



Song of Solomon

by Toni Morrison

About Pilate Dead

A non-bellybutton, a movement-loving mouth, a snuffbox earring, and a bag of human bones. Pilate is pretty much like everyone else you know. Not. She has a weakness for geography, and has lived in more states than you can count on both hands, not to mention a Virginian island where she joined a colony of farmers and found a lover. She's picked beans and washed laundry until her hands bled. She lost her mom before she was born. She lost her dad and her brother within weeks of each other, when she was only a little girl. She's spent a good chunk of her life alone, roaming. The Prohibition was her best friend, compelling her into the lucrative trade of bootlegging. She spends her days fermenting wine, chewing on splinters, and fixing everyone else's problems. Oh, and perfecting the recipe for the soft-boiled egg. Her secret longing is the wild cherry jam that she once made as a little girl living on Lincoln's Heaven. The sum total of her belongings are a wash basin, three beds, a rocking chair, some magazine pictures, her dad's bones, her geography book, a knife, and brambles. She wears things like quilts and knit caps, and sings soul-rattling songs.

This woman who slept in a cave with a dead man for three days as a little girl is pretty much as hardcore as they come, and yet she's totally stumped by her spoiled granddaughter who never seems to be full or satisfied. Pilate has an irrepressible love for her nephew, who is the only one in the family capable of perpetuating and cultivating the Dead family tree.

Pilate has been mocked, abandoned, and sneered at for her lack of a bellybutton. She's lost lovers because of it, and once lost a mother figure because of it. Apparently having a bellybutton means that you are normal and worth hanging out with, but if you don't have a bellybutton, you freak everyone out. You are like an impossibility, not of this earth, and people will run from you for the rest of your life.

So Pilate is faced with a hard decision: do I keep my bellybutton secret from the world for the rest of my life, or do I let it all hang out, so to speak? After keeping it a secret long enough to have baby, Pilate chops off her hair and decides not to hide anymore, but not without some serious self-reflection and soul-searching. She is ostracized and pushed to the periphery everywhere she goes, but does she give a flying hoot? Um, no. Because she's got a baby to love and that baby then has a baby that she can love, and she helps other outcasts around her whenever she can.

Living an existence based on hospitality and generosity sure is a lot better than trying to fit into the limited societal niches available in early 20th century America. She moves to the town where her brother lives, because she thinks her granddaughter needs a family to connect with. But Macon, of course, treats her like a venomous snake. Pilate sticks like glue anyway, setting up shop in Southside, watching over Ruth, and making sure the Dead family heir stays alive. She's like a fairy godmother or like that really cool aunt you've

always wanted.

We can know Pilate in an instant when we listen to her name. Not the Pontius Pilate part (the Roman responsible for the execution of Jesus), but the *pilot* part. She's a guide, a sage, and knowledgeable beyond belief. She knows American geography like the back of her hand, but she also knows the geography of human nature, how and why humans behave the way they do. She knows how to make little voodoo dolls, she can make one mean love potion, and the woman can wield a knife.

When she dies, she tells us that she wishes she could have known more people so that she could have loved more people. A bird swoops up and grabs her snuffbox earring, and Milkman realizes that, unlike Solomon and so many other men in the world, Pilate is able to both fly and remain on earth at once. She answers the conundrum upon which the novel rests, and she does so easily, as though she were pulling the yolk out of a soft-boiled egg.

Let us put it this way: if we were suddenly thrown into the Southside world, we would immediately try to find Pilate, because she would help us out, give us a place to stay, and would read our tea leaves, too.