook decided to check on them, but they rarely did on nights like this, when Crook forgot he had kids and Mildred was too preoccupied with her own defense.

Mildred flicked on the dining room light and walked toward the bathroom. Her foot was killing her. When she looked in the mirror she saw that the blood from her lip had smudged all over the white mink collar of her blue suede coat. The blood had made the mink come to slick points, like the fur of a wet dog. Mildred felt herself getting mad all over again. She had cleaned a lot of white folks' houses to buy this coat, had kept it on layaway at Winkleman's for almost a year, and she knew that blood never came out, never.

When Mildred looked down, she saw more blood was soaking through the seams of the pockets and staining the white stitching around the buttonholes. The scent of her Evening in Paris permeated the bathroom and started to stink. She wanted to throw up. Instead, she went into the kitchen, grabbed the

dishrack, and threw it high into the air so that it crashed and hit the edge of the sink. Everything breakable broke and smashed in the basin. Plates, glasses, cups and saucers, cereal bowls. Some things fell to the floor and shattered into jagged chips. Mildred gritted her teeth, balled up her right fist, and pounded it on the pile of broken dishes. Her fist bled but she was too mad to notice.

She was just about to look for the skillet when she heard Crook stagger in the side door. Her rage welled up from a hollow cave in her stomach. "Ooooooooo! You just irks me so. I'm surprised I ain't had a nervous breakdown by now. Always making a mountain out of a frigging molehill. Thinking thangs is happening when ain't nothing happening. You can't see for looking, you know that? I keep saying to myself, Mildred, leave this pitiful excuse for a man. I keep saying, Mildred, you know in your heart he ain't no good. Rotten, sorry. But how I'ma leave him with five growing kids to clothe and feed?" Her teeth felt like chalk and she scraped them together so hard that they slipped and she bit her tongue.

"Lord, have mercy on my soul," Mildred pleaded. "If somebody could show me the light, clear a path and give me an extra ounce of strength, I'd be out of here so damn fast make your head swim." Mildred was not a religious person, but she made sure her kids went to Shiloh Baptist every Sunday morning, though the only time she ever bothered to go herself was on Easter, Mother's Day, and Christmas. She shook her head back and forth, letting her eyes roll like loose marbles.

"Just keep on running your mouth, girl," Crook said, trying unsuccessfully to kick off his shoes.

Mildred's anger was flowing like hot lava. Pearls of sweat slid down her temples. Her jawbone was tightening as though she were biting down on rock candy.

"If I was trying to flirt with somebody for real, do you think I'd be stupid enough to do it right in front of your frigging face?" She put her hands on her hips and took soldier steps toward Crook. She didn't know where she was getting this courage from and surely it couldn't have been from God because he'd never given her any clue that being a fool would get her any-

where safe. "But you know what? Yeah, I'd love to screw Percy since you and everybody else swear I've been screwing him for years anyway. Who else was I supposed to be flirting with behind your back? Oh yeah, Porky and Joe Porter and Swift! I'd love to fuck all of 'em!"

"Mildred, you better shut your mouth up, girl. You know you're gon' get it. You know I ain't two minutes away from your behind." Crook had managed to get his shoes off, scattering wet red and gold leaves that had stuck to his soles. He slipped and fell backward against the china cabinet and plaster-of-Paris knickknacks tumbled all over the floor. He danced over the glass grapes, wishing wells, and miniature cats as though he were walking on hot sand at the beach.

Mildred didn't care at this point. She knew that whether she kept her mouth shut or open, she was going to get it anyway. His fist would snap against her head, or the back of his hard hand would swipe her face, or he'd hurl her against a wall until her brains rattled. It was always something, so long as it hurt.

Crook stumbled toward the living room and into the bedroom. He found his thick brown leather belt, the one Mildred occasionally used to chastise the kids for their wrongdoings, then he walked back out to the dining room. He pulled his shoulders back high, trying to act sober, and beckoned Mildred with his index finger. "Since you so damn smart, let's see if your ass is as tough as your mouth is, girl. Now get in here. You ain't had a good spanking in a while."

Mildred's courage vanished.

"Crook, please, don't. I'm sorry. I didn't mean what I said, none of it. I was just running my drunk mouth." Mildred was trying to move backward, away from him, but when she found herself in a corner and couldn't move another inch, she knew she was trapped. There was no one she could call to for help. She didn't want to scare the kids any more than they already were, and Mildred knew they were probably leaning against their bedroom doors, shivering like baby birds in a nest. All she could do was hope that he wouldn't take this any further than the belt to the point where he might just kill her this time. A drunk is always sorry later. "Crook, please don't hit me," she

begged. "I promise I won't say another word. Please." Mildred was not the type to beg. Had never begged anybody for anything and now it didn't sound or feel right.

"Get on in here, girl. Your tears don't excite me," he said, snatching her by the wrists. "You think you're so cute, don't you?" Crook's face was contorted and had taken on a monstrous quality. It looked like every ounce of liquor and Indian blood in his body had migrated to the veins in his face. He yanked off her wig and threw it to the floor. Then he made her drop her coat next to it, then her cream knit dress, and then her girdle. When all she had on was her brassiere and panties, he shoved her into the bedroom where she crawled to a corner of the bed. Crook kicked the door shut and the kids cracked theirs. Then they heard their mama screaming and their daddy hollering and the whap of the belt as he struck her.

"Didn't I tell you you was getting too grown?" *Whap.* "Don't you know your place yet, girl?" *Whap.*

"Yes, yes, Crook." *Whap.*

"Don't you know nothing about respect?" *Whap.* "Girl, you gon' learn. I'm a man, not no toy." *Whap.* "You understand me?" *Whap.* "Make me look like no fool." *Whap.*

He threw the belt on the floor and collapsed next to Mildred on the bed. The terror in her voice faded to whimpers and sniffles. To the kids she sounded like Prince, their German shepherd, when he had gotten hit by a car last year on Twenty-fourth Street.

Mildred curled up into a tight knot and tried to find a spot that would shelter her from Crook. She hoped he would fall asleep, but he reached over and turned on the TV. Mildred crept out the end of the bed and put on a slip.

"Where you going?" he asked.

"To the bathroom," she said. She closed the door behind her and headed straight for the kitchen, tiptoed around the broken glass, and opened the oven. She yanked the black skillet out and slung the grease into the sink. Crook heard her and came into the dining room to see what she was doing. Before he knew what was happening, Mildred raised the heavy pan into the air and charged into him, hitting him on the forehead with a loud

throng. Blood ran down over his eye and he grabbed her and pushed her back into the bedroom. The kids heard them bumping into the wall for what seemed like forever and then they heard nothing at all.

Freda hushed the girls and made them huddle under a flimsy flannel blanket on the bottom bunk bed. "Shut up, before they hear us and we'll be next," she whispered loudly. She tried to comfort the two youngest, Angel and Doll, by wrapping them inside her skinny arms, but it was no use. They couldn't stop crying. Since Freda was the oldest, she felt it was her place to act like an adult, but soon she started to cry too. None of them understood any of this, but when they heard the mattress squeaking, they knew what was happening.

Money ran from his room into Freda's. They all sat on the cold metal edge of the bed where the mattress didn't touch, sniffing, listening. They waited patiently, hoping that after five or ten minutes all they would hear would be Crook's snoring. They prayed that they could all finally go to sleep. But just when they had settled into the rhythm of silence — the humming of the refrigerator, the cars passing on Twenty-fourth Street, Prince yawning on the back porch — their parents' moans and groans would erupt again and poison the peace.

When Money couldn't stand it any more, he tiptoed back to his room. He flipped over his mattress, because the fighting always made him lose control of his bladder. He would say his prayers extra hard and swear that when he got older and got married he would never beat his wife, he wouldn't care what she did. He would leave first.

The girls slid into their respective bunks and lay there, not moving to scratch or even twitch. They tried to inch into their separate dreams but the sound of creaking grew louder and louder, then faster and faster.

"Why they try to kill each other, then do the nasty?" Bootsey asked Freda.

"Mama don't like doing it," Freda explained. "She only doing it so Daddy won't hit her no more."

"Sound like she like it to me. It's taking forever," said Bootsey. Angel and Doll didn't know what they were talking about.

"Just go to sleep," Freda said. And pretty soon the noises stopped and their eyelids drooped and they fell asleep.

The kids were already on the sun porch watching Saturday morning cartoons when Mildred emerged from the bedroom. She had a diaper tied around her head and a new layer of pancake makeup on to camouflage the swelling. The kids didn't say anything about the purple patch of skin beneath her eye or her swollen lip. They just stared at her like she was a stranger they were trying to identify.

"What y'all looking at?" she said. "Y'all some of the nosiest kids I've ever seen in my life. Look at this house!" she snapped, trying to divert their attention. "It's a mess. Your daddy was drunk last night. Now I want y'all to brush your teeth and wash those dingy faces 'cause I ain't raising no heathens around here. Freda, make these kids some oatmeal. And I want this house spotless before you sit back down to watch a "Bugs Bunny" or a "Roadrunner," and don't ask me no questions about them dishes. Just pick 'em up and throw that mess away. Cheap dishes anyway. Weren't worth a pot to piss in. Next time I'm buying plastic."

The kids were used to Mildred giving them orders, didn't know any other way of being told what to do, thought everybody's mama talked like theirs. And although they huffed and puffed under their breath and stomped their feet in defiance and made faces at her when her back was turned, they were careful not to get caught. "And I want y'all to get out of this house today. Go on outside somewhere and play. My nerves ain't this" — she snapped her fingers — "long today. And Freda, before you do anything, fix your mama a cup of coffee, girl. Two sugars instead of one, and lots of Pet milk."

Freda had already put water on for the coffee because she knew Mildred was mad. She had picked up the broken dishes, too. She didn't like seeing her mama all patched up like this. As a matter of fact, Freda hoped that by her thirteenth birthday her daddy would be dead or divorced. She had started to hate him, couldn't understand why Mildred didn't just leave him. Then they all could go on welfare like everybody else seemed to be doing in Point Haven. She didn't dare suggest this to her

mama. Freda knew Mildred hated advice, so she did what her mama wasn't used to doing: kept her mouth shut.

When Crook finally got up, he smiled at the kids like nothing had happened. And like always on a Saturday morning after a rough night at the Shingle, he had somewhere important he had to go. When Mildred heard the Mercury's engine purring, she felt relieved because she knew she wouldn't have to see him again until late that night when he would most likely be drunk and asking where his dinner was, or tomorrow, when he'd be so hung over that he would walk straight to the bedroom and pass out.

Mildred counted her change and managed to muster up a few dollars. She decided to send the kids to the movies. Told them to sit through the feature twice, which was fine with them.

When they had finally skipped out the door and the house was as clean as an army barracks, Mildred had limped to the back porch and scrounged up the ax.

Her coffee was cold now, so she added some hot water to it and walked slowly into the living room. The house shoe helped cushion her foot against the hard floor, but it still hurt. She collapsed on the orange couch. Good, she thought. No Crook, no kids, and no dog. Mildred looked around the room, scanning its beige walls and the shiny floors she had waxed on her knees yesterday. The windows sparkled because she had cleaned the insides with vinegar and water. She had paid old ugly Deadman five dollars to clean the outsides. The house smelled and looked clean, just the way she liked it.

Her eyes claimed everything she saw. This is *my* house, she thought. I've worked too damn hard for you to be hurting me all these years. And me, like a damn fool, taking it. Like I'm your property. Like you own me or something. I pay all the bills around here, even this house note. I'm the one who scrubbed white folks' floors in St. Clemens and Huronville and way up there on Strawberry Lane to buy it.

Mildred sank back deeper into the couch and propped her good foot on top of the cocktail table. She tucked her lip in and took the diaper off her head. Then she ran her fingers over her thick braids. She began unbraiding them, though she had no intention of doing anything to her hair once it hung loose.

She looked out the window at the weeping willow trees. She remembered when she planted them. And who had had the garden limed? she thought. Paved the driveway and planted all those flowers, frozen under the dirt right now? Me. Who'd cooked hamburgers at Big Boy's and slung coconut cream pies to uppity white folks I couldn't stand to look in the eye 'cause they was sitting at the counter and I was standing behind it? Smothered in grease and smoke and couldn't even catch my breath long enough to go to the bathroom. And who was the one got corns and bunions from carrying plates of ribs and fried chicken back and forth at the Shingle when I was five months pregnant, while you hung off the back of a city garbage truck half drunk, waving at people like you were the president or the head of some parade?

She put her foot back on the floor and lit another cigarette.

Never even made up a decent excuse about what you did with your money. I know about Ernestine. I ain't no fool. Just been waiting for the right time. Me and the kids sitting in here with the lights and gas cut off and you give me two dollars. Say, "Here, buy some pork-n-beans and vanilla wafers for the kids, and if it's some change left get yourself a beer." A beer. Just what I needed, sitting in a cold-ass house in the dark.

Mildred's eyes scanned the faces of her five kids, framed in gold and black around the room.

And you got the nerve to brag about how pretty, how healthy and how smart your kids are. Don't they have your color. Your high cheekbones. Your smile. These ain't your damn kids. They mine. Maybe they got your blood, but they mine.

Mildred had had Freda when she was seventeen, and the other kids had fallen out every nine or ten months after that, with the exception of one year between Freda and Money. Crook had told her he didn't want any more kids until he got on his feet. Freda was almost three months old when Mildred realized she was pregnant again. She was too scared to tell Crook, so she asked her sister-in-law what she should do. Curly Mae told her to take three five-milligram quinine tablets. When that didn't work, she told her to drink some citrate of magnesia and take a dry mustard bath. A week later she went to the bathroom

feeling like she was going to have a bowel movement and had a miscarriage.

Motherhood meant everything to Mildred. When she was first carrying Freda, she didn't believe her stomach would actually grow, but when she felt it stretch like the skin of a drum and it swelled up like a small brown moon, she'd never been so happy. She felt there was more than just a cord connecting her to this boy or girl that was moving inside her belly. There was some special juice and only she could supply it. And sometimes when she turned over at night she could feel the baby turn inside her too, and she knew this was magic.

The morning Freda came, Crook was in a motel room on the North End with Ernestine. Curly Mae drove her to the hospital. From that point on, Mildred watched her first baby grow like a long sunrise. She was so proud of Freda that she let her body blow up and flatten for the next fifty-five months. It made her feel like she had actually done something meaningful with her life, having these babies did. And when she pulled the brush back and up through their thick clods of nappy hair, she smiled because it was her own hair she was brushing. These kids were her future. They made her feel important and gave her a feeling of place, of movement, a sense of having come from somewhere. Having babies was routine to a lot of women, but for Mildred it was unique every time; she didn't have a single regret about having had five kids — except one, and that was who had fathered them.

Mildred lay down when she felt the heaviness of the pill beginning to work. Bells were ringing in her ears, and it made her think of Christmas, which was only two months away. For the past nine Christmases Mildred had had to hustle to buy Chatty Cathy dolls, Roll-a-Strollers, ice skates, racing car sets, sleds, and bicycles. Crook had helped her sneak them through the side door at midnight. She didn't know how she would manage this year.

She shook her head. Should've never let you come back after you got out the sanitarium, she thought. Should've let you have old sorry, ancient Ernestine, 'cause y'all deserved each other. But I felt bad for you 'cause I thought tuberculosis was gon' kill