



## Tar Baby Draft

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(A)

TAR BABY

original typescript  
& ink written



Tar Baby

by

Toni Morrison

Casque Bond

MADE IN U.S.A.

- 200 CONTENT -



200 COTTON FIBER

CHIEF MAN BOARD





## ONE

He believed he was safe. He stood at the railing of HMS Stor Konigsgaarten and sucked in great gulps of air, his heart pounding in sweet expectation as he stared at the harbor. Queen of France blushed a little in the lessening light and lowered her lashes before his gaze. A mile or so down current was a deserted pier. He crept back to the cabin he shared with the three others who had gone on shore leave, and since he had no things to gather--no book of postage stamps, no razor blade or key to any door--he merely folded more tightly the blanket corners under the mattress of his bunk. He took off his shoes and knotted the laces of each one through the belt hoop of his pants. Then, after a leisurely look around the cabin, he left it and returned to the top deck. He swung one leg over the railing and considered diving head first, but, trusting what his feet could tell him more than what his hands could, changed his mind and simply stepped way from the ship. The water was so soft and warm that it was up to his armpits before he realized he was in it. Quickly he brought his knees to his chest and shot forward. He swam well. At each fourth stroke he turned skyward and lifted his head to make



sure his course was parallel to the shore but away from the port of entry. Although his skin blended well with the dark waters, he was careful not to lift his arms too high above the waves. He gained on the pier and was gratified that his shoes still knocked softly against his hips.

After a while he thought it was time to head inland--towards the pier. As he scissored his legs for the turn, a bracelet of water circled them and yanked him into a wide, empty tunnel. He struggled to rise out of it and was turned three times. Just before the urge to breathe water became unmanageable, he was tossed up into the velvet air and laid smoothly down on the surface of the sea. He tread water for several minutes while he regulated his breathing, then he struck out once more for the pier. Again the bracelet tightened around his ankles and the wet throat swallowed him. He went down, down, and found himself not at the bottom of the sea, as he expected, but whirling in a vortex. He thought nothing except "I am going counterclockwise." No sooner had he completed the thought than the sea flattened and he was riding its top. Again he tread water, coughed, spat and shook his head to free his ears of water. When he'd rested he decided to swim butterfly and protect his feet from the sucking that had approached him both times from his right side. But when he tore open the water in front of him, he felt a gentle but firm pressure along his chest, stomach, and down his thighs. Like the hand of an insistent



it slowed choking for breath just twenty leagues short of the sea.

Horrificed, the clouds looked at each other, then broke apart in confusion. You could hear their thundering hooves as they raced about the sky with spuming heads carrying the news of the scatterbrained river to the peaks of hills and the tops of the champion daisy trees. But it was too late. Now the tools gnawed away at the daisy trees. Wild-eyed and yelling, they broke in two and hit the ground. A huge silence followed their fall. Seconds later the orchids that had lived in their hair spiraled down to join them.

When it was over, the trees that had been spared dreamed of their comrades for years afterward and their nightmare mutterings annoyed the diamondbacks who left them for the silence of the new growth that had come to life in the spaces the sun saw for the first time.

Then the rain changed and was no longer equal. Now it rained not for an hour every day at the same time, but in seasons, abusing the river even more. Poor insulted, broken-hearted river. Poor demented stream. House, home and inn for all manner of other broken-hearted creatures it soon forgot that it had ever run free. Now it sat in one place like a grandmother and became the swamp the fishermen called Sein de Veilles. And witch's tit it was: a shrivelled fog-bound oval seeping brackish fluid into the bay.



"Take my word for it."

"Huh."

"I thought you liked it here."

"Love it."

"Then stop complaining."

"It's because I do love it that I'm complaining. I'd like to know if it's permanent. Living like this you can't figure nothing. He might pack up any minute and trot off some place else."

"He'll be here till he dies," Sidney told her. "Less that greenhouse burns up."

"Well I'll pray nothing happens to it," she said. She needn't have worried. Valerian took very good care of the greenhouse for it was a nice place to talk to his ghosts in peace while he transplanted, fed, air-layered, rooted, watered, dried, and thinned his plants. He kept a small refrigerator of blanc de blanc and read seed catalogues while he sipped the wine. Sometimes he gazed through the little greenhouse panes at the wash house. Other times he checked catalogues brochures and entered into ringing correspondence with nurseries from Tokyo to Newburgh, New York. He read only mail these days, having given up books because the language in them had changed so much--stained with rivulets of disorder and meaninglessness. He loved the greenhouse and the island, but not his neighbors. Luckily there was a night, three years ago, after he'd



first settled into tropic life, when he woke up with a toothache so brutal it lifted him out of bed and knocked him to his knees. He knelt on the floor clutching the Billy Blass sheets and thinking "This must be a stroke. No tooth could do this to me." Directly above the waves of pain his left eye was crying while his right went dry with rage. He crawled to the night table and pressed the button that called Sydney. When he arrived, Valerian insisted on being taken to Queen of France at once, but there was no way to get there. At that hour fishermen had not even begun to stir and the launch was twice a week. They owned no boat and even if they had neither Sydney nor anyone else could handle it. So the quick witted butler telephoned the neighbors Valerian hated and got both the use of Seabird II and the boat skills of the Philipino houseboy. After a daring jeep ride in the dark, an interminable boat ride and a taxi ride that was itself a memory, they arrived at Dr. Michelin's door at 2:00 am. Sydney banged while the Philipino chatted with the taxi driver. The dentist roared out of the second floor window. He had been run out of Algeria and thought his door was being assaulted by local Blacks--whose teeth he would not repair. At last, Valerian, limp and craven sat in the dentist's chair where he gave himself up to whatever the Frenchman had in mind. Dr. Michelin positioned a needle toward the roof of Valerian's mouth but seemed to have changed his mind at the last minute, for Valerian felt



the needle shoot straight into his nostril on up to the pupil of his eye and out his left temple. He stretched his hand toward the doctor's trousers, hoping that his death grip--the one they always had to pry loose--would be found to contain the crushed balls of a D.D.S. But before he could get a grip under the plaid bathrobe, the pain disappeared and Valerian wept outright, grateful for the absence of all sensation in his head. Dr. Michelin didn't do another thing. He just sat down and poured himself a drink, eyeing his patient in silence.

*couraged* This encounter, born in ~~antagonistic~~ <sup>simultaneous</sup> hatred, ended in affection. ~~the~~ the good doctor let Valerian swallow a little of his brandy through a straw and against his better judgment, Valerian recognized a man who took his medical oaths seriously. They got good and drunk together that night, and the combination of novocaine and brandy gave Valerian an expansiveness he had not felt in years. They visited each other occasionally and whenever Valerian thought of that first meeting he touched the place where the abcess had been and smiled. It had a comic book quality about it: two elderly men drunk and quarreling about Pershing (whom Valerian had actually seen) neither one mentioning then or ever the subject of exile or advanced years which was what they had in common. Both felt as though they had been run out of their homes. Robert Michelin expelled from Algeria; Valerian Street voluntarily exiled from Philadelphia.



They were quiet for a while, Valerian chewing pineapple; Sydney leaning against the sideboard. Then Valerian said, "Why do you suppose he hangs on to it? A boy's camp foot locker."

"Keep his clothes in."

"Foolish. All of it. The trunk, him and this visit. Besides he won't show."

"She thinks so this time."

"She's not thinking. She's dreaming, poor baby. Are you sure there was nothing between those towels?"

"Here comes the lady. Ask her yourself."

A light clicking of heels on Mexican tile was getting louder.

"When the boy goes to the airport," whispered Valerian, "tell him to pick up some Maalox on the way back. Well, what have we here? Wonder Woman?"

"Please," she said, "it's too hot. Good morning, Sydney."

"Morning Mrs. Street."

"Then what is that between your eyebrows?"

"Frownies."

"Beg pardon?"

"Frownies."

Sydney walked around the table, tilted the pot and poured coffee soundlessly into her porcelain cup.

"You have trouble frowning?" asked her husband.



"Yes."

"And that helps?"

"Supposed to." She held the cup in front of her lips and closed her eyes. The steam floated into her face while she inhaled.

"I am confused. Not senile, mind you. Just confused. Why would you want to frown?"

Margaret took another breath of coffee steam and opened her eyes very slowly. She looked at her husband with the complete dislike of a natural late-sleeper for a cheerful early-riser.

"I don't want to frown. Frownies don't make you frown. They erase the consequences of frowning."

Valerian opened his mouth but said nothing for a moment. Then "But why don't you just stop frowning? Then you won't need to paste your face with little pieces of tape."

Margaret sipped more coffee and returned the cup to its saucer. Lifting the neckline of her dress away from her she blew gently into her bosom and looked at the pale wedges of pineapple Sydney placed before her. "I thought we'd have mangoes." Sydney removed the fruit and hurried to the swinging doors. "What gets into everybody? Pineapple every morning?"

"Tell Sydney at night what you'd like for breakfast the next morning. That way he can . . ."

"She knows I hate fresh pineapple. The threads get in



Valerian shrugged. "Slurp away. But you had three helpings of mousse last night."

"Two, I had two. Jade had three."

"Oh well, only two . . . "

"Well what do we have a cook for? Even I can slice grapefruit."

"To wash the dishes."

"Who needs dishes? According to you all I need is a teaspoon."

"Well someone has to wash your teaspoon."

"And your trowel."

"Funny. Very funny."

"It's true." Margaret took a mouthful of mango. "I've never seen anyone eat as much as you and not gain an ounce--ever. I think she adds things to my food. Wheat germs or something. At night she sneaks in with one of the introvenous things and pumps me full of malts."

"Nobody pumps you full of anything."

"Or whipped cream maybe."

Sydney had left them discussing calories and now he was back with a silver tray on which wafer thin slices of ham tucked into toast baskets held a poached egg. He went to the sideboard and lifted them onto plates. He lay stems of parsley on the right rim and two tomato slices to the left of each plate. He whisked away the fruit bowls, careful not to spill the water from the ice and then leaned forward with



the hot dish. Margaret waved it away and he returned to the sideboard, put the rejected dish down and picked up the other. Valerian accepted it enthusiastically and Sydney edged the salt and pepper mill an inch or two out of his reach.

"I suppose you are decorating the house with guests for Christmas. Push that salt over here will you?"

"Why would you suppose that?" Margaret stretched out a hand, a beautifully manicured hand, and passed him the salt and pepper.

"Because I asked you not to. It follows therefore that you would defy me."

"Have it your way. Let's just spend the holidays all alone in the cellar."

"We haven't got a cellar, Margaret. You should take a look around this place. You might like it. Come to think of it I don't believe you've seen the kitchen yet have you? We've got two, two kitchens. One is . . . "

"Valerian. Please shut up."

"But this is exciting. We've been coming here for only thirty years and already you've discovered the dining room. That's three whole rooms. One every decade. First you found the bedroom. That is I assume you did. It's hard to tell when a wife sleeps separately from her mate. Then in 1965 I think it was you located the living room. Remember that? Those cocktail parties? Those were good times. Heights, I'd



"Not that! About Michael, I mean. That he won't show up."

"Because he never has."

"He never has here. Down here in this jungle with nothing to do. No young people. No fun. No music . . . "

"No music?"

"I mean his kind of music."

"You surprise me."

"And so he won't be bored to death, I've invited a friend of his--" She stopped and pressed a finger to the frownie between her eyes. "I don't know why I bother."

"Yes. Why do you bother?"

"You hate everybody," she yawned.

"I don't hate anybody."

"Three years it's been. What's the matter with you? Don't you want to see your son anymore? I know you don't want to see anybody else-but your own son. You pay more attention to that fat dentist than you do Michael. What are you trying to prove down here? Why do you cut yourself off from everybody, everything?"

"It's just that I'm undergoing this very big change in my life called dying."

"Retirement isn't death."

"A distinction without a difference."

"Well I am not dying. I am living."

"A difference without distinction."



two places."

"I want to live in one--just one. In October you said after New Year's, you'll come back. Then when New Year's comes you'll say after Carnival. If I want to live with you I have to do it your way--here. I can't keep flying back and forth across the ocean wondering where I left the Kotex. Anyway. I'm going back with Michael. For a while. Make a home for him."

"You'll have to eat corncakes. Three hundred and twenty-five per serving."

"I told you he's not there anymore. He's applied at U.C. Berkeley, I think."

"Marijuana cookies then. Two hundred . . . "

"You will not listen."

*Margaret*  
"Promise me something."

"What?"

"That you won't go unless he agrees to it."

"But . . . "

"Promise."

*(Cover)*  
"All right. All right. That's no risk."

"What about Jade, then?" *asked Valerian.*

"What about her? She can stay as long as she likes."

"She thinks she's working for you."

"Let her work for you while I'm gone."

"Oh dear."

"Or just relax. She wanted to spend the winter here



"Sydney's very excited about that shop idea. <sup>„ Valerian said.</sup> Ondine too."

"Oh?"

"Nothing definite. At the dreaming stage still."

"Now who's worked up?"

"It's a possibility, that's all. An attractive one for them I suppose."

"That's selfish, Valerian."

"Perhaps, but I don't think so. I don't think so."

"You're worrying about nothing. They wouldn't leave you and the situation they have here to go into the retail business. At this time of life, never."

"Yes?"

"Of course yes. Look at you." She laughed. "You're scared. Scared ~~you~~ won't take care of you."

"I have always taken care of them."

"And they will do the same for you. God knows they will. You couldn't pry them out of here. With or without Jade. They are yours for life."

"Don't snarl. Your frownie is coming loose."

"I'm not. <sup>snarling</sup> They're loyal people and they should be."

"I've never understood your jealousy."

"That's <sup>just</sup> ~~so~~ like you to call <sup>it</sup> ~~any feeling you don't share~~ jealousy."

"When we were married I used to have to pull you away from Ondine. Guests in the house and you'd prefer gossiping



...litz, ... wherefore art thou, Berlitz.

"Joueaux Noel."

"Dear God."

"Joyoux Noel, Sydney."

"Ma'am?

"Did you tell the boy about the trunk?"

"He hasn't come yet ma'am. As soon as he does . . . "

"And turkey. Ondine will do a turkey. Sydney?"

"Ah, yes, ma'am, if you like."

"I like. I really like."

"I've ordered geese, Margaret."

"Geese? Michael doesn't eat geese. We have to have turkey for Christmas. This is a family Christmas, an old fashioned family Christmas, and you have to have turkey."

"If Tiny Tim could eat goose, Margaret, Michael can eat goose."

"No!"

"I'll mention it to Ondine, ma'am."

"You will not mention it! You will tell her!"

"Yes Maam."

"And apple pies."

"Apple, maam?"

"Apple. And pumpkin."

"We are in the Caribbean, Margaret."

"No! I said no! If we can't have turkey and apple pie for Christmas then maybe we shouldn't be here at all!"



"Berlitz, Berlitz, wherefore art thou, Berlitz?"

"Johann Noel."

"Dear God."

"Joyous Noel, Yehay."

She stands at Valtarin for sundries. He could  
not imagine it. Let a blank frame be a roll  
of film, she had the picture. That she  
had a room painted the wall. Turkey, she saw  
but goose....

"Geese? At least geese's not worse, he have to have

turkey for Christmas. This is a turkey Christmas, an old

legendary turkey Christmas, and we have to have turkey."

"If tiny tin could eat geese, the turkey can

Staking up and a 2 happy person top. She

was moving her hand. Then

don't let but. Let's make socks on the feet

"Yes, dear."

"And apple pie."

"Apple, yes?"

"Apple. And pudding."

"We are in the Caribbees, Margaret."

"No! I said no! If we can't have turkey and apple

pie for Christmas then maybe we shouldn't be here at all!"



"She ate a mouthful," said Sydney.

"Contrary," murmured his wife. She poured the eggs into a shallow buttered pan, and stirred them slowly with a wooden spoon.

"It's all right, Ondine. Lucky you had one."

"I'll say. Even the colored people down here don't eat mangoes."

"Sure they do," Sydney slipped a napkin from its ring. The pale blue linen complimented his mahogany hands.

"Yardmen," said Ondine. "And beggars." She poured the eggs into a frying pan of chicken livers. She was seventeen years her husband's junior, but her hair, braided across the crown of her head, was completely white. Sydney's hair was not as black as it appeared, but certainly not snow white like Ondine's. She went back to the stove and bent to check on the biscuits in the oven.

"What's the Principal Beauty hollering about?"

"Turkey."

Ondine looked at her husband over her shoulder. "Don't fool with me this morning."

"And apple pie."

"You better get me a plane ticket out of here." She straightened.

"Calm down, girl."

"She want it, she can come in here and cook it. After she swim on back up to New York and get the ingredients.

Where she think she is?"

"It's for the boy."



as Mary and couldn't ever be wrong about it because all the baptized black women on the island had Mary among their names. Once in a while Yardman brought a small-boned girl too. Fourteen, perhaps, or twenty, depending on what she chose to do with her eyes.

Sydney would go down to the little dock then, in the Wilys jeep and return with the whole crew, driving through beautiful terrain, then through Sein des Veilles saying nothing for he preferred their instructions to come from his wife. Yardman sometimes ventured a comment or two, but the Mary and the small-boned girl never said anything at all. <sup>(over)</sup> Sydney may have maintained a classy silence, but Ondine talked to them constantly. Yardman answered her but the Mary never did except for a quiet "oui, Madame" if she felt pressed. Ondine tried, unsuccessfully, for months to get a Mary who would work inside. With no explicit refusal or general explanation each Mary took the potatoes, the pot, the paper sack and the paring knife outdoors on the part of the courtyard the kitchen opened on to. It enraged Ondine because it gave the place a nasty, common look. But when, at her insistence, Yardman brought another Mary, she too took the pail of shrimp outside to shell and devein them. One of them even hauled the ironing board and the basket of Vera sheets out there. Ondine made her bring it all back and from then on they had the flat linen done in Queen of France along with the fine.



They just sat in the jeep quietly hiding  
their hair from the eyes of malevolent  
strangers.



## Two

*Treat attached*

The unsocketed eye that drifts through the skies of the Caribbean is not restless. Simply and calmly it watches the night moves that take place below. Anyone can tell it is an alert eye for it has no lid and can not wax or wane. No one speaks of a quarter or half moon in the Caribbean. It is always full. Always adrift and curious. Unastonished but never bored by the things it beholds: A pair of married servants sleeping back to back. The man without pajama tops in deference to the heat; his wife up to her neck in percale to defy it. There is safety in those backs. Each one feels it radiating from the other, <sup>S</sup>Knowing that the steady, able spine of its partner is a hip turn away. <sup>then</sup> Their sleep is tranquil, earned, unlike the sleep of the old man upstairs in cotton pajamas. He has napped so frequently during the day in his greenhouse that night sleep eludes him. Sometimes he needs a half balloon of brandy to find it, and even then he chats the night away, whispering first to his wrist, then to the ceiling <sup>the</sup> messages he has received that need telling. And when he has got it straight: the exact wording, even the spelling of the crucial words, he is happy and laughs lightly like a sweet boy. His wife, in another room, has <sup>carefully</sup> climbed the steps to sleep <sup>at its door</sup> deliberately and arrived <sup>there</sup> with



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A house of sleeping humans is both closed and wide open. Like an ear it resists easy penetration but cannot brace for attack. Luckily in the Caribbean there is no fear. The unsocketed eye that watches sleepers is not threatening--it is merely alert which anyone can tell for it has no lid and cannot wax or wane.

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50% COTTON FIBER



luggage packed and locked: buffered nails, lightly oiled skin, hair pinned, teeth brushed--all her tips in shining order. Her breathing is still rapid, for she has just done twelve minutes of Canadian Air Force exercises. Eventually it slows and under her sleeping mask two cotton balls soaked in witch hazel nestle against peaceful eyelids. She is hopeful in sleep for this may be the night she will dream the dream she ought to. Next to her bedroom, adjacent to it with a connecting door (she is not in this house year round and has chosen a guest room rather than the master bedroom as her own) a young woman barely twenty-five years old is wide awake. Again. She fell asleep immediately when first she lay down, but after an hour she woke rigid and frightened from a dream of large hats. ~~One of those lunatic nightmares about nothing at all except terror. Hats. Large beautiful women's hats like Norma Shearer's and Mae West's and Jeanette Mac Donald's and Claudette Colbert's~~ although the dreamer is too young to have seen their movies or remembered them if she had. Feathers. Veils. Flowers. Brims flat, brims drooping, brims folded, and rounded. Hat after lovely, sailing hat surrounding her until she is finger-snapped awake. ~~Now she lies there under the eye of the moon wondering what was in it that frightened her so;~~ why the hats had shamed and repelled her. <sup>So</sup> As soon as she gave up looking for the center of the fear, she was reminded of another picture that was not a dream. Two months ago, in Paris, the day she went grocery shop-



on her shopping list was right there in Paris? Nothing was absent, not even the spit of an African woman whose eyes had burned away their lashes.

Jadine slipped out of bed and went to the window. She knelt on the floor, and, folding her arms on the sill, rested her head on the pane. She lifted the back of her hand to her mouth and squeezed the soft flesh with her teeth. She <sup>couldn't figure out</sup> ~~knew now~~ why the woman's insulting gesture had derailed her--shaken her so out of proportion to the incident. <sup>Why</sup> ~~She~~ had wanted that woman to like and respect her. It had certainly taken the zing out of the magazine cover as well as her degree. Beyond the window etched against the light of a blazing moon she could see the hills at the other side of the island where one hundred horsemen rode one hundred horses, so Valerian said. That was how the island got its name. He had pointed the three humps of hills out to her, but Margaret, who had accompanied them on the tour of the grounds when Jadine first arrived, said no such thing. One rider. Just one. Therefore Isle de la Chevalier. One French soldier on a horse, not a hundred. She'd gotten the story from a neighbor--the first family Valerian had sold to. Valerian stuck to his own story, which he preferred and felt was more accurate because he had heard it from Dr. Michelin who lived in town and knew all about it. "They're still there," he said. "And you can see them if you go over there at night. But I don't suppose we'll ever meet. If they've



been riding for as long as the story is old, they must be as tired as I am, and I don't want to meet anybody older or more tired than I am."

Maybe they're not old, Jadine thought, staring out of the window. Maybe they're still young, still riding. One hundred men on one hundred horses. She tried to visualize them, wave after wave of chevaliers, but somehow that made her think of the woman in yellow who had run her out of Paris. She crawled back into bed and tried to fix the feeling that had troubled her.

The woman had made her feel lonely in a way. Lonely and inauthentic. ~~Inauthentic what? Woman, black woman, art historian, model? No, some of that was fake; her art thing was fake, but so what? Most of it was, had to be, lobbying. Gift, talent was not even part of it. Modelling was a self-stroking paid for in hard currency. She knew that long ago and it had never troubled the part of her that was genuine. No. That couldn't be it.~~ <sup>Perhaps she was over-re-acting</sup> ~~^~~ The woman appeared simply at a time when she had a major decision to make: <sup>of the three raucous men the one</sup> ~~^~~ ~~the man~~ she most wanted to marry and who was desperate to marry her was exciting and smart and fun and sexy . . . so? I guess the person I want to marry is him, but I wonder if the person he wants to marry is me or a Black girl? And it if isn't me he wants, but any Black girl who looks like me, talks and acts like me, what will happen when he finds out that I hate ear hoops, that I don't have to straighten



my hair, that Mingus puts me to sleep, that sometimes I want  
 to get out of my skin? <sup>and be only the person inside - not American - not Black</sup> Suppose he sleeps with somebody <sup>Just</sup>  
 else after we're married? Will I feel the way I did when  
 he took Nina Fong away for the weekend? ~~How many times~~  
 can I pull that off? He was amazed, he said, at my reaction.  
 Weren't we always to be honest with each other? He didn't  
 want a relationship with lies, did I? And then we made up,  
 set the date--no wedding, just a marriage--he got rid of  
 his old mattress and bought a new one, a new one for us to  
 grow old in, he said. ~~And I was so happy, happy and~~ then  
 the magazine cover, and then <sup>her</sup> my degree assured and then,  
 the woman in yellow. <sup>and then she ran away because</sup> ~~Oh God why am I playing around with~~  
~~it, and not saying it?~~ Ryk is white and the woman spit at  
 her and she had to come to see her aunt and uncle to see  
 what they would feel, think, say. White but European which  
 was not as bad as white and American; they would understand  
 that, or would they? Had they ever said? They liked her  
 being in Paris, the schools she'd gone to, the friends she'd  
 had there. They were always boasting about it. And it was  
 not like she needed their views on anything. After her  
 mother died they were her people--but she never lived with  
 them except summers at Valerian's house when she was very  
 young. Less and then never, after high school. They were  
 family; they had gotten Valerian to pay her tuition while  
 they sent her the rest, having no one else to spend it on.  
 Nanadine and Sydney mattered a lot to her but what they



thought did not. She had sought them out to touch bases, ~~think~~ to sort out things before going ahead with, with, with anything. <sup>So far</sup> ~~As yet~~ she had been playful with them, had not said anything definite about her plans. When they asked her was she serious about this Ryk fellow who telephoned and who sent letters every week, she <sup>ed</sup> pretend it was nothing. That she was thinking of going back to Paris only to get her things. There was a small assignment in New York; she would take it and then she wanted to see about opening a business of her own, she'd told them, a gallery, or a boutique or a . . . she'd looked at their faces then . . . well, something they could all do together so they could live together like a family at last. They smiled generously, but their eyes made her know they were happy to play store with her, but nothing would pull them away from the jobs they had had for thirty years and more.

~~She didn't want to go back to him just yet. Being Black over there was useful, even interesting but it was never real. In the states, on the barricades--that was the real test. Wasn't it? That and being married to a Black man. God. That was the tester's test. If you needed to be tested, that is.~~

<sup>#</sup> <sup>Jadine</sup> What a muddle, she thought, and <sup>1</sup> kicked off the sheet and buried her head under the pillow to keep the moonlight out of her eyes, <sup>and the woman in yellow out of her mind</sup>

<sup>#</sup> When Jadine had gotten out of bed to stare at the hills,



But they didn't close it out. Not right away, at least. The uncles let the item sell itself in the South until the sugar shortage of the early forties and even then they fought endlessly to keep it on. They went to the bathroom, to lunch, read food industry literature and held caucuses among themselves about whether to manufacture a nickel box of Valerians in Mississippi where beet sugar was almost free and the labor too. "Ooooh. Valerian!!" said the box. And that was all. Not even a picture of the candy or a happy face eating it. Valerian appreciated their efforts but recognized them as sentimental and not professional and swore again he would retire exactly at sixty-five if not before and would not let his ownership position keep him there making an ass of himself. <sup>(lover)</sup> All the way through a seven year childless marriage to a woman who disliked him; all the way through a hateful, shoddy, interminable divorce; all the way into and out of the military service, he <sup>could be</sup> ~~was~~ firm. After the war he went to a convention of industrial food appliance sales in Maine and stepped out for a breath of winter air. There on a float with a polar bear he saw Miss Maine. She was so young and so unexpectedly pretty he swallowed air and had a coughing fit. She was all red and white, like the Valerians and <sup>something inside him knelt</sup> ~~he wanted to kneel down~~ as though she actually were a Queen. So already at thirty-nine he was showing signs of the same sentimentality his uncles had. It made his resolve even firmer; out of respect



After all he was the first partner with a  
College education and a love of other things  
And it was because of these other things -  
Music, books - that



did not throw a fit to go elsewhere. Over the years he  
 sold off parts of it, provided the parcels were large and  
 the buyers discreet, but he kept his distance and his  
 dream of getting out of the way at sixty-five, and letting  
 his son take over. ~~Needless to say~~ <sup>But</sup> the son was not charmed  
 by Teddy Boys or island retreats. <sup>Valerian's</sup> ~~The~~ disappointment was  
 real, so he agreed to its sale to one of the candy giants  
 who could and did triple the volume in two years. Valerian  
 turned his attention to refining the house, its grounds,  
 mail service to the island, measuring French colonial taxes  
 against American residential ones, killing off rats, snakes  
 and other destructive animal life, adjusting the terrain  
 for comfortable living. When he knew for certain that Michael  
 would always be a stranger to him, he built the greenhouse  
 as a place of controlled ever-flowering life to greet  
 death in. It seemed a simple, modest enough wish to him.  
 Normal  decent--like his life. Fair, generous--  
 like his life. Nobody except Sydney and Ondine seemed to  
 understand that. He had never abused himself, but he thought  
 keeping fit inelegant somehow and vain. His claims to decency  
 were human: he had never cheated anybody. Had done the  
 better thing when ever he had a choice and sometimes when  
 he did not. He had never been miserly or a spendthrift, and  
 his politics were always rational and often humane. He had  
 played his share of tennis and golf but it was more for  
 business reasons than pleasure. And he'd had countless



began their duties by trying to keep him from grieving over his father's death. Luckily a drunken woman did their laundry. And although he stayed on one year past sixty-five to make some changes and another year past that to make sure the changes held, he did manage to retire at sixty-eight to L'Arbe de la Croix and sleep the deep brandy sleep he deserved.

Margaret was not dreaming nor was she quite asleep, although the moon looking at her face believed she was. She was experiencing the thing insomniacs dread--not being awake but the tickey-tacky thoughts that <sup>fill in the space where sleep ought to be</sup> ~~came in the absence~~ of sleep. Rags and swatches; draincloths and crumpled paper napkins. Old griefs and embarrassments; jealousies and offense. ~~It was not thinking or mulling or even regret.~~ Just common ignoble scraps not deep enough for dreaming and not light enough to dismiss. <sup>Insert attached</sup> ~~Pointless, wasted, non-sleep time which disturbed the breathing but not the face of this beautiful woman born to two ordinary looking people who had looked at their exceptionally beautiful child and thought "Oh my. Well, she has that at least so she'll be all right."~~ And they stepped back and let her be. They gave her care, but they withdrew attention. Their strength they gave to the others who were not beautiful; their knowledge, what information they had they did not give to this single beautiful



Yet she was hopeful that sleep would come, that she would have the dream she ought to for maybe that would dispell the occasional forgetfulness that plagued her when she forgot the names and uses of things. It happened mostly at meals, and once, years ago with the princess telephone which she picked up with her car keys and address book and tried to stuff it in her purse. They were rare moments, but dark and windy enough to last. After lunch with friends you could go the the powder room, twist the lipstick out of its tube and wonder suddenly if it was for licking or writing your name. And because never knew when it would come back, a thin terror accompanied you always--except in sleep. So there was peace and hope on the face of this beautiful woman born to two ordinary looking people



Insert page 71

, Joseph and Leonora Lordi who had looked at ~~this~~ <sup>their</sup> beautiful ~~red head~~ <sup>red head</sup> child with ~~red hair~~ with shock and amazement. Of course there was no thought of adultery ( Leonora was ~~sixty~~ <sup>60</sup> before she showed the world her two bare legs), but the hair bothered Joe--caught his eye at the dinner table and ~~gave~~ ruined his meals. He looked at little Margarete's skin as delicate as the skin of a robin's egg and almost as blue and stroked his thumb. Leonora shrugged and covered her head with lace older than Maine itself. She was as puzzled as her husband but not as alarmed, although it did look funny at the 9:30 mass: Margarete's head glowing like an ember among the coal ~~bright~~ <sup>dark</sup> heads of her other children. She couldn't explain it and didn't try, but Joe never left off stroking his thumb and staring at his little girl's blue-if-it's-a -boy-blue ~~eues~~ <sup>eyes</sup>. He ~~stoked~~ <sup>stroked</sup> his thumb and stroked ~~until~~ <sup>his thumb</sup> until he smashed his temple with his fist having just remembered Buffalo. The Buffalo great aunts Celestina and Alicia--twins with hair the color of ~~pimento~~ <sup>saffron</sup> and the white skin of the north. He roared and began to tell people about his Buffalo aunts whom he had not seen since he was six. And, although hisbrothers shouted yeh,yeh he reminded them, he thought he saw doubt in the eyes of his fri. Thus began a series of letters to Buffalo inviting the twins to <sup>South Suzanne</sup> ~~South Suzanne~~. They were flattered by his ~~xxxxxx~~ letters, but could not understand the sudden affection from a great nephew they did not remember. For a year they declined to pay a visit on account of advanced age, until Joe offered to pay their bus fare. "Where" asked Leonora, "Where will they sleep?" and Joe touched his <sup>Adalphe</sup> ~~finger~~ finger. Campi, Estella, Cesare, Nick, Nuzio, Mickelena or any of



other~~x~~ Lordi's scattered around the county. Leonora looked at the ceiling, covered her head with lace older than Maine itself and went to mass to beg for sanity, Madre de Dio, if not peace in her house.

The aunts came and when Joe picked them up at the bus station and saw that the ~~pimento~~<sup>saffron</sup> had turned to garlic he smashed his temple again. It turned out better than nothing <sup>however</sup> for he was able to regale them in the presence of company about losing their flaming hair, and they smiled and acknowledged that it had certainly been lost--which was proof enough for everyone that such hair and such skin had existed at one time and therefore could legitimately reappear four generations later on the tiny head of Margarett Lenore. Still it left its mark, <sup>on her</sup> being that pretty with that coloring. Joe and Leonora left her pretty much alone after the Buffalo aunts went home. Maybe ~~she~~ her beauty scared them a little; maybe they just felt Well, at least she has that. She won't have to worry.



one. They saved it, distributed it instead to those whose characters had to be built. <sup>Insert A. attached</sup> ~~In that trailer they lived in~~ and later in the big brick house on Chester Street, after her father and ~~two~~ uncles bought two trucks and began Lordi Brothers, the <sup>loneliness</sup> ~~separation she felt~~ was only partially the look in the eyes of the uncles and the nuns. Much of it was the inaccessibility of the minds (not the hearts) of <sup>Leonora</sup> ~~Grace and Joseph Lordi~~ to little Margaret Lenore Lordi. So when she got married eight months out of high school, she did not have to leave home, she was already gone; she did not have to leave them; they had already left her. And other than money gifts <sup>to them</sup> and brief telephone calls, she was still gone. It was always like that: she was gone and other people were where they belonged. She was going up or down stairs; other people seemed to be settled somewhere. She was on the two concrete steps of the trailer; the six wooden steps of the <sup>hand built</sup> ~~Chester Street~~ house; the thirty-seven steps at the Stadium when she was crowned; and a million wide steps in the house of Valerian Street. <sup>Insert B. attached</sup> ~~They bothered her, all those stairs to all those places. All that getting in and out of a door to get to someplace else where she could not stay or did not want to be. She used to dream of them when she was a new bride: backing away from or running down from stairs. It had been a horror and a pleasure to teach Michael how to count by walking him up those stairs. One, two, three . . . his little hand in hers repeating the numbers as they mounted each tread. No one would believe that she~~



(A) The rest of their energies they used on the problems of surviving in a county that did not want them there. During the months when the earth permitted it, Joe and his brothers dug a hole in the ground. They cinder blocked it, topped it and put in a toilet and a gas line. Little by little the Lordi's moved out of their trailer across the yard into the cinder block basement. Two years they lived huddled and quite warm there, considering what Maine winters were like. The third year Joe started the first floor walls and by 1935 all six of them were in a seven-room house the Lordi brother had built with their own hands. Leonora rented the trailer, but kept its back yard for peppers, corn, fat squash and the columbine she loved beyond reason. But Margarette always loved the trailer best for ther<sup>e</sup> the separateness she felt had less room to grow in. In the hand built house, ~~and later after her father and mother brought two weeks establishing Lordi Brothers~~



Insert page 72 b.

It was just her luck to fall in love with and marry a man who had a house bigger than her elementary school. A house of three stories ~~with xxxxxxxxxx~~ with pear<sup>l</sup> gray S's everywhere --on cups, saucers, glasses, silverware and even in their bed. ~~When~~ <sup>and faced each other touching</sup> she and Valerian lay down ~~and touched~~ toes her head barely came <sup>It was sung and</sup> to his arm pit ~~but xxxxxxxxxx~~ and right across <sup>his</sup> chest. When she and Valerian lay snug in bed, facing each <sup>o</sup>ther and touching toes the pearl gray S on the sheet hems and pillow slips coiled at her ~~xxxxxx~~ and she stiffened like Joan Fontane in Rebec until she learned from her husband that his ex-wife had nothing to do with it. His grandmother had had some of the monograms done and his mother the rest. Margaret's relief was solid but it did nothing to keep her from feeling drowned when he was not there in the spaciousness of that <sup>h</sup>ouse with only a colored couple with unfriendly faces to save her. Alone in the house peeping into a <sup>room,</sup> ~~room~~ it looked all right, but the minute she turned her back she heard the after boom, and who could she tell that to Not the coloreds. She was seventeen and couldn't even give them orders the way she was supposed to. It must be like room service she thought, and she asked them to bring her things and they did ~~when~~ but when she said thank you and sipped the <sup>Coca Cola</sup> iced tea, they smiled a private smile she hated. The woman Ondine cooked and the cleaning; the man too, <sup>he</sup> and had also had morning chats with Valerian, brushed his clothes, sent some to the laundry, some to the cleaners, some disappeared altogether. There was nothing that line for her to do but amuse herself in solitude and as that was, the dinners with Valerian's friends were worse.



B cont'd.

There men talked about music and money and the Marshall Plan. She knew nothing about any of it, but she was never stupid enough to pretend she did or try to enter the conversation. The wives talked around the edge of such matters or dropped amusing bits into the conversations like the greens specks in conelli filling. Once a wife whom she showed to the downstairs powder room asked her where she had gone to school and she said South Susanne, and ~~the woman said~~ <sup>asked the woman</sup> what's there? South Suzanne High School, said Margaret. The woman gave her a wide generous grin for a long time, then patted Margaret's stomach. "Get to work, fast, sweet heart."

Margaret lived for the concerts Valerian took her to, and the dinners for two at restaurants and even alone at home. Otherwise it was solitude with the colored coupe floating mysteriously through the house. In the fourth month of her marriage she sat on the screened porch watching as The World Turns when Ondine passed by with a can of linseed oil and said "Excuse me. Did they arrest Joan Barron yet?" Margaret said No, but they must be about to. <sup>"Go" said</sup> ~~Then~~ <sup>and</sup> Ondine began to fill her in on the people. Margaret was not a regular viewer but she became one with Ondine and <sup>cast of characters</sup> ~~thereby~~ <sup>a maiden</sup> flow ~~their friendship.~~ Margaret was not ~~only~~ afraid any more (although it was some time before Sydney did not inspire her with awe). She ed forward to the chats with Ondine whose hair was black then and "dressed" as she called it, once a month. They talked about Valerian's family and South Susanne and Baltimore where Ondine was from.. was just about to show her how to make crust (and Margaret by then knew the honor of the offer, since Ondine did not like sharing

recipes or kitchen space) when Valerian put a stop to it saying



she should guide the servants , not consort with them. The next thing you know they'd be going to movies together, which hurt Margaret a lot because <sup>taking in a movie with Ondine</sup> ~~the movies~~ was definitely on her mind.

~~So she was relegated forced back to the sunporch and her chats on~~  
~~Ondine's kitchen were stolen~~ They quarreled about it. Not because  
~~XXXXXXX~~ Margaret thought Valerian was wrong: she had never known him to be and doubted if he could be in error about anything . Not him, not with those clam eyes or that crisp quiet voice that reassured and poked fun at you at the same time.. And although the theme of her defense in the argument was that Ondine (if not all colored people) was just as good as they were, she didn't believe it, and besides that wasn't the point of the disagreement anyway. Valerian was never rude to Ondine or Sydney, in fact he pampered them, even paid for their neice's education in some private school. No. The point was not consorting with Negroes, the point was her ignorance and her origins. It was a nasty quarrel and their first in which they said regrettable things to each other and that resulted in not touching toes in the night. It frightened Margaret--the possibility of losing him. And though she abandoned the movie idea, <sup>and</sup> she still sneaked into Ondine's kitchen of an afternoon, ~~still~~, she took the advice of the lady in the powder room and "got ~~pregnant~~ to work--f

When the baby was born everything changed except the afterboom which got louder and louder and even when she carried her baby through the rooms it was there as soon as she turned her back. It had been a horror and a pleasure to teach little Michael how to count by walking him up those wide stairs flashing white like piano keys.



loved him. That she was not one of those women in the National Inquirer. ~~that she was never~~ She did not consider herself an over-protective or designing parent with unfulfilled dreams.

*Now that Michael was an adult*

1/ Of all the people she knew in the world, he seemed to her the best. The smartest and the nicest. She liked his company, to talk to him, to be around him. Not because he is my son, she told herself, my only child, but because he is interesting and he thinks I am interesting too. I am special to him. Not as a mother, but as a person. Just as he is to me.

*1/ In wanting to live near him*

1/ She was not behaving like a brooding hen. Quite the contrary. She had cut the cords decisively and was enjoying her son as an individual. He was simply better society than her women friends. Younger, freer, more fun. And he was better company than the men of her acquaintance who either wanted to seduce, lecture or bore her to death. She felt natural, easy, unafraid with Michael. There was no competition with him, no winning, no preening, no need to be anybody but who she was, *and in his presence she did not forget the names and use* 1/ It wasn't always that way. When he was an infant he seemed to want everything of her, and she didn't know what to give. ~~But~~ she loved him even then. But no one would believe it. They would think she was one of those mothers in the National Inquirer. And since she was not anything like them, she fell asleep finally, but did not have the dream she ought to.



Down below, where the moon couldn't get to, in the servant's quarters, Sydney and Ondine made alternate trips to the bathroom and went quickly back to sleep. Ondine dreaming of sliding into water, frightened that her heavy legs and swollen ankles will sink her. But still asleep she turns over and touches her husband's back--the dream dissolves and with it the anxiety. He is in Baltimore now as he <sup>usual</sup> ~~always~~ is and because it was always a red city in his mind--red brick, red sun, red necks and cardinals--his dream of it now was rust-colored. Wagons, fruit stands, all rust colored. He had left that city to go to Philadelphia and there he became one of those industrious Philadelphia Negroes--the proudest people in the race. That was over fifty yers ago, and still his most vivid dreams were the red rusty Baltimore of 1921. The fish, the trees, the music, the horses harnesses. It was a tiny dream he had each night that he would never recollect from morning to morning. So he never knew what it was exactly that refreshed him.

They were all asleep now. Nothing disturbed them. Not the moon certainly and certainly no foot steps in the dark.



Sydney retraced his felt steps to clear the plates for the next course. Just before he reached Margaret, who had not yet touched anything, she dipped her spoon into the bisque and began to eat. Sydney hesitated and then stepped back.

"You're dawdling, Margaret," said Valerian.

"Sorry," she murmured. The maiden aunts stroked her cheek and she wiped away the dampness their fingers left.

"There is a rhythm to a meal. I've always told you that."

"I said sorry. I'm not a fast eater."

"Speed has nothing to do with it. Pace does," Valerian answered.

"So my pace is different from yours."

"It's the souffle, Margaret," Jadine interrupted.

"Valerian knows there's a souffle tonight."

Margaret put her spoon down. It clicked against the china. Sydney floated to her elbow. *James I. attached*

"Mushroom?" she asked.

"I don't know," said Jadine. "I think so."

"I hate mushrooms."

"I'm not sure; maybe it's plain."

"I like it when it's hot, plain and fluffy," said Margaret.

"Well let's hope that's what we get. Omelette's more



She was usually safe with soup, anything soft or liquid that required a spoon, but she was never sure when the confusion would return: when she would scrape her fork tines along the china trying to pick up the painted ~~apple~~ blossoms at its center, or forget to unwrap the cookie at the side of her plate and pop the whole thing into her mouth. Valerian would squint at her, but say nothing, convinced that she was stewed. Lobster, corn on the cob--all problematic. It came. It went. And when it left sometimes for a year, she couldn't believe how stupid it was. Still she was careful at table, watching other people handle their food--just to make sure that never again would she pick up the knife instead of the celery stalk or pour water from her glass over the prime ribs instead of the meat's own juices. Now it was coming back. Right after she managed to eat the correct part of the mango, in spite of the fact that Ondine tried to trick her by leaving the skin on and propping it up in ice, she had dug <sup>in</sup> her fork recklessly, and a slice came away. Right after that Sydney presented her with a plate of something shaped like a cardboard box. Now she had hesitated to see if the little white pebbles floating in her bowl were to be eaten or not. It came to her in a flash--oysterettes! and she had dipped her spoon happily into the soup but had hardly begun when Valerian complained. Now Jade was announcing a new obstacle: souffle. Margaret <sup>prayed</sup> she would recognize it.



likely in this weather." Valerian was fidgety and signalled for more wine. "The only thing I dislike about this island is the fog."

"It may not be good for eggs, but it's doing a good job of souffle-ing my hair," said Jadine. "I should have had it cut like yours, Margaret." She pressed her hair down with both palms, but as soon as she removed them her hair sprang back into a rain cloud.

"Oh, no. Mine's so stringy now," said Margaret.

"But it still looks okay. That's why that haircut's so popular, you know? Uncombed, even wet, it's got a shape that suits the face. This shaggy-dog style I wear has to be worked on, and I mean worked on."

Margaret laughed. "It's very becoming, Jade. It makes you look like what was her name in Black Orpheus? Eurydice."

"Chee, Margaret, chee," said Valerian. "Eurydi-chee."

"Remember her hair when she was hanging from the wires in that streetcar garage?" Margaret continued to address Jadine.

"You mean the hair in her armpits?" Jadine asked.



~~that Margaret did not have the ease of white people who had~~  
~~grown up with Black children; she had rather an angled, off center~~  
~~approach which consisted mainly in ferreting out or diminishing~~  
~~what she believed were racial characteristics.~~ <sup>She</sup> So Jadine <sup>^</sup> was  
uncomfortable with the way Margaret stirred her into blackening  
up or universalling out, <sup>always alluding to or ferreting out what she believed were</sup> She ended by resisting both, but it <sup>racial</sup>  
kept her alert about things she did not wish to be alert about. <sup>character</sup>

Margaret's blue-if-it's-a-boy-blue eyes crinkled with  
laughter. "No, I mean the hair on her head. It was lovely.  
Who noticed her armpits?"

"I would like to stay well through dessert, ladies, if you  
please. Could we find another topic?!"



"Valerian, could you for once, just once . . . "

"Say," Jadine broke in. "What about Christmas? That's a topic we need to talk about. We haven't even begun to plan. Any guests?" She picked up the salad utensils from the bowl of many-colored greens Sydney held near her. "Oh, I meant to tell you, the von Brandts sent a note . . . "

"Brandt, Jade. Just plain Brandt. The 'von' is imaginary." Valerian <sup>said</sup> ~~watched specks of pepper floating down to his salad greens.~~

Insert attached → "Well anyway, they want you both for dinner. Small, she says. But the Hatchers are having a big weekend thing. And they want--" She paused for half a heartbeat. Their faces were closed, snapped shut like the lids of jewelry boxes. "They thought you'd like to come for the entire weekend. Christmas Eve, a dinner party; then breakfast, then some boating in the afternoon, then, then a cocktail party with dancing. The Journeymen from Queen of France are playing. Well, they're not really from there. New Jersey, I think, but they've been playing at Chez Marin--" She couldn't go on in that silence. "What's the matter, Margaret?"

"Let's go back to armpits," Margaret said.

The maiden aunts smiled and tossed their maiden aunt hair.

"We'll do nothing of the sort. You were saying, Jade?" Valerian drained his wine glass.



*Insert 47*

Margaret took hold of the long wooden handles poking out of the salad bowl that Sydney held toward her. Carefully she transferred the green to her plate. Nothing spilled. She took another helping and it arrived safely also. She sighed and was about to tell Jade to decline the Brandt's invitation when Valerian shouted "What the hell is the matter with you?"

Startled, Margaret looked around. He was glaring at her. Jade was looking at her plate while Sydney leaned near her wrist. What? she said "What?" looking down at her plate. It was all right, nothing spilled, nothing broken: lettuce, tomatoes, cucumber all there. Then Sydney set the bowl on the table and picked up the salad spoon and fork. She had left them on the table.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she whispered, but she was angry. What was so awful about that? They had looked at her as though she'd wet her pants. Then quickly they pretended it had not happened; Jade was chirping again.



"I don't have to sit here and listen to this. You're trying to ruin it for me, but you're not going to. I tear my life apart and come down here for the winter and all I ask in return is a normal Christmas that includes my son. You won't come to us--we have to come to you and it's not fair. You know it's not. This whole thing is getting to be too much!"

"Is that a problem for you? Having too much?"

"That's not what I mean."



"I know what you mean, but is it a problem for you? Because if it is I can arrange for less. I could certainly do with less myself. Less hysteria, less shouting, less drama . . . "

Jadine, unable to think of anything to do or say, <sup>and set about applying the principals of a survey course in psychology</sup> watched tomato seeds slide into the salad dressing. During the two months she'd been there, Valerian and Margaret frequently baited one another and each had a dictionary of complaints against the other, entries in which, from time to time, they showed her. ~~But she, from a combination of indifference and good manners, was able to sympathize with the injured party and condemn the injury without once slandering the injurer.~~ Just a May and December marriage, she thought, at its crucial stage. He's <sup>over</sup> almost seventy; she's <sup>KNOCKING</sup> close to fifty. He is waning, shutting up, closing in. She's blazing with the fire of a soon to be setting sun. Naturally they bickered at and taunted one another. <sup>Normally, even so. For they were decent people.</sup> Naturally. <sup>^</sup> Over and above their personal generosity to her and their solicitude for her uncle and aunt, they seemed decent. Decent like Sydney and Nanadine were decent and this house full of decent folk situated in the pure sea air was exactly where she wanted to be right now. This vacation with light but salaried work was what she needed to pull herself together. ~~Decide. Or decide not to decide.~~ Listening to Margaret and Valerian fight was a welcome distraction, just as playing daughter to Sydney and



rules so that they looked at each other under the tender light of a seventy year old chandelier, bought by Valerian's father in celebration of his wife's first pregnancy, lifted their lips and bared their teeth.

Insert  
attached

" . . . a sweet little man too," Margaret was saying. "Puerto Rican with those soft eyes and four little Puerto Rican children."

"I did not have him fired. I didn't hire him, so how could I fire him. He was dismissed because he was drunk every day. Morning, noon . . . "

"That's what you told the super, but the truth was Michael liked him and I liked him."

"He couldn't find the floors. He was always putting us out in the laundry room."

"I can still hear those kids. They cried all the time."

"Of course they cried all the time. Making do with a father completely stewed at nine o'clock in the morning would make any child cry."

"Yeah, sure. A clear-eyed sober father is what they needed. Like you. Then they wouldn't have the energy to cry. They'd be too busy starving to death after their sober father threw them out into the street and refused to support them."

"I beg your pardon. Is there some thirty-year old Harvard graduate related to me who is so helpless he



"...she never liked me," Margaret was saying. "From the very beginning she hated me."

"How could she hate you from the beginning? She didn't even know you." Valerian lowered his voice in an effort to calm her.

"That's what I'd like to know."

"She was perfectly polite and gracious to you in the beginning."

"She was awful to me, Valerian. Awful!"

"That was later when you wouldn't let Michael visit her."

"Wouldn't let? I couldn't make him go. He hated her; he'd shrink at the very..."

"Margaret, stick to the fact, Michael was two or three. He couldn't have hated anybody let alone his aunt."

"He did, and if you had any feelings you would have hated her too."

"My own sister?"

"Or at least told her off."

"For what, for God's sake. For having a private wedding instead of a circus?" You never invite them down here and she's prbbably set about it, that's all. And this is her way of...."

"Dear God. You have screamed at me for years for having too many people. Now you want me to invite Cissy and Frank. I don't believe..."



"I didn't say that. I don't want her here any more than you do. I am only trying to explain why they didn't let us know about the wedding. From what I gather..."

"What do you mean us? She invited Michael!" but not me!"

"Stacey's idea."

Do you think if Michael got married I would invite Stacey and not her parents?"

"Margaret I don't give one god damn..."

"She's always treated me that way. You know what she did to me the first day I met her."

"I suppose I should but I don't."

"You don't?"

"No. Sorry."

"What she said to me that first day?"

"It's been some time."

"About my cross?"

"Your what?"

"My cross. The cross I wore. My First Communion present. She said for me to take it off. That only whores wore crosses."

Valerian laughed. "That sounds like her."

"You think it's funny."

"In a way."

"That your own sister...My god."

"Margaret you didn't have to do it. Take it off. Why didn't you tell her to go to hell?"

"Why didn't you?"



"I don't remember."

"Because you agreed with her, that why."

"That my bride was a whore?"

"You know what I mean."

"All I know is that you let her get under your skin and she's still there after thirty years. You don't give a gnat's ass about the wedding. You just wanted to be anywhere Michael is. You can't stand for him to be wherever you're not."

"That's not true."

"You wanted to crash some fat-headed wedding because Michael was there. You are too stupid to live."

"I don't have to sit here and be called names.!"

"Idiot. I married an idiot!"

"And I married an old fool!."

"Of course you did. Who else but an old fool would marry a high school drop out off the back of a truck!"



can't find a way to feed himself?"

"There is a sensitive poet related to you who refuses to tow-kow, or play little power games, or . . . "

"Tow-kow? Tow-kow? I married an illiterate."

"And I married a decrepit, sexless old fool!"

There it was. The major chord, sounding in the silence: her education; his age. Too little of one, too much of the other. Jadine watched as Valerian raised his paw slowly and Margaret crouched. "Who else?" he purred. "Who else in God's universe would have married anybody off the back of a truck?"

"A float!" Margaret shouted and when the wine glass bounced from the centerpiece of calla lilies, and rolled toward him he didn't even look at it. He simply watched his wife's face crumple and her boy-blue eyes well up.

"Oh," said Jadine. "This is . . . maybe . . . Margaret? Would you like to . . . " But Margaret was gone leaving the oak door swinging behind her and the maiden aunts cowering in the corners of the room.

Sydney (unbidden but right on time) removed the glass and placed a fresh white napkin over the wine spot. Then he collected the salad plates replacing them with warm white china with a single band of gold around the edges. Each plate he handled with a spotlessly white napkin and was careful, as he slipped them from the blue quilted warmer, not to make a sound. When the plates were in position, he



disappeared for a few seconds and returned with a smoking souffle. He held it near Valerian a moment for inspection, and then proceeded to the sideboard to slice it into flawless, frothy wedges.

Jadine considered her souffle while Valerian signalled for more wine. It seemed a long time before he murmured to her "Sorry."

Jadine smiled or tried to and said, "You shouldn't tease her like that."

"No, I suppose not," he answered but his voice held no conviction and his twilight gaze was muddy.

"Is it because she wants to go away?" asked Jadine.

*Of course not.*  
"No. Not at all."

"Michael?"

"Yes. Michael."

He said nothing more so Jadine decided to exit as quickly as she could manage it. She was folding her napkin when suddenly he spoke, "She's nervous. Afraid he won't show. I'm nervous. Afraid he will."

There was another silence and Jadine said, "I remember Michael. He's . . . nice." She recalled an eighteen year old boy with yellow hair and cut off jeans.

"Quite," said Valerian. "Quite nice."

"If he does come, as well as his friend, how can it hurt?"

"I don't know. It depends."



disappeared for a few seconds and returned with a small  
bottle. He held it near Valerie's nose for inspection,  
and then proceeded to the cupboard to take it into the  
kitchen, to the window.

Valerie considered her bottle while Valerie remained  
for some time. It seemed a long time before he returned  
to her "sorry."

Valerie looked at the bottle and said, "You should have  
told me like that."  
"I'm sorry," he said, "I didn't know."  
"To say, I don't think of a thing  
So she gave up and said the above."

"No, I'm all right."  
"Michael?"  
"Yes, Michael."  
He said nothing more and Valerie decided to wait  
quietly as she could sense it. She was waiting for him  
when suddenly he spoke, "She's nervous. Always he was  
now. I'm nervous. Always he was."

There was another silence and Valerie said, "I remember  
Michael. He's . . . nice." She recalled an eighteen year  
old boy with yellow hair and out of focus.  
"Quite," said Valerie. "Quite nice."  
"If he does come, as well as his father, how can it

"I don't know. It depends."



"On what?"

"Things outside my control. I can't be responsible for things outside my control." He pushed away his plate and drank his wine.

Jadine sighed. She wanted to leave the table, but didn't know how. Does he want me to stay or doesn't he? *she wonders*  
Does he want me to talk or doesn't he? All I can do is ask polite questions and urge him to talk if he feels like it. *ask him my head*  
I should go to Margaret. I should change the subject. *amnesia*  
"No one asks you to be," she said softly. *for Cor*  
*her*

"That's not the point, whether I'm asked or not. A lot of life is outside and frequently it's the part that most needs control." He covered his lips with his napkin for a while then uncovered them and said, "Margaret thinks this is some sort of long lazy vacation for me, designed to hurt her. In fact I'm doing just the opposite. I intend to go back at some point. I will go back but actually it's for Michael that I stay. His protection."

"You make him sound weak, the way you say that. I don't remember him that way at all."

"You did know him, didn't you?" Valerian looked at her with surprise.

"Well, not really know him. I met him twice. The last time when you invited me to spend the summer in Orange County. Remember? *Jadine picked up, animated by her own memory*  
My first year at college? He was there



"Oh, I see. Not the Dark Ages, the Renaissance."

"It was a long time ago, Valerian. Eight years? Nine? He was just a kid then. So was I."

"You've grown. He hasn't. His vocabulary, perhaps, but not his mind. It's still in the grip of that quisling Little Prince. Do you know it?"

"Know what?"

"That book. The Little Prince."

"Saint-Exupery? No. I never read it."

"Read it some time. And pay attention not to what it says, but what it means."

Jadine nodded. It seemed like a perfect exit line to her, since she didn't know what he was talking about and didn't want to pursue his thoughts if they were anything like his eyes at this moment. Without melanin, they were all reflection, like mirrors, chamber after chamber, corridor after corridor of mirrors, each one taking its shape from the other and giving it back as its own until the final effect was color where no color existed at all. Once more she stirred to rise from the table and once more he stopped her, but not irritably this time but with compassion.

"Did they trouble you--the things he said that summer?"

"For a while."

"You knew better?"

"I knew the life I was leaving. It wasn't like what



artists in Europe however were a scandal. The only thing more pitiful than their talent were their pretentions. There was just one exception: a stateside Black whose work towered over the weeds like a Sequoia. But you could hardly find <sup>his stuff</sup> him anywhere.

"You look sad," said Valerian. "He must really have made you suffer. You should have mentioned it to me. I wanted that summer to be an especially pleasant one for you."

"It was. Actually it was good he made me think about myself that way, at that place. He might have convinced me if we'd had that talk on Morgan Street. But in Orange County on 120 acres of green velvet?" she laughed softly. "Can you believe it? He wanted us to go back to Morgan Street and be thrilling."

"Us? He was going with you?"

"Just to get us started. He meant us blacks: Sydney, Ondine and me."

<sup>turned his gaze toward his butler and</sup>  
 "Sydney? A potter?" Valerian laughed and Jadine <sup>smiled but not looking at her</sup>  
~~joined him.~~

<sup>¶</sup> "You can see how much he knows about Sydney."  
~~As quickly as it had come, his humor left him.~~ "And I haven't given you one thousandth of what I gave him, of what I made available to him. And you have fifty times the sense he does, I don't mind telling you." Valerian's sentences changed tempo. They were slower, and it was taking him longer to blink his eyes. "Margaret did that."



She made him think poetry was incompatible with property. She made a perpetual loser of one of the most beautiful, the brightest boy in the land." He held his forehead for a moment. To Jadine he seemed terribly close to tears and she was relieved when he merely repeated himself. "The most beautiful, the brightest boy in the land."

"He didn't turn out the way you wanted?"

"No."

"You want him to be something else?"

"I want him to be something at all."

"Maybe he is."

"Yes. An adolescent. A kitten. But not playful. Complaining. A complaining kitten. Always mewling. Meow. Meow. Meow."

"You shouldn't hate him, though. He's your son."

Valerian took his hand from his forehead and stared deep into the peaches nestled in their silver bowl. "I don't hate him. I love him. <sup>Margaret thinks</sup> ~~I know it seems as if I don't.~~ But I do. <sup>I think about him all the time.</sup> You know . . . this isn't going to sound right . . . <sup>but</sup> I never was convinced that she did. Perhaps she did. In her way. I don't know. But she wasn't ready for him. She just wasn't ready. Now, now she's ready. When it's over. Now she wants to bake him cookies. See him off to school. Tie his shoelaces. Take care of him. Now. Absurd. I don't believe it. I don't believe her. When he was just a little thing ~~we lived in a large apartment in the heart of the city.~~ My



~~mother was still alive then in the house you know.~~ I came home one day and went into the bathroom. I was standing there and I heard this humming--singing--coming from somewhere in the room. I looked around and then I found it. In the cabinet. Under the sink. He was crouched in there singing. That was the first time, but not the last. Every now and then I'd come home. He'd be under the sink. Humming to himself. When I'd pull him out, ask him what he was doing there, he'd say he liked the soft. He was two, I think, two years old, looking in the dark ~~dirty clothes~~ for something--soft. Now imagine how many soft, cuddly things he had in his room? Bunny rabbits, slippers, panda bears. I used to try to be it for him, but I wasn't there during the day. She was though. I sometimes had the feeling that she didn't talk to him very much, then it would go away. The feeling, I mean. She'd change, she'd get interested in him, read to him, take him to shows, parks. Months would pass. Then I'd come home and he'd be under the sink again, humming that little--I can't tell you how--lonely, lonely song. I wasn't imagining it, it was lonely. Well, he got older and she'd go hot and cold, in and out. But he seemed to miss her so, need her so that when she was attentive he was like a slave to her. Then she'd lose interest again. When he was twelve he went to boarding school and things were better. Until he came to visit. She would do things--odd things, to get his attention and keep it. Anything to keep his eyes on her.



She'd make up things, threats to herself, attacks, insults-- anything to see him fly into a rage and show how willing he was to defend her. I watched, and tried to play it down or prove prove she was making it up. I always checked, it was always nothing. All I ~~did~~ <sup>ended up doing</sup> was make him angry with me. I thought another child--but she said no. Absolutely refused. I have until this day never understood that. When he left for college I was relieved. It was already too late, but I still hoped he'd get out from under her. In a way he has, I suppose. Never visits, seldom writes. Calls sometimes. Complains. About Indians. About water. About chemicals. Meow. Meow. Meow. But he is on his own, I guess. On his own. But now" Valerian turned to Jadine and stared right at her chin. "Now she wants to get hold of him again. Tempting him with some fake poet. And she wants to go back with him, live near him. For a while she says. Know what that means? A 'while?' It means as soon as he trusts her again, needs her again, counts on her, she'll change her mind, leave him. ~~And he'll go looking for another hamper. The world is full of hampers.~~ I haven't seen him for three years, and the last couple of times I didn't like him, or even know him. But I loved him. Just like I loved the boy under the sink, humming. That beautiful boy. With a smile like . . . like Sunday."

The maiden aunts, huddled in the corners of the room, were smiling in their sleep. <sup>Insert attached</sup> ~~Jadine~~ <sup>She</sup> played with the little



Insert p. 93

Judine

She flared her nostrils in an effort not to yawn. Another cup of coffee, another glass of port--nothing could bring her alive to the memories of an old man. I ought to be saying something, she thought. I ought to be asking questions and making comments instead of smiling and nodding like a puppet. ~~Still~~, <sup>a residue of</sup> hoping there was interest in her eyes, she held her chin toward him and continued to smile--but only a little-- in case what he was remembering was poignant but not happy. Long ago she had given up trying to be deft or profound or anything ~~but sleepily animated~~ <sup>who didn't thrill her</sup> in the company of people she was not interested in. She drank the last of the port knowing that whatever he was saying, her response was going to miss the point entirely. Her mind was in automatic park, ~~a hangover from grade school where she could not think or remember or even speak in the class of a teacher who bored her.~~ But she glittered in the presence of one who did not. It was a habit painful to cure, <sup>and</sup> ~~but she did it in schools, but it was too hard to do it elsewhere.~~ 80



everything looked the same. Only the Emperor butterflies  
 appeared excited about something. Such vigorous flapping  
 in blazing heat was uncommon for them. They hovered near  
 the bedroom windows but the shutters had remained closed  
 all morning and none of them could see a thing. They knew,  
 however, that the woman was in there, and what they would  
 have seen was the perspiring woman up to her neck in her  
 sheet. Her blue-if-it's-a-boy blue eyes <sup>Insert</sup> slowly examining  
 the room she had taken refuge in as though she had never  
 seen it before but now that she had, now that the breakfast  
 rain was over and cleaned light filtered through the  
 shutters she was amazed to discover how much like the  
 trailer it was. Full circle, she thought, I have come full  
 circle. The trailer had been like this <sup>room.</sup> All economy and  
 parallel lines. All secret storage and uncluttered surfaces.  
<sup>South Suzanne's</sup> Her idea of luxury back then had been the antique-stuffed  
 houses of old Bangor families: blue bottles, and white  
 mouldings, soft yellow wallpaper and re-covered Federal  
 chairs. <sup>But Margaret loved the trailer best and</sup> <sup>NON-Catholic</sup> When she married the older man <sup>over the objections</sup>  
 of her parents and moved to Philadelphia, <sup>it was years together of the after</sup> she found it all  
<sup>that she had</sup> exactly as she had dreamed for a while; and now <sup>it</sup> he'd left the  
 states, for a winter, he said three years ago and put her in  
 this room that was "sculpted" he said, not decorated, that  
 for all its Meis <sup>a</sup> Ven der Rohe and Max whatever reminded her  
 of the trailer in the South Susanne <sup>e</sup> Mobile Home Park where  
 she had been the envy of her girlfriends for the first dozen



eyes red-rimmed with longing for a trailer softened by Columbine and  
for her Ma. Leonora, the daily communicant; Leonora whose head  
was covered at mass with lace older than Maine itself, who  
~~refused~~ at sixty folded away her stockings and from then on  
wore white socks with the black cuban-heeled oxfords. Sweet,  
darling socks out of which grew strong, wide legs that had never  
been crossed at the knees.

I have come full circle, Ma, thought Margaret



years of her life and was fourteen before she discovered  
 that everybody in South Susanne <sup>had</sup> ~~did~~ <sup>ed</sup> not share that envy.  
 Did not think the little toilet was cute, or the way the  
 tables folded down and beds became sofas was really neat  
 like having your own doll house to live in. And when she  
 did discover that most people thought ~~living~~ in a trailer  
 was tacky, it might have crushed the life out of her except  
 that she discovered at the same time that all of South  
 Susanne was overwhelmed by her astonishing good looks. She  
 agreed, finally, with their evaluation, but it didn't help  
 much because it meant she had to be extra nice to other  
 girls to keep them from getting mad at her. It meant having  
 teachers go fuzzy in her presence (the men with glee, the  
 women with distrust), fighting off cousins in cars, dentists  
 in chairs and feeling apologetic to every woman over thirty.  
~~except her mother who thought her beauty was a gift from God~~  
~~and not a sin as she first suspected because she found out~~  
~~that at sixteen she could win hands down with her good~~  
~~looks. Margaret was relieved then, to think of it as a~~  
~~commodity rather like a talent for playing the piano which~~  
~~had value and gave pleasure to other people.~~ Privately she  
 neither valued it or enjoyed it and before she could learn  
 to use it properly, she met an older man who <sup>was Never</sup> ~~not only wasn't~~  
 fuzzy in her presence, <sup>I</sup> ~~but also protected her from cousins,~~  
~~dentists and malevolent nuns.~~ And it was that, not his  
 money that comforted her and made her feel of consequence



Insert  
p 101

That was almost the first thing he said to her: "You really are beautiful," like it could have been fake like the float but wasn't. And she smiled because he seemed surprised. "Is that enough?" she asked and it was the first honest response she had every made to a male compliment. "Beauty is never enough," he said. "But you are." The safety she heard in his voice was in his nice square fingernails too.



under the beauty, back down beneath it where her Margaret-hood lay in the same cup it had always lain in--faceless, silent and trying like hell to please. And she did please her new husband who took her beauty for granted at least at first he did or seemed to. So she forgot about it completely and began to relax enough to have a baby at which point, to her great surprise, her husband got interested in it, and began telling her what to wear and why and what to eat and when and she complied as best she could but it was getting harder and harder to spend her days in permanent pursuit of a look that had been effortless before. The faceless, silent person in the cup was abandoned and confusion reigned in place of comfort, making her alert to every crooked smile and snide remark around her regardless of whether it was addressed to her or not. Little by little she began to yearn for the forthrightness of a cousin or an old fashioned ~~wrestle with a dentist.~~ Even to yearn for the trailer so far from Philadelphia and L'Arbe de la Croix but maybe not so far after all since the bedroom she had locked herself into was a high class duplication, minus the coziness, of the first.

Margaret Lenore stared into the spaces and thought desperately of coffee, but she did not want to ring up Sydney or Ondine, for that would begin the day that she was not sure she wanted to participate in. She had had no sleep to speak of, and now, drained of panic, wavering between



anger and sorrow, she lay in bed. Once again she had wakened thinking that there was some dream she was not dreaming. Some dream she ought to be having, but wasn't. I keep coming close, she thought, but I never quite dream it. She let the tail of the dream she had not dreamed slip away and tried to clear her head. Things were getting better. She was getting better. She could feel it and right smack in the middle of it, with Michael on his way, this had to happen: literally, literally a nigger in the woodpile. And of course Valerian had to think up something to shock everybody and actually ask him to dinner. A stranger who was found hiding in his own wife's closet, a bum that even Sydney wanted to shoot, he invited to dinner while she was shaking like a leaf on the floor. In her closet. The end, the living end, but as disgusting as that was, it wasn't as bad as Valerian's insult that it was okay for him to be there. And if it weren't for the fact that Michael was coming, she would pack up that very day and really leave him this time. And Valerian knew that, knew he could get away with it, because Michael's Christmas visit was so important to her and would keep her from leaving. ~~Now she was in bed--again--unable to face a day that required solutions--none of which she could arrive at and none of which Valerian would arrive at in accordance with anybody's desires but his own.~~ Now he was playing that boring music in the greenhouse. *as though nothing had happened.* She was so hungry and coffee-starved



but she couldn't start things off just yet. And Jade hadn't knocked at all.

Usually when Margaret overslept Jade woke her with a smile, some funny piece of mail or an exciting advertisement. She would sink her cup of chocolate into Margaret's carpet (there were no endtables in the chic sparse sculpture) and they would begin the day with some high-spirited girlish nonsense.

"Look. Chloe has four new perfumes. Four."

"I think Mr. Brougham's lover has gone; you have been invited to dinner. You'd better go, 'cause I think her mistress is due to visit them soon. Have you seen the three of them eating together? Ondine says the cook over there said it makes her sick."

~~On and one with chatter that helped her greet another day on that awful island. That was one of the nice things Valerian did. When he told her about this niece of his servants who had no parents and that he was sending her to a private school--she was pleased, even proud of him. The occasional holiday visits from this girl were awkward and uninteresting, but now she was grown up, smart, and a lot of fun.~~

She didn't know how the dinner went. Did Jade stay? When did the man leave? She lifted her hand to press a button. Then changed her mind. Maybe the man killed everybody, and she alone escaped because she had run up to



Long ago when Jade used to come for holiday  
visits, Margaret found her awkward and poorly,  
but now that she was grown up, she was pretty and a  
lot of fun. Well, all those colleges hadn't made  
her uppity and she was not at all the Mother  
Superior kind. Jade had become.



her room and locked herself in. No. If he had, the boring music would not be going. God. Maybe he will come back and do it later; kill Valerian, kill Sydney, rape Ondine, Jade and herself and then she could turn that music off forever and flush her megavitamins down the toilet and eat what she liked. The three of them could live happily ever after. He would fall in love with Jade; Jade would lead him on then dump him and then they could travel and shop and flirt and eat without criticism and tell Michael to stay home and enjoy himself. No. Jade would not allow her to get out of shape. She would rivet her model's keen eyes on every gram of excess weight, every cellulite, every crease. ("But when I sit down? Even then? Isn't there supposed to be a crease there?"

"Yes, but just one. One. Not three and no waves or hills. The only fat I ever eat is chocolate and the glycerine of my vitamin capsules."

"But what about my rear? It's too flat if I lose weight."

"Don't worry about it."

"Why don't colored I mean black women have flat behinds?"

"Kicking builds muscles, and we've been kicked a lot back there."

"And breasts? They have such large breasts. That's not from kicking is it?"

"No. That's from hanging. Everybody hanging on.")

Margaret smiled. She and Jade had a lot in common. Both



Inset  
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And what could they do to stop him? All the neighbors would have to be told that a Black man had been roaming around, and it could happen again. They would have to share security and keep in touch with each other. Each house could post one of the help so that around the clock some one was on guard. She wouldn't mention Valerian's feeding him dinner first and trying to make her stay there and watch him eat it. The neighbors would think he was crazy and blame him for whatever the burgler did. Maybe he was already in jail. He couldn't have gotten off the island last night, but, early in the morning she'd heard the jeep take off and return. Sydney probably drive him the to launch where harbor police shackled him. In any case, she wasn't going to pretend what Valerian did was Okay by her. He hadn't even bothered to come in and explain, let alone apologize to her. Just as he never bothered to explain why he wouldn't go back to the States. He really expected her to steam in that jungle, knowing as he did what heat and sun and wind did to her skin. Knowing that after Maine even Philadelphia was the torrid zone for her. That her arms went pimento with even a little sun and her back burst into pebbles. Still he stayed in this place she had never enjoyed except when Michael was younger and they all vacationed there. Now it was a boiling graveyard made bearable--just bearable--by Jade's company, shopping in Queen of France, and lunches with the neighbors. She would never get through Christmas here without Michael. Never. Already the confusion was coming back. The salad things last night for instance, and earlier at breakfast. But with Michael around she never forgot the names and uses of things.



~~were born poor; both had fallen into money and leisure by accident; both had had to defend themselves against men; both had "made it" so to speak on their looks. Jade was like the colored girl in the seventh grade. Dorcus. A cut-up, she kept the class in stitches; tears would run from their eyes at Dorcus' antics. God, she was funny. Silly, probably, but they all were and everything was so funny then and so innocent and so far far away. Everybody changed after the seventh grade, even Dorcus, she supposed.~~

Margaret Street closed her eyes and turned over on her stomach although she knew she would not sleep again. All night she'd ~~lain awake petrified with fear without even a cup of coffee or a piece of candy to soothe her; glancing at her closet door where she had gone to find the poem just to make sure Valerian was making fun of her and that there really was the line "and he glittered when he walked" in the poem Bridges had dedicated to Michael~~ <sup>Michael had</sup> ~~and/given to her.~~ It was a walk-in closet with dressing room separate from wardrobe and a tiny storage niche at the very back where she kept things and in there right among all her most private stuff she saw him sitting on the floor as calm as you please and as filthy as could be. He looked at her but never moved and it seemed like hours before she could back out and hours more before she could make sound come from her open mouth and how she got down the stairs she would never in this world know but when she did it was like a dream with them



looking at her but not looking as though they believed her and Valerian was worst of all sitting there like some lord or priest who doubted her confession, the completeness of it, and let her know with his eyes that she'd left something important out. She had lain there all night with the lights on thinking of her closet as a toilet now where something rotten had been and still was. Only at dawn did she slip into a light and unrefreshing sleep not dreaming something she was supposed to be dreaming. She was exhausted when she woke but, as night disappeared, so did her fear. Among the many things she felt, anger was the most consistent but even that kept sliding away as her thoughts, unharnessed, turned sorrowful and galloped <sup>back to Leonora and a trailer sunk</sup> ~~over familiar fields.~~ <sup>Columb</sup>

It was getting unbearably hot but she would not toss aside the sheet. Her door was locked. Jade would come soon to see about her. Valerian could do what he wished. She herself would not budge. In her things. Actually in her things. Probably jerking off. Black sperm was sticking in clots to her French jeans or down in the toe of her Anne Klein shoes. Didn't men sometimes jerk off in women's shoes? She'd have the whole closetfull cleaned. Or better still, she'd throw them all out and buy everything new--from scratch. What a louse Valerian was. What a first class louse. Wait till Michael hears about it. Just wait. And then she was crying about the night she won the beauty contest in a strapless gown that her mother had to borrow money from Uncle



Adolph for and a gold cross that she always wore until her sister in law ~~laughed and took her to the powder room and~~ told her only whores wore crosses. The bitch. She lay there wiping teary cheeks with the top hem of a Vera sheet. There was nothing the cool sculptured spaces could do to keep her from forgetting the fact that she was almost fifty sitting on a hill in the middle of a jungle in the middle of the ocean where the temperature was on broil and not even a TV with anything on it she could understand and where her husband was punishing her <sup>for forgetting to put the salad things</sup> and there was no one to talk to except Jade and where her sex life had become such a wreck it was downright interesting. And if that wasn't enough now this nigger he lets in this real live dope addict ape just to get back at her wanting to live near Michael. "We'll see about that," she said, "just wait till Michael comes." She whispered so nobody would hear and nobody did not even the Emperor butterflies. They were clinging to the windows of another bedroom trying to see for themselves what the <sup>angel trumpets</sup> ~~gardenias down below~~ had described to them: the hides of ninety baby seals stitched together so nicely you could not tell what part had sheltered their cute little hearts and which had cushioned their skulls. <sup>they</sup> ~~The~~ gardenias had not seen the coat at all but a few days ago a bunch of them had heard the woman called Jade telling the woman called Margaret all about it. The butterflies didn't believe it and went to see for themselves. Sure enough, there it



the braids crossed like two silver machetes on her head caught them chatting in the wash house or in the garden behind, she would fly into a rage and her machetes would glitter and clang on her head. The silence was why she often brought Alma, and although the girl's chatter was so young it made her head ache, it was better than listening to soldier ants trying one more time to enter the greenhouse and being thwarted as usual by the muslim dipped in poison and taped to the door sill.

She was sorry Alma could not come today. Gideon and she had a bet on how long the chocolate eater could last. Gideon said "long as he wants. Till New Year," while she said "No. The chocolate eater's heart would betray him-- not his mind or stomach." And on Saturday as they rowed back to Queen of France she raised the bet to 150,000 francs instead of the 100,000 she began with. She laughed and spat in the sea as she raised him, so confident was she. For she had seen<sup>evidence of</sup> the man who ate chocolate (in the wash house, in the trees, in the gazebo, down by the pond, in the tool shed, near the greenhouse). And it was he who brought the soldier ants onto the property with his trail of foil paper containing flecks of chocolate that the ants loved and sought vigorously. Wet and naked she had seen him in a dream smiling at her as he rode away on a stallion. So she knew he was in agreement with her and any day now he would be discovered or reveal himself.



said. "Just one of them little ones, like he got out in the greenhouse. Plug it up right there . . . "

"Talk, man. Stop going on about a frig."

"Wouldn't you like a little cold beer or chilled wine from time to time?"

"Cold beer?" She looked at him in amazement. "That country ruined you, man. Stop fooling with me. Where did you see him?"

"In the window. Her window."

*He took the chicken head and from his shirt and wrapped in newspaper.*

"Doing what?"

"Looking. Just looking. A sheet or something wrapped around him, but bare naked on top."

"Did he see you see him?"

"No. Don't think so. I pretended I was taking off my cap to scratch my head and looking off up in the trees."

"He didn't do anything? Move?"

"Nope. Just looked around. Then I turned and walked back away."

"Alone? Was she with him?"

"Can't say. But it was in her room. Get what I mean? And I saw her up there <sup>before</sup> ~~too~~ naked as a worm when I was fixing to put up the tree. She jumped back, but didn't do no good. She don't know I got eyes in the top of my head. Then next, about a hour or so later, there he was. Naked too, almost. Just a piece of white stuff around his waist. You reckon they got it on?" He had stopped trying to be disinterested



appeared in 1963 with twelve apples hidden in the lining of his electric blue leisure suit which Therese's friends at customs noticed but for two dollars US ignored <sup>M</sup>her gratitude was so complete he didn't get on the next plane back as he threatened. After all he hadn't left much: just US citizenship, the advantage of which was the ability to send an occasional ten dollar money order, buy a leisure suit and watch TV. Most of the friends of his youth had immigrated to France, but the stories of their lives there were so heart-breaking, he'd chosen Quebec instead although he had to wait until he was twenty two for a visa and then he arrived in the coatpocket so to speak of a Canadian farmer. And two years later, by much subterfuge (including marriage to an American Negro) got into the States where money orders, leisure suits and TV abounded. <sup>Now that he'd come back</sup> What was there to do but build a new roof after each hurricane, find a little work, and wait for carnival? At first he was ashamed before his family and friends. Just as Therese had lied to him, so had he lied to her about the wealth he had accumulated in the States. Now there he was for all the world to see building another temporary roof, looking for tourist tips, eyeing women at the bars--just like before. With no suitcase of American dollars. Just twelve apples and a leisure suit. Humiliating. Who but an ass would go back to Dominique with no more than what he had when he left? Those who wished desperately to come back (from France, Quebec, New York City



back inside to get a mop handle to run the males off and crack the bitch over the back and send her home, she who had done nothing but be "in heat" which she couldn't help but which was her fault just the same so it was she who was beaten and cracked over the head and spine with the mop handle and made to run away and I felt sorry for her and went looking for her to see if she was hurt and when I found her she was behind the gas station standing very quietly while another dog sniffed her ass embarrassing me in the sunlight.

*Insert attached* → "Tell him," he said. "Tell him anything but don't tell him I smelled you because then he would understand that there was something in you to smell and that I smelled it and if Valerian understands that then he will understand everything and even if he makes me go away he will still know that there is something in you to be smelled which I have discovered and smelled myself. And no sealskin coat or million dollar earrings can disguise it."

You son of a bitch I need this like a wart. I came here to get some rest and have some peace and find out if I really wanted to kick my legs up on a runway and let buyers with Binaca breath lick my ears or if I wanted to roam around Europe instead, following soccer games for the rest of my life and looking for another Bezzi or if I should buy an Alpha and drive through Rome making the scene where producers and agents can see me and say Cara mia is it really you I



Q All around her it was like that: a fast crack on the head if you  
let the hunger show so in Baltimore never  
And she decided then and there at the age of twelve ~~not~~ to be  
broken in the hands of any man. Whatever it took--knife blades  
or screaming teeth--Never. And yes, she would tap dance, and yes  
she would skate, but she would do it with a frown, pugnacious  
lips and scary eyes because Never. And anybody who wanted nice  
from this little colored girl would have to get it with pliers  
and chloroform, because Never. When her mother died and she went  
to Philadelphia~~ore~~ and then away to school, she was so quick to  
learn, but no touchee, teacher, and no I do not smile because  
Never. It smoothed out a little as she grew older. The pugnacious  
lips became a seductive pout--eyes more heated than scary. But  
beneath the easy manners was a claw always ready to rein in the  
dogs, because Never.



knew wanted what she wanted--either steadily and carefully like Sydney and Ondine or uproariously and flashily like theater or media types. But whatever their scam, "making it" was on their mind and they played the game with house cards, each deck issued and dealt by the house. With white people the rules were even simpler. She needed only to be stunning, and to convince them she was not as smart as they were. Say the obvious, ask stupid questions, laugh with abandon, look interested, and light up at any display of their humanity if they showed it. Most of it required only charm--occasionally panache. None of it called for this . . . this . . .

<sup>Oh</sup>  
 "Horse shit!" she said aloud. It couldn't be worth all this rumination and she stood up. The avocado tree standing by the side of the road heard her and, having really seen a horse's shit, thought she had probably mis-used the word. Jadine dusted off the back of her skirt and walked back toward the house. The avocado tree watched her go then folded its leaves tightly over its fruit. When she got near the greenhouse she thought she saw two figures ~~inside~~ behind the translucent ~~plastic~~ panes. One was gesticulating wildly. Her heart pounding she raced to the <sup>peeped in</sup> ~~open~~ door and ~~yanked it open~~. There they were. Valerian and the man, both laughing to beat the band.



## Five

"Laughing?" Margaret could not believe her ears.

"I'm telling you! They were in there laughing! I ~~was going to break the door down~~ <sup>looking right at them</sup> when you called out of the window."

"Good God. What's gotten into him?"

"I don't know."

"Are you scared?"

"Not really. Well, sort of."

"You don't know him, do you?"

"Know him. How would I know him?"

"I don't know. ~~I'm thinking like a crazy woman.~~ <sup>This is making me crazy.</sup> Maybe we should do something."

"What? We're the only women. And Ondine. Should I go to the Broughton's and . . . ." Jadine stopped and sat down on Margaret's bed. She shook her head "This is too much."

"What did he say?" asked Margaret. "When you all had dinner? Did he say what he was doing here?"

"Oh, he said he was hiding. That he'd been looking for food after he jumped ship a few days ago. That he was trying to get something out of the kitchen and heard footsteps and



ran up the stairs to hide. Apparently he didn't know what room he went into, he was just waiting for a chance to get back out."

"Do you believe him?"

"I believe some of it. I mean I don't believe he came here to rape you." (Me, maybe, she thought, but not you.)

"How did he get here?"

*That's impossible."* "He says he swam."

*It's what he said."* "Well then he can swim back. Now. Today. I'm not going to sleep with him in this house. If I had known that I would have had a heart attack. All night I waited for that bastard Valerian to come up here and tell me what the hell was going on. He never showed."

"And Sydney was patrolling the halls with a gun. I thought he would have killed him by now."

"What does he think?"

"He's angry. Ondine's scared, I think."

"I'm going to have it out with Valerian. He's doing this just to ruin Christmas for me. Michael's coming and he knows I want everything right for him, and look what he does to get me upset. Instead of throwing that that . . . "

"Nigger."

"Right, nigger, instead of throwing him right out of here."

"Maybe we're making something out of nothing."

"Jade. He was in my closet. He had my box of souvenirs



Rinsing his mouth he noticed blood. He was bleeding from the gums. He unscrewed the cap from a bottle of Listerine with instructions in French on the label and gargled. Finally he wrapped a white towel around his waist. He noticed another door in the bathroom and opened it with the easy familiarity of some one who has been there before. It led to a dressing room within an alcove in which stood a table and a mirror circled by lights. Further along were dresses, shelves of shoe boxes, luggage, and a narrow lingerie chest. On a tiny chair lay shorts and a white tennis visor. The smell of perfume nauseated him--he had not eaten since the gobbling of cold souffle and peaches the night before. He picked a robe, returned to the bathroom, urinated and stooped to pick up the pajamas, damp and bunched up on the floor, but changed his mind, left them there and walked back through the bedroom. The breeze from the open window was sweet and he went to it and stood looking out.

They are frightened, he thought. All but the old man. The old man knows that whatever I jumped ship for it wasn't because I wanted to rape a woman. Women were not on his mind and however ~~bad~~ (strange) it looked, he had not followed the women. He didn't even see them properly. When the boat docked, he stayed in the closet. Their voices were ~~as~~ light, ~~monosyllabic~~ <sup>ing</sup> as their feet pattered on the dock and when he went, at last, to look, all he saw was two slim-backed women floating behind the beam of a hand lamp toward



flicking the cyclamen stems and smiled first to himself and then at Valerian. "Did you ever hear the one about the three colored whores who went to heaven?"

"No," said Valerian. "Tell me." And he did and it was a good joke. Very funny and when Jadine ran to the greenhouse certain the noise coming from it was somebody murdering somebody she heard laughter to beat the band.

Sydney had put some of his boss's old clothes in the guest room for him, and Valerian sent him off with Gideon to get a haircut, because Sydney refused flat out to ~~do~~<sup>cut</sup> it. Valerian half expected the man would get into town and not return, since he had given him enough money to buy some underwear and some shoes that fit him better than his did. While Valerian had dinner alone that night served by a silent steeping butler, and while Margaret pouted in her room and Jadine ate with Ondine in the kitchen, Mr. Green alias Son drifted off with Gideon and Therese in the Prix de France. <sup>With country people's pride in a come-from-far</sup> ~~They were as happy as a~~ <sup>que</sup> ~~and~~ <sup>to Place de Vent</sup> paraded the American Negro through the streets of town like a king. Gideon even got one of his friends to give them a free taxi ride to the outskirts of town, and then they had to walk and walk and walk up into the hills <sup>to Place de Vent</sup> before they reached the powder pink house where he lived with Therese



sight so long she didn't remember herself when she started to go blind.

Son asked who were the blind race so Gideon told him a story about a race of blind people descended from some slaves who went blind the minute they saw Dominique. A fishermen's tale, he said. The island where the rich Americans lived is named for them, he said. Their ship floundered and sank with Frenchmen, horses and slaves aboard. The blinded slaves could not see how or where to swim so they were at the mercy of the current and the tide. They floated and tread water and ended up on that island along with the horses that had swum ashore. Some of them were only partially blinded and were rescued later by the French, and returned to Queen of France and indenture. The others, totally blind, hid. The ones who came back had children who, as they got on into middle age, went blind too. What they saw, they saw with the eye of the mind, and that, of course, was not to be trusted. Therese, he said, was one such. He himself was not, since <sup>his mother and</sup> ~~Therese~~ <sup>had different father</sup> ~~was his~~ ~~mother's brother's wife.~~

Son felt dizzy. The cheap rum and the story together made his head light.

"What happened to the ones who hid on the island? Were they ever caught?"

<sup>No, Ma'am</sup>  
"Still there," said Gideon. "They ride those horses



Jadine apparently did now--that he was harmless. At any rate, he was not sleeping upstairs, she'd been informed by Jadine, nor eating with them and maybe Michael would enjoy him if he was still on the property then. Especially if B.J. didn't show. The travel agency said the ticket had not yet been picked up yet. She tried to hang on to her despair about Valerian, but it was hopeless. He was tickled to death by the sight of four cyclamen blossoms, so happy he was considering putting down mirrors for the ants. He'd gone around all morning beating up other plants, especially his miniature orange trees which had come with no blossoms or fruit. He had even drafted a letter to the consulate asking whether a B class visa could be arranged for a local employee of his. And he spoke of Michael's visit as though it were a reality.

They were amiable that evening. Relaxed, like high jumpers after the arch had cleared the pole. Valerian cracked jokes that were not funny back in the fifties. Margaret chattered and thought up extra niceties for the holidays and ended by insisting that she would cook the Christmas dinner herself. It was to be a really old-fashioned Christmas, and that required the woman of the house to be bustling in the kitchen with an apron making turkey and apple pies. Valerian should call the consulate. They would have some apples, they always got American produce. Valerian said she'd never made a crust in her life and he wasn't looking forward to an ex-



periment at Christmas. But Margaret wouldn't listen. She was hyper and happy: Michael was on his way. Valerian thought she had gone hog wild this time--but her cheer cheered him and he encouraged rather than spoiled it.

The quiet amiableness lasted the whole evening and there was rest in everybody's sleep that night. Except Son's. He was swinging in a hammock outside in the night wind with that woman on his mind. He had managed a face for everybody but her. The others were seduced by the Hickey Freeman suit and the hair cut but she was not and neither was he. Not seduced at all. He did not always know who he was, but he always knew what he was like.

The soldier ants were not out in the nightwind, neither were the bees. But heavy clouds grouped themselves behind the hills as though for a parade. You could almost see the herd assemble but the man swinging in the hammock was not aware of them. He was dwelling on his solitude, rocking in the wind, adrift. A man without human rites: unbaptized, uncircumcized, minus puberty rites or the formal rites of manhood. Unmarried and undivorced. He had attended no funeral, married in no church, raised no child. Property-less, homeless, sought for but not after. There were no grades given in his school, so how could he know when he had passed? But he had chosen it--opted for it when everybody else had long ago surrendered because he never wanted to live in the world that way. There was something wrong

sent  
attached



with the rites. He wanted another way. Some other way of being in the world he felt leaving him when he stood in the white towel watching Yardman's--Gideon's--back. There was something loose in him, like the ball that looped around the roulette wheel, carried as much by its own weight as by the force of the wheel. A looseness that had begun to frighten him, made him want to go home, make him jump ship without a thought as soon as got into that part of the world again. There weren't going to be any lions or water-buffalo; no mating dance, no trophies. There was dice instead of tusk; a job when he wanted a journey. And no fraternity at all. On the ocean and in lock-ups he looked for it; in tiny bars and shape-up halls he looked for it and could never remember not looking for it, needing it and since he could not live without it, he had to go where he knew it was--home. He wanted to go home, but that woman was on his mind. The one whose dreams he had tried to change and whom he had insulted to keep her unhinging beauty from afflicting him and keeping him away from home.

She is on my mind, he thought, but I am not on hers. What must it be like to be on her mind, and he guessed the only way to know was to find out, so he asked her the next morning if she would like to eat lunch with him down on the beach and she said "sure. I want to sketch down there before I go." It surprised him into awkwardness and the word 'go' sent a tremor through him, exacerbating the



He used to want to go down in blue water, down, down, then to rise and burst from the waves to see before him a single hard surface, a heavy thing, but intricate. He would enclose it, conquer it for he knew his power then. And it was perhaps because the world knew it too that it did not consider him able. And knowing the power and the judgment secluded him, made him unilateral.

ent 222 And the lion he believed was exclusive to his past was frozen in stone (can you beat it?) in front of the New York Public Library in a city that laughed at his uniform. Like an Indian seeing his profile diminished on a five cent piece, he saw the things he imagined to be his including his own reflection mocked. Appropriated, marketed and trivialized into decor. Now he craves the last thing left to him - fraternity.



awkwardness. She was getting ready to leave? Go somewhere?

They took the Wilys and she drove, saying almost nothing. She sat quietly under the wheel in an expertly crushed white cotton halter and a wide, wide skirt that rich people called 'peasant' and peasants called 'wedding.' Her skin damp and glowing against the Easter white cotton--all temptation and dare.

When they got to the dock and parked, she jumped out with her sketch pad and box of pencils. He followed her with the basket for she was leading the way--making little prints in the hard packed sand. They walked about half a mile to a bend of good clean sand and a clump of pineapple palms. They sat down and she took off her canvas shoes. It was after they ate that carelessly assembled, hurriedly packed lunch that she seemed really aware of him but only because she was opening her sketch pad and fiddling with the wooden box of pencils. She examined him then with an intent but distant eye and asked him a casual question which he answered by saying "My original dime. That's all I want. My original dime." The sun was hiding from them and the mosquitoes were held off by a burning can of commercial repellent. The olives, French bread, uncuttable cheese, ham slices, jar of black mushy cherries and wine left them both as hungry as they were when they started.

It was a deliberately unappetizing lunch which she had literally dumped into a beautiful brown and purple Haitian



## Six

Eureka! <sup>and</sup> Even the goddamn hydrangea had bloomed!

Christmas Eve's eve, The whole island was vomiting up color like a drunk and here in the corner, in plastic filtered light, was one spot of sane, refined mauve. Valerian sprayed it with water and aerated the soil around the stem. "Merry Christmas," he said and toasted the shy violet buds with his wine glass. Maybe Margaret was right: this would be a warm and memorable Christmas. The black man had brought luck to the greenhouse maybe he'd bring luck to the whole celebration. Michelin would be there; Michael, Michael's friend; that was just enough. And Margaret was <sup>Sober</sup> glowing and busy and cheerfully preoccupied with something outside herself for a change.

Valerian walked away from the hydrangia and looked out of the window toward the washhouse. The washerwoman was there, bless her heart, with the yard boy. He couldn't hear them, but they looked as though they were laughing. A nip, he thought. They're already celebrating and have taken a Christmas nip. He liked that. That was the way a holiday ought to begin and since everything was in its place as it should be: Michael coming, Margaret cooking, hydrangia in bloom, he decided to go out there with the servants and wish



got in everybody's way. The exchange of gifts, scheduled for Michael's arrival, took place anywhere, furtively and without fanfare or enthusiasm. When it was certain that no one was coming and the day looked as if it belonged to the tin tin birds and not to family and friends, Valerian, to raise Margaret's spirits probably or simply to get through the day, and "Let's all sit down and have the dinner among ourselves. Everybody. Jade, Willie, Ondine, Sydney." They would all have a good time, he said. Margaret nodded, and left the kitchen, but seemed not to care one way or another. It was just a meal now and the dinner she had started the night before in Ondine's kitchen, Ondine had to finish, including the lemon whip. Ondine was persuaded to dress up and join Sydney and the others in the dining room partly because she'd had the foresight to bake a ham and a coconut cake and would not be required to eat Margaret's cooking and partly because she'd have to eat alone otherwise, but she was deeply unhappy about being thrown out of her kitchen in the first place and then pushed back in when Margaret abandoned the whole thing half way through because the guests were different. She was also unhappy because she thought Jadine had secret plans to leave right after Christmas. A few days ago she had the humiliation of Alma Estee handing her a pair of recently worn pajamas that she found in the gardenia bushes underneath Jadine's bedroom. Ondine took them and did not mention the find to anyone, but it worried



them on. And since they were obviously stealing, and the whole house was upset anyway, I did what I thought was best."

"I wouldn't have tried any such thing, if they stole. I don't condone that."

"Well they did and I let them go and that's that."

TR to  
p. 275

The evening eyes met <sup>those of</sup> the man with savannahs in his face. The man who respected industry looked over a gulf at the man who prized fraternity.

Son's mouth went dry as he watched Valerian chewing a piece of ham, his head-of-a-coin profile content, approving even of the flavor in his mouth although he had been able to dismiss with a flutter of the fingers the people whose sugar and cocoa had allowed him to grow old in regal comfort; although he had taken the sugar and cocoa and paid for it as though it had no value as though the cutting of cane and picking of beans was child's play and had no value; but he turned it into candy the invention of which really was child's play, and sold it to other children and made a fortune in order to move near, but not in the midst of, the jungle where the sugar came from and build a palace with more of their labor and then hire them to do more of the work he was not capable of and pay them again according to some scale of value that would outrage Satan himself and when those people wanted a little of what he wanted, some apples for their



"It's true, ain't it? We was slighted by taking in one thief and now we are slighted by letting another go."

"We are quarreling about apples," said Margaret with surprise. "We are actually quarreling about apples."

"It is not about apples, Mrs. Street," said Sydney quietly. "I just think we should have been informed. We would have let them go ourselves, probably. This way, well . . . " He looked as if even staying on at the table let alone the job was hopeless.

Valerian, at the head of his Christmas table, looked at the four black people, all but one he knew extremely well; all but one, and even that one was in his debt. Across from him at the bottom of the table sat Son who thought he knew them all very well too, except one and the one was escaping out of his hands, and that one was doing the bidding of her boss and 'patron.' Keeping the dinner going smoothly, quietly chastizing everybody including her own uncle and aunt, soothing Margaret, agreeing with Valerian and calling Gideon Yardman and never taking the trouble to know his name and never calling his own name out loud. *He looked at Valerian and Valerian looked back.* So he said to Valerian, in a clear voice, "If they had asked, would you have given them some of the apples?" The whole table looked at Son as if he were crazy.

"Of course," said Valerian. "Some, surely, but they didn't ask; they took. Those apples came at great expense and inconvenience from the Consulate. Do you know how many



Americans here want special treats and goodies from the consulate? Especially at Christmas. They sent us one crate and those two, along with that girl they bring, took them, or tried to. I stopped them <sup>(over)</sup> and I fired them. <sup>Insert fr. p. 275</sup> I don't see what the problem is."

"Inconvenience for who?" Son asked. "You didn't go and get them. They did. You didn't row eighteen miles to bring them here. They did."

"Surely you don't expect me to explain my actions, defend them to you?"

"You should explain it to somebody. Two people are going to starve so your wife could play American mama and fool around in the kitchen."

"Keep me out of it, please," said Margaret.

"Precisely," said Valerian. His evening eyes had a touch of menace. "You keep my wife out of this. I rather think you have caused her enough mischief." Somewhere in the back of Valerian's mind one hundred French chevaliers were roaming the hills on horses. Their swords were in their scabbards and their epaulets glittered in the sun.

Somewhere in the back of Son's mind one hundred black men on one hundred unshod horses rode blind and naked through the hills and had done so for hundreds of years. They knew the rain forest when it was a rain forest, they knew where the river began, where the roots twisted above the ground; they knew all there was to know about the



She's no cook and she's no mother."

Valerian stood up. "If you don't leave this room I'll . . . " It was the second time he ordered a dismissal and the second time it held no force.

"What? You'll what?" asked Ondine.

"Leave!" said Valerian.

"Make me," said Ondine.

"You don't work here anymore," he said.

"Oh yeah? Who's going to feed you, ~~you old fool.~~  
Her?" She pointed up-table at Margaret. "You'll be dead in a week! and lucky to be dead. And away from her."

Margaret picked up her glass and threw it. The Evian splashed on the cloth and some got on Ondine's chiffon dress. As the others jumped up from their seats, Ondine slipped out of her zircon studded shoes and raced around the table at the target of all her anger. The real target, who would not be riled until now when she got fed up with the name calling and shot her waterglass across the table. "Don't you come near me!" Margaret shouted, but Ondine did and with the back of her hand slapped Margaret across the face.

"Call the harbor!" shouted Valerian, but again there was no one to do his bidding. He had played a silly game, ~~with the lives of his household--with his wife with his son and with the household help.~~ And everyone was out of place.

Margaret touched her flaming cheeks and then rose up



She had not looked then either, only felt that fingerprint in the arch of her sole. Now she could not help but look, see those hands large enough to sit down in. Large enough to hold your whole head. Large enough, maybe, to put your whole self into.

"I hope you are serious," she said. She left her panties on and got under the sheet. Son undressed completely and Jadine shot him a quick look to see if he had an erection.

"Look at you," she said. "You're going to meddle me and all I want is rest."

"Be quiet," he said. "I'm not meddling you. I can't control that, but I can control whether I meddle you." He walked to the bed and got in next to her.

"Well how am I supposed to sleep with you taking up half the sheet in that tent?"

"Don't think about it and it'll go away."

"I'll bet. You sound like a character in those blue comics."

"Shush."

Jadine turned over on her stomach and then her side, with her back to him. <sup>(cover)</sup> "Have you slept with anybody since you jumped ship?"

"Yes."

"You have?" She raised her head. "Who? I mean where?"



She had not looked then either, only felt that something  
in the arch of her sole. Now she could not help but look,  
see those hands large enough to fill her in. Large enough  
to hold your whole head. Large enough, maybe, to put your

whole self into.  
"I hope you are serious," she said. She left her  
cuddled on and got under the sheet. Don understood com-  
pletely and Jantine shot him a quick look to see if he had  
an erection.  
"Look at you," she said. "You're going to meddle me

and all I want to rest."  
"Be quiet," he said. "I'm not meddling you. I can't  
meddle with you. I can control myself. I meddle you." He  
waited for the bed next to him.

"Well how am I supposed to sleep with you taking up  
half the sheet in that tent?"

"Don't think about it and it'll go away."  
"I'll bet. You sound like a character in those blue  
comics."

"Comics?"  
Jantine turned over on her stomach and then her side.  
With her back to him. "Have you slept with anybody since  
you jumped ship?"

"Yes."  
"You never?" She raised her head. "Who? I mean who?"



"What do you want to do to me? I mean if you had the language what would you do?"

"I'd make you close your eyes." <sup>(over A.)</sup> ^

"Is that all?"

"Then I'd ask you what you saw." <sup>(over B)</sup>

"I don't see anything." ^

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Not even the dark?"

"Oh, yes, that."

"Is it all dark? Nothing <sup>else?</sup> ~~more.~~ No lights moving around? No stars? No moon?"

"No. Nothing. Just black."

"Imagine something. Something that fits in the dark. Say the dark is the sky at night. Imagine something in it."

"A star?"

"Yes."

"I can't. I can't see it."

"Okay. Don't try to see it. Try to be it. Would you like to know what it's like to be one? Be a star?"

"A movie star?"

"No a star star. In the sky, keep your eyes closed, think about what it feels like to be one." He moved over to her and kissed her shoulder. "Imagine yourself in that dark, all alone in the sky at night. Nobody is around you. You are by yourself, just shining there. You know how a



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 You are by yourself. Just what you are. You know how a

A. he said



star is supposed to twinkle? We say twinkle because that is how it looks, but when a star feels itself, it's not a twinkle, it's more like a throb. Star throbs. Over and over and over. Like this. Stars just throb and sometimes, when they can't throb anymore, when they can't hold it anymore they fall out of the sky."



his baby. Watch her. He would watch her stomach while she slept just the way he had when he'd lived like an animal around the house and spent the hind part of the night at her bedside pressing his dreams into hers. Now those dreams embarrassed him. Adolescent mewings of a homesick vandal, brutalized by loneliness for a world he thought he would never see again.

There was a future. A reason for hauling ass in the morning. No more moment to moment play-it-as-it-comes existence. That stomach, ~~those crusted nipples aching to ease their load in a sucking mouth~~ required planning. Thinking through a move long before it was made. What would he name his son? Son of Son?

He should have thought about that before he left. Perhaps he would have taken things: cash, jewelry and the passport of a stranger instead of a friend. Instead he took the clothes, one piece of luggage and the Baly shoes and his bottle of Paco Rabanne. He saw it all as a rescue: first tearing her mind away from that blinding awe. Then the physical escape from the plantation. His first, hers to follow two days later. Unless . . . he remembered sitting at the foot of the table, gobbling the food, watching her pour his wine, listening to her take his part, trying to calm Ondine and Sydney to his satisfaction. Just as she had done the first night when they found him in the closet. He would not look at her then--refused to lock with those mink-



dark eyes that looked at him with more distaste than Valerian's had. The mocking voice, the superior managerial, administrative, clerk-in-a-fucking-loan-office tone she took. Gate keeper, advance bitch, house-bitch, welfare office torpedo, corporate cunt, tar baby side-of-the-road whore trap, who called a Black man old enough to be her grandfather "Yardman" and who couldn't give a shit who he himself was and only wanted his name to file away in her re-strung brain so she could remember it when the cops came to fill out the report--five eleven, maybe six feet, black as coal with the breath and table manners of a rhino. But the love thing was already there. He had been looking for her all his life, and even when he thought he had found her, in other ports and other places, he shied away. He stood in her bedroom, a towel wrapped around his waist. Clean as a whistle, having just said the nastiest thing he could think of to her. Staring at a heart red tree desperately in love with a woman he could not risk loving because he could not afford to lose her. For if he loved and lost this woman whose sleeping face was the limit his eyes could safely behold and whose wakened face threw him into confusion, he would surely lose the world. So he made himself disgusting to her. Insulted and offended her. Gave her sufficient cause to help him keep his love in chains and hoped to God the lock would hold. It snapped like a string.

He stood up, searching for the anger that had shaken him



Underneath her efficiency and know-it-all-sass were wind chimes. Nine rectangles of crystal, rainbowged in the light, fragile pieces of glass tinkling as long as the breeze was gentle. But in more vigorous weather the thread that held it together would snap. So it would be his duty to keep the climate mild for her, to hold back with his hands if need be thunder, drought and all manner of winterkill, and he would blow with his own lips a gentle enough breeze for her to tinkle in. The bird-like defenselessness he had loved while she slept and saw when she took his hand on the stairs was his to protect. He would have to be alert, feed her ~~xw~~ with his mouth if he had to, construct a world of steel and down for her to flourish in.



CHEERTAIN BOND  
50% COTTON FIBER



told him to write; and told him about Frisco. In the tiny toilet at the rear of the bus, Son cried like an infant for all the blowings up in Asia. Jadine kissed his hands and he asked her why she left the States in the first place. She said she always thought she had three choices: marry a dope king or a doctor, model, or teach art at Jackson High. In Europe she thought there might be a fourth choice. They told each other everything. Yet he insisted on Eloë. She listened to him and nodded, thinking anywhere with him would be all right. She was completely happy. After all those sexually efficient men, all those foreplay experts and acrobats, the equipment men, his wildness and fumbling, his corny, unselfconscious joy was like blue-sky water.

→ They thought about Isle de Chevalier sometimes. He would say "ollieballen" and she would scream with laughter. She wrote two misleading postcards to Ondine and Sydney. Got a short, sorrowful, somewhat accusatory letter back which she refused to let sour her happiness. Her leave-taking had been difficult. She was dependent at last on that mulatto with a leer sent by Dr. Michelin as the new yard boy. The Streets seemed not to notice or mind her going. Only Ondine and Sydney were cut up about it. She promised to send for them as soon as they wanted her to, but she had to take this gig, she told them, and she left the two sullen and confused old people at the kitchen table, their hearts steeled against her leaving even though her New York trip, she said, was vital



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Show me again what it's like to be shining all alone in the sky. And he did that, and he did more. Regarding her whole self as an ear, he whispered into every part of her stories of ice caps and singing fish, The Fox and the Stork, The Monkey and The Lion, The Spider Goes to Market and so mingled was their sex with adventure and fantasy that to the end of her life she never heard a reference to Little Red Reding Hood without a tremor.



CHIEFTAIN BOND

50% COTTON FIBER



looked at him with hatred older than lava.

"Come here," he said.

She didn't move, so he put his arms around her to shield her from the eyes of the second story people and bank her fire. The girl bucked, but he wouldn't let her go. "You're going to freeze to death," he said. "Let me buy you a drink." She tipped her forehead onto his chest then, and began to cry.

"Come on," he said. "There's a place down the block." Arm around her shoulder, he led the way to a Chinese restaurant and ordered her gin. She drank and began to tell him about the man, but Son shook his head. "Don't," he said. "Don't think about it. You got a place to stay?"

She said "Not tonight, I don't," so he left the job hauling boxes and took her home.

~~"Jadine, come here. We got a visitor."~~

~~"Who?" Jadine came out of the kitchen oven-flushed and barefoot.~~

~~"I don't know. What's your name, sweetheart?"~~

~~"Nommo," she muttered.~~

~~"Nommo? Your mama name you that?" he smiled.~~

~~"Don't fuck with me," she said. As soon as she got in the door and saw Jadine she hardened.~~

~~"Okay. Okay." He threw up his hands. "Jadine this is Nommo. Nommo, this is Jadine."~~

~~"Hi, Nommo."~~



"Hello."

"Nommo needs a place to stay tonight," Son said.

"Nommo needs a coat too," said Jadine. "Where's your stuff?"

"Uptown. I can get it tomorrow. When he's out of the house."

"You got your key?" Jadine asked her.

"Naw, but I can get in."

"What's to eat?" asked Son taking off his coat.

"Lasagna. You're early," Jadine said.

"Yeah." He put his arms around her neck from behind. "I left the job to keep Nommo from getting hit by a truck or a nigger one. Is it frozen?"

"Hell no. From scratch. You like lasagna, Nommo?"

Nommo shrugged. "It's okay. You all got anything to drink?"

"You just had a drink," Son told her.

"Can I have two or what is it?" she narrowed her eyes.

"Don't mind him," said Jadine. "We have beer and we have some scotch."

"Scotch."

"You fix it, Son, my lettuce is drowning."

Son picked up the bottle and a glass. "How do you like it?"

"Wet."

He handed her the drink which she swallowed as though it was quenching her thirst.



"You need money?" Son asked.

"I could use a five, I guess. Till Friday."

"What happens on Friday?"

"I get a check. At least I'm supposed to."

"You got people in New York?"

"Yeh. My mother's in the Bronx. But that's out, you know. Ain't nothin shakin there."

Jadine came back into the room.

"Jadine you got five dollars?"

"Look in my purse. Hey, Leonard called you. He wants you back."

"No kidding. He must be hard up, I spilled as much as I poured."

"Tuesday," said Jadine. "Two o'clock."

"Same place?"

"I don't know." She stood at the table mixing a salad.  
"He'll give you a ring tomorrow. I didn't want to answer for you."

"Yeah, okay." Son took a five dollar bill out of her wallet and handed it to Nommo.

"Come on, let's eat." Jadine waved them to the table.

"Hey. Look a here," said Nommo. "I'd just as soon skip it."

Jadine turned around "You don't want anything?"

Nommo frowned. "I mean, can't we just get it on now and skip the menu?"



"Get what on?" Jadine opened her mouth wide. "What do you think this is?"

"I know what it is," said the girl. "All I need to know is when it is."

Son sighed and leaned on his elbows. "You don't know nothing, Nommo. Your head's in the shit house."

"You all fuckin with me," she said.

"You want a place tonight--stay. You don't--split. Simple as that."

"You all serious?"

"Serious as cancer. You've been in this town too long."

"No tricks?" she asked.

"Oh come on, girl," said Jadine. "Stop playing uptown whore. This is your night off. My cooking's nothing to write home about but it'll do."

They sat down at the table and Jadine cut three pieces of lasagna. Nommo picked at her food, Jadine chewed gallantly, but Son took one forkful and said "This has got to be the worst lasagna on the face of the earth."

"Uh uh," said Jadine, her mouth full. "The worst is in the garbage. This is my second try."

"My mistake. The second worse lasagna on earth."

"It's a little different, that's all," Jadine answered.

"Different? You mean contrary. Contrary to everything lasagna is supposed to be."



Jadine put her hand over her mouth to hold both the food and her laughter inside.

"Shouldn't there be some white stuff in here?"

"Yeah," she swallowed and smiled at him.

"Well, where is it?"

"There," she poked her fork tines in his food and picked up her wine glass.

"That's navy blue!"

Jadine choked on her wine and coughed before saying "I ran out."

"Ran out of what? Your mind?"

"Ricotta. I had to use a substitute."

"Oh. Ink?"

"No!" she wiped tears from her eyes. "Yoghurt."

"This is yoghurt? Blue yoghurt?"

"Blue berry," she dropped her fork, lay her head on the back of the chair and laughed helplessly until Son picked her up, threw her over his shoulder and carried her to the window. "Call the police, Nommo. Tell them a woman just got thrown out the window." Then they were wrestling and screaming and laughing so hard, Nommo began to laugh too. Son took his ~~last and only ten dollar bill~~ and, all three went to a delicatessen where, after much discussion, they bought potato chips, R & W root beer, and three Payday candy bars. They ate it all in the snow. Cold and giggling they trudged back to the apartment where Son and Jadine slept like puppies and



## Eight

All these years he thought she drank, was a secret alcoholic: the sleeping masks, the silences, the beauty spa vacations, the withdrawals, the hard-to-wake-mornings, the night crying, the irritability, the sloppy candy-kisses mother love. Valerian was convinced that she drank--heavily, in private and that was why she took only wine and sherry in his presence. Non-drinkers take real drinks; only secret drinkers insist on Chablis at every occasion--or so he thought. And he wished it were true. He was devastated by the knowledge that she had never been drunk, had never been "out of her mind," never in a stupor, never hung over, never manic from being dry too long. Drunkenness he could take, had taken in fact since he'd always believed it. Anything was better than knowing that a pretty (and pretty nice) sober young woman had loved the bloodying of her own baby. Had loved it dearly. Had once locked herself in the bathroom, a pair of cuticle scissors in her hand, to keep from succumbing to that love. Nothing serious, though. No throwing across the room, or out of the window. No scalding, no fist work. Just a delicious pin-stab in sweet creamy flesh. That was her word 'delicious.' "I knew it was wrong, knew it was



The air around L'Arbe de la Croix was charged with so much pain the angle trumpets could not breathe it. Rows of them wrinkled on the vine and fell unnoticed right in Valerian's sightline. He sat in the greenhouse oblivious of everything but 1948 when he first heard his son's song.



<sup>bad</sup> monstrous. But <sup>Something about</sup> it was delicious too." She was telling him, saying it aloud at the dinner table after everyone had gone. His knees were trembling and he'd had to sit down again. The Negroes had all gone out of the room, disappeared like bushes, trees out of his line of vision, and left the two of them in the light of the chandelier. She was <sup>standing</sup> ~~sitting~~ there <sup>next to</sup> ~~with~~ him, her cheek white again after the blow Ondine had given her, her hair rumpled but lovely. She was serene <sup>standing</sup> ~~sitting~~ there saying it, and he agreed with that, thought it could be, must be, true--that it was delicious, for at that moment it would have been delicious to him too if he could have picked up the carving knife lying on the platter next to the carcass of the goose and slashed into her lovely Valentine face. Delicious. Conclusive and delicious. But he could not concentrate. His knees were trembling, his fingers shuddering on the tablecloth. He didn't want to see them shaking there, but he did not want to see her face either. He thought about that--how or whether to stop looking at her and look instead at his hands. He couldn't make up his mind and he couldn't shift his gaze. But he thought about it while she was saying it. "It's funny, but I would see the mark and hear him cry but somehow I didn't believe it hurt all that much." 'Mark' she called it. She saw the mark. Didn't think it hurt 'all that much.' Like a laboratory assistant removing the spleen of a cute but comotose mouse.



*Suddenly* *exactly*  
Immediately he knew what to do: go to him. Go to Michael. Find him, touch him, rub him, hold him in his arms. Now. He tried to stand but the spastic legs defied him.

"I can not hear anymore," he said. "I can't."

She stopped then and looked at him with complete understanding and complete patience. Still he could not stand. *and without another word walked slowly out of the room.* She understood that too, ~~and stood herself.~~ 'Later,' her footsteps seemed to say, 'when you are stronger, I will say it to you. Share it with you. Make it yours as well as mine.'

Valerian did not move. I will never be that strong, he thought. I will never be strong enough to hear it. I have to die now or go to him. When I move from this table I will do one or the other, nothing in between. I will never be able to hear it.

*when* *returned*  
It was 2:00 in the morning. Sydney ~~came in~~ dressed in robe, slippers and pajama bottoms. Valerian was sitting in the chandelier light--legs and fingers finally at rest.

"You should go on up to bed, Mr. Street."

Valerian gave a small shake of his head. If he went up he might never come down again and if he stood up it would only be to die or go to Michael.

"Get some rest; figure things out in the morning," Sydney said.

Valerian nodded.



The table was precisely as it was when Sydney guided the sobbing Ondine away. No one had moved a thing while he helped Ondine undress, made her lie down and rubbed her feet until she slept. But he could not sleep at all. The sea spread around him and his wife. They were afloat in it and if removed from the island there was nowhere to land. They had no house, no place of their own. Some certificates worth a bit, but no savings. <sup>(over)</sup> Sydney started to clear the table and stack things on the sideboard. The suspense was too great, so he asked him outright.

"Mr. Street."

Valerian showed him his evening eyes, but did not speak.

"You going to let us go?"

Valerian stared at Sydney trying to focus on then comprehend the question.

"Who? What?"

"Me and Ondine. You going to let us go?"

Valerian rested his forehead in his hand. "I don't know. I don't know anything," he said and Sydney had to be content for now with that answer spoken faintly, remotely for Valerian never heard another word he said. He held his head and fell back into the reverie of horror Sydney had interrupted. He was still there at 6:00 the next morning. His eyes closed at last, his mind slowed to an occasional thud. He woke because nature required him to. Not to die



or hop an airplane headed for his son, but to go to the bathroom. So he did move from the table and he climbed the stairs on frail new legs. Once attending to that call, it was not unthinkable to attend to another--to rinse his face, clean his teeth, brush back his hair with his hands. He took off his shoes and sat on the bed holding them. The picture of the beautiful boy in the laundry under the sink, singing because he could not speak or cry--because he had no vocabulary for what was happening to him, who sang la la la, la la la instead--that picture had stayed with Valerian all night, through fitful sleep and was there between his stockinged feet in the morning.

"I have to cry about this," Valerian whispered. "I have got to shed tears about this. But may they not be water, please god may they be blood. Help me cry blood tears for all that is left of my life for his wounds. But I will need several lives, life after life after life after life one for each wound, one for every trickle of blood, for every burn. I will need a lifetime of blood tears for each one of them. And then more. Lives upon lives upon lives for the the the the the. Hurt. The deep-down eternal little boy hurt. The not knowing when, the never knowing why, and never being able to shape the tongue to speak, let alone the mind to cogitate how the one person in the world upon whom he was totally completely dependent--the one person he could not even choose not to love could do that to him.



inside his bedroom door. Another time she said "Don't persuade yourself that I didn't love him. He was more important to me than my life. Than my life." She had to repeat the phrase for his back was receding fast. He never directed those gloaming eyes her way. She told him in bite-size pieces, small enough for him to swallow quickly because there was no way to describe what she had come to know, remember. ~~That she had never wanted to be pregnant;~~  
~~that when it was born its wiggling frightened her;~~ that she was outraged by its needfulness and there were times when she absolutely had to limit its being there; stop its implicit and explicit demand for her best and constant self. She could not describe her loathing of its prodigious security--the criminal arrogance of an infant's conviction that while he slept, someone is there; that when he wakes, someone is there; that when he is hungry food will somehow magically be provided. So she told him that part that was palatable: that she could not control herself--which was true for when she felt hostage to that massive insolence, that stupid trust, she could not help but pierce it. Finally, Margaret entered his room one night and locked the door behind her.

"I've just spoken to Michael," she said.

Valerian could not believe it. She could call him? Speak to him? Say his name? Did she think it was business as usual?



And there was no way or reason to describe those long quiet days when the sun was drained and nobody ever on the street. There were magazines, of course, to look forward to, but Neither Life nor Time could fill a morning. It started on a day like that. Just once she did it, a slip, and then once more and it became the thing to look forward to, to resist, to succumb to, to plan, to be horrified by, to forget, because out of the doing of it came the reason.