



## Ruby

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## PARADISE

TONI MORRISON

For many are the pleasant forms which exist in

numerous sins,

and incontinencies,

and disgraceful passions

and fleeting pleasures,

which (men) embrace until they become

sober

and go up to their resting place.

And they will find me there,

and they will live,

and they will not die again.

CHAPTER ONE

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## CHAPTER ONE

### RUBY

They shoot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time. No need to hurry out here. They are seventeen miles from a town which has ninety miles between it and any other. Hiding places will be plentiful in the Convent but there is time and the day has just begun.

They are nine, over twice the number of the women they are obliged to stampede or kill and they have the paraphernalia for either requirement: rope, palm leaf crosses, handcuffs, Mace and sunglasses along with clean, handsome guns.

They have never been this deep in the Convent. Some of them have parked Chevrolets near its porch to pick up a string of peppers or have gone into the kitchen for a gallon of barbecue sauce; but only a few have seen the halls, the chapel, the school room, the bedrooms. Now they all will. And at last they will see the cellar and expose its filth to the light that is soon to scour the Oklahoma sky. Meantime they are startled by the clothes they are wearing--suddenly aware of being ill-dressed. For at the dawn of a July day how could they have



guessed the cold that is inside this place? Their t-shirts, work shirts, and dashikies soak up cold like fever. Those who have worn workshoes are unnerved by the thunder of their steps on marble floors; those in Pro-Keds by the silence. Then there is the grandeur. Only the two who are wearing ties seem to belong here and one by one each is reminded that before it was a Convent, this house was an embezzler's folly. A mansion where bisque and rosetone marble

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Now armed men search rooms where macrame' baskets float next to Flemish candalabra ; where Christ and His mother glow in niches trimmed in grape vines. The Sisters of the Final Cross [tk] chipped away all the nymphs, but curves of their marble hair still strangle grape leaves and tease the fruit. The chill intensifies as the men spread deeper into the mansion, taking their time, looking, listening, alert to the female malice that hides here and the yeast and butter smell of rising dough.

One of them, the youngest, looks back, forcing himself to see how the



dream he is in might go. The shot woman, lying uncomfortably on marble, waves her fingers at him--or seems to. So his dream is doing okay, except for its color. He has never before dreamed in colors such as these: non-committal black sporting a wild swi<sup>re</sup>p of green, then thick feverish yellow.

The leading man pauses, raising his left hand to halt the silhouettes behind him. They stop, editing their breath, making friendly adjustments in the grip of rifles and handguns. The leading man turns and gestures the separations: you two over there to the kitchen; two more upstairs; two others into the chapel. He saves himself, his brother and the one who thinks he is dreaming for the cellar.

They part gracefully without words or haste. Earlier, when they blew open the Convent door, the nature of their mission made them giddy. But the venom is manageable now. Shooting the first woman (the white one) has clarified it like butter: the pure oil of hatred on top, its hardness stabilized below.

Outside the mist is waist high. It will turn silver soon and make grass rainbows low enough for children's play before the sun burns it off, exposing acres of bluestem and maybe witch tracks as well. →

one of the men  
The kitchen is bigger than the house in which ~~either man~~ was born. The ceiling barn-rafter high. More shelving than Ace's Grocery Store. The table is fourteen feet long if an inch and it's easy