DEAREST CELIE,

Every day for the past week I've been trying to get Corrine to remember meeting you in town. I know if she can just recall

your face, she will believe Olivia (if not Adam) is your child. They think Olivia looks like me, but that is only because I look

like you. Olivia has your face and eyes, exactly. It amazes me that Corrine didn't see the resemblance.

Remember the main street of town? I asked. Remember the hitching post in front of Finley's dry goods store? Remember

how the store smelled like peanut shells?

She says she remembers all this, but no men speaking to her.

Then I remember her quilts. The Olinka men make beautiful quilts which are full of animals and birds and people. And as

soon as Corrine saw them, she began to make a quilt that alternated one square of appliqued figures with one nine-patch

block, using the clothes the children had outgrown, and some of her old dresses.

I went to her trunk and started hauling out quilts.

Don't touch my things, said Corrine. I'm not gone yet.

I held up first one and then another to the light, trying to find the first one I remembered her making. And trying to

remember, at the same time, the dresses she and Olivia were wearing the first months I lived with them.

Aha, I said, when I found what I was looking for, and laid the quilt across the bed.

Do you remember buying this cloth? I asked, pointing to a flowered square. And what about this checkered bird?

She traced the patterns with her finger, and slowly her eyes filled with tears.

She was so much like Olivia! she said. I was afraid she'd want her back. So I forgot her as soon as I could. All I let myself

think about was how the clerk treated me! I was acting like somebody because I was Samuel's wife, and a Spelman

Seminary graduate, and he treated me like any ordinary nigger. Oh, my feelings were hurt! And I was mad! And that's

what I thought about, even told Samuel about, on the way home. Not about your sister— what was her name?— Celie?

Nothing about her.

She began to cry in earnest. Me and Samuel holding her hands.

Don't cry. Don't cry, I said. My sister was glad to see Olivia with you. Glad to see her alive. She thought both her children

were dead.

Poor thing! said Samuel. And we sat there talking a little and holding on to each other until Corrine fell off to sleep.

But, Celie, in the middle of the night she woke up, turned to Samuel and said: I believe. And died anyway.

Your Sister in Sorrow, Nettie

DEAREST CELIE,

Just when I think I've learned to live with the heat, the constant dampness, even steaminess of my clothes, the

swampiness under my arms and between my legs, my friend comes. And cramps and aches and pains— but I must still

keep going as if nothing is happening, or be an embarrassment to Samuel, the children and myself. Not to mention the

villagers, who think women who have their friends should not even be seen.

Right after her mother's death, Olivia got her friend; she and Tashi tend to each other is my guess. Nothing is said to me,

in any event, and I don't know how to bring the subject up. Which feels wrong to me; but if you talk to an Olinka girl

about her private parts, her mother and father will be annoyed, and it is very important to Olivia not to be looked upon as

an outsider. Although the one ritual they do have to celebrate womanhood is so bloody and painful, I forbid Olivia to even

think about it.

Do you remember how scared I was when it first happened to me? I thought I had cut myself. But thank God you were

there to tell me I was all right.

We buried Corrine in the Olinka way, wrapped in barkcloth under a large tree. All of her sweet ways went with her. All of

her education and a heart intent on doing good. She taught me so much! I know I will miss her always. The children were

stunned by their mother's death. They knew she was very sick, but death is not something they think about in relation to

their parents or themselves. It was a strange little procession. All of us in our white robes and with our faces painted

white. Samuel is like someone lost. I don't believe they've spent a night apart since their marriage.

And how are you? dear Sister. The years have come and gone without a single word from you. Only the sky above us do

we hold in common. I look at it often as if, somehow, reflected from its immensities, I will one day find myself gazing into

your eyes. Your dear, large, clean and beautiful eyes. Oh, Celie! My life here is nothing but work, work, work, and worry.

What girlhood I might have had passed me by. And I have nothing of my own. No man, no children, no close friend,

except for Samuel. But I do have children, Adam and Olivia. And I do have friends, Tashi and Catherine. I even have a

family— this village, which has fallen on such hard times.

Now the engineers have come to inspect the territory. Two white men came yesterday and spent a couple of hours

strolling about the village, mainly looking at the wells. Such is the innate politeness of the Olinka that they rushed about

preparing food for them, though precious little is left, since many of the gardens that flourish at this time of the year have

been destroyed. And the white men sat eating as if the food was beneath notice.

It is understood by the Olinka that nothing good is likely to come from the same persons who destroyed their houses, but

custom dies hard. I did not speak to the men myself, but Samuel did. He said their talk was all of workers, kilometers of

land, rainfall, seedlings, machinery, and whatnot. One seemed totally indifferent to the people around him— simply

eating and then smoking and staring off into the distance— and the other, somewhat younger, appeared to be

enthusiastic about learning the language. Before, he says, it dies out.

I did not enjoy watching Samuel speaking to either of them. The one who hung on every word, or the one who looked

through Samuel's head.

Samuel gave me all of Corrine's clothes, and I need them, though none of our clothing is suitable in this climate. This is

true even of the clothing the Africans wear. They used to wear very little, but the ladies of England introduced the Mother

Hubbard, a long, cumbersome, ill-fitting dress, completely shapeless, that inevitably gets dragged in the fire, causing

burns aplenty. I have never been able to bring myself to wear one of these dresses, which all seem to have been made

with giants in mind, so I was glad to have Corrine's things. At the same time, I dreaded putting them on. I remembered

her saying we should stop wearing each other's clothes. And the memory pained me.

Are you sure Sister Corrine would want this? I asked Samuel.

Yes, Sister Nettie, he said. Try not to hold her fears against her. At the end she understood, and believed. And

forgave— whatever there was to forgive.

I should have said something sooner, I said.

He asked me to tell him about you, and the words poured out like water. I was dying to tell someone about us. I told him

about my letters to you every Christmas and Easter, and about how much it would have meant to us if he had gone to see

you after I left. He was sorry he hesitated to become involved.

If only I'd understood then what I know now! he said.

But how could he? There is so much we don't understand. And so much unhappiness comes because of that.

love and Merry Christmas

to you.

Your sister, Nettie