



Tar Baby Screenplay Draft

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Setting: Isle des Chevaliers. a privately owned island
in the Caribbean (i.e. the out islands near Martinique).
Outrageously beautiful but somehow alien, full of presences.
The extremes are disconcerting: ^{sudden} extreme light, ^{sudden} extreme darkness
is sudden. Everybody on the island is in fact an intruder,
and the environment seems to defeat polite and civilzied
behavior. To exaggerate it or minimalize it. Like high tea
in the Everglades

Credits roll over

A warm sea, Late afternoon. A Black man is swimming, taking
long well-executed strokes. It is silent. Only his arms, back
and long wooly hair can be seen.

To

grounds and exterior of ^{the} large, elegant house, ^{obviously} On the grounds
are a gazebo, greenhouse, wash house, swimming pool, patio.

^{garden} Lovely grounds with appropriate furniture. Loud classical
music.

To

The sea . Silence. Man swimming. His dreadlocks keep us

ing his face. His strokes are not racing, but not le

They are swift and determined.

To

Interior of the elegant house. Classical music resumes.

Margaret is dressing in her bedroom

Jadine is finishing up some secretarial work in a small room

To The sea. Silence. Man swimming. We see him from underwater

He is wearing pants and shoes.

Sense of invasion grows with each of the intercuts.

To

Green house. Inside Valerian is finishing up some potting

chore. Washes his hands, takes a sip of wine as he prepares

to leave. Music is loud here as it is coming from a recorder in

the greenhouse.

To Kitchen. Ondine is preparing dinner.

To

Dining room. Sydney is laying table

To

Stairway to ^{second} first floor. Jadine is coming down the stairs.

To

Kitchen Jadine enters. Kisses Ondine who reacts lovingly.

Jadine ^{tastes} ~~examines~~ the food ^{being prepared.} ~~in preparation~~

Shore of the island can be seen in the distance

the swimming man.

To

Greenhouse. Valerian, leaving, stops to examine ants at the doorsill. Takes a look around. The plant life ^{inside} ~~there~~ is very restrained and Victorian compared to the lush flora and ~~gre~~nnery outside. He adjusts air conditioner and record player. Music stops.

To

Sea. Swimming man is close to shore.

The island looms - out of the beautiful but somewhat alien - as though full of "presences."

To

Dining Room. Seated are Margaret, Valerian and Jadine. Sydney is in attendance. Margaret is vulnerable looking, by turns irritable and charming. Valerian is Patrician, sardonic; Makes interesting company. Jadine is delightfully charming, sympathetic although one guesses it is all a pose for a young, beautiful and restless Black girl. Sydney is the perfect butler.

[#]To Shore. The man is wading through the surf. He notices a small craft at the dock. After ^{regaining his breath and} looking around, he boards it cautiously.

To

Dining room. Sydney is ladling bisque from a tureen in

soup bowls, offering "oysterettes"

To

Dock. Man enters galley of the boat. Seraches cupboards and refridgerator for food. Finds bottled water and limes. He drinks the water.

To

Dining room. Valerian presses his thumb to soup plate to signal that he is finished. Sydney collects the plates. Hesitates at Margaret's chair as she has just begun to eat.

Credits completed

Valerian: You're dawdling Margaret

Margaret: Sorry

Valerian: There is a rhythm to a meal. I've always told you

Margaret: I said sorry. I'm not a fast eater.

Valerian: Speed has nothing to do with it. Pace does.

Jadine: It's the souffle, Margaret. Ondine's giving us souffle tonight.

Margaret: Mushroom? I hate mushrooms. Should be hot plain and fluffy.

Valerian: Well let's hope that's what we get. Omelet's more likely in this ^{heat.} ~~weather~~

Jadine: It may not be good for eggs, but it's doing a g

job of souffle-ing my hair.

Margaret: It's very becoming Jade. You look like what's her name in Black Orpheus. Eurydice.

Valerian: Chee, Margaret. Eurydi-chee.

Margaret: (ignoring him) Remember her hair when she was hanging from the wires?

Jadine: YOU mean the hair in her arm pits?

Valerian: I would like to stay well through dessert, ladies, if you please. (Signals Sydney with a nod to take Margaret's plate) Could we find another topic?

[Margaret: Valerian, could you for once, just once---

Jadine: Say, What about Christmas?

Margaret:--let me talk about what I want to

Jadine: We haven't even begun to plan. I've finished all the cards but--]

Valerian: I suppose you are decorating the house with guests.

Margaret: (laughing) If we have it your way, we'd spend the holidays all alone in the cellar.

Valerian: (serious) We haven't got a cellar, Margaret. Take a look around, you might like it. Come to think of it I don't think you've seen the kitchen yet, have you?

Margaret: Valerian, please shut up.

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Valerian; (mock glee) But this is exciting. We've been coming here for thirty years and already you've discovered the dining room. One every decade. First you found the bedroom. That is ^I assume that 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 those cocktail parties. Those were good times. Heights, I'd say.

Margaret: You're right. I am having guests for Christmas.

Valerian: Then the dining room. Speak of a find! Dinner for ten twenty, thirty.

Margaret: Michael's coming.

Valerian: If we hurry, by the time I'm eighty we can invite Philadelphia. He won't come.

[Margaret: I've never had more than twelve people in this house at any one time.]

Valerian: He won't show up. Again.]

Margaret: And I don't want to see the kitchen.

Valerian: Why work yourself up this way every year. You know he'll disappoint you.

Margaret: (to Jadine) I was a child bride. I hadn't time to learn to cook before he put me in a house that not only

your aunt cooking her heart out, but a kitchen fifty

from the front door. (To Valerian) Whydo you say that?

You always say that.

Valerian: Becaseu he never has.

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

Valerian: No music?

Margaret: I mean his kind of music. I haven't invited anybody in years becasue of you. YOU hate everybody.

Valerian: I don't hate anybody

Margaret: (to Jadine) Three years it's been.] He hasn't set foot in the States in three years. (To Valerian) I know you don't want to see anybody else, but your own son. You pay more attention to seed catalogues than you do Michael.

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

Margaret: Retirement isn't death.

Valerian: A distinction without a difference.

Margaret: And I intend to go back with him.

Valerian: Sounds terminal, I don't advise it

To

Kitchen. Ondine and Sydney executing the next course, over
out of conversation then - in dining room,
the following. Camera focuses on Jadine as she hears Valerian
and Margaret's voices as from a far. She is looking

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as thought they were cartoons, or actors ^{ON} a stage.

[Margaret: I don't care

Valerian: What makes you think He'll want you to?]

Margaret: He will. Besides I'm going to live near him
not with him.

Valerian: When he gets here, we'll ask him if he wants his
mother next door to the reservation in a condominium

Margaret: He through with that.

Valerian: Oh, He's done the Hopis. Gone on to the Choctaws,
I suppose.

Margaret: He's not with any tribe. He's studying Environmental
something. He wants to be an environmental lawyer.

Valerian: Well why not? [A band manager, shepherd, poet-in-resid
film producer, lifeguard ought to study law, the more environ
mental the better.] He's certainly had a lot of environments
to choose from. And what will you do? design no-nuke stickers?

To ^{1st Hallway from}
~~Kitchen~~ ^{to Dining room}
~~Dining room~~

Sydney enters at tail end of last remark

Margaret: ~~(exasperated)~~ Let's go back to arm pits.

Valerian: We'll do nothing of the sort. You were saying,

Jadine: ~~(comes out of the inattentiveness with a start)~~

Nothing. Well, I mean it's wonderful. Michael coming

mas. I haven't seen him since---

Margaret: (shyly to Jadine) I promised ^{Michael} ~~him~~ this really terrific present. [↑]

Valerian: A poet? ^{You're} ~~She's~~ giving him his favorite poet for Christmas? ~~Isn't that so love?~~

Margaret: You make everything I do sound stupid. (to ~~Jadine~~)

I'm trying to get in touch with his

~~I've invited Michael's~~ old teacher. He's a famous poet--

Valerian: Then you may as well have your nervous breakdown right now, Michael will think you're batty and go snake dancing.

Margaret: I don't have to ~~sit here and~~ listen to this.

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

Valerian: Is that a problem for you? Having too much? Because if it is I can arrange for less. I could certainly do with less myself. Less hysteria, less shouting, less drama

Margaret: You're jealous of Michael and me.

Valerian: You are too stupid to live!

Margaret: I will not sit here and be called names!

Valerian: Idiot. I married an idiot.

Margaret: And I married an old fool!

Valerian: Of course you did. Who else but an old fool

marry a high school drop out off the back of a truck!

Margaret: A float! For the prettiest girl in the state
of Maine!

Margaret storms out. after throwing a glass or two. Sydney quietly
and expertly clears the table. Jadine sits in silence with
Valerian. She is about to excuse herself when he says

Valerian: Sorry

VALERIAN

You wanted to crash some fatheaded wedding because Michael was there. You are too stupid to live.

MARGARET

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

VALERIAN

Idiot. I married an idiot!

MARGARET

And I married an old fool!

VALERIAN

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

MARGARET

A float!

MARGARET EXITS -

JADE

Oh. This is...maybe...Margaret?

JADE SILENTLY ENTERS -

VALERIAN

Sorry.

JADE

You shouldn't tease her like that.

VALERIAN

No, I suppose not.

JADE

Is it because she wants to go away?

VALERIAN

Of course not. Not at all.

JADE

Michael?

VALERIAN

Yes. Michael.

VALERIAN

She's nervous. Afraid he won't show. I'm nervous. Afraid he will.

JADE

I remember Michael. He's...nice.

VALERIAN

Quite. Quite nice.

JADE

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

VALERIAN

~~I don't~~ know. It depends.

JADE

On What?

VALERIAN

Things outside my control. I can't be responsible for things outside my control.

JADE

No one asks you to be.

VALERIAN

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. 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.

JADE

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

*The last time
Saw him was*

VALERIAN

You did know him, didn't you?

JADE

Well, not really know him. I met him twice. The last time when you invited me to spend the summer in Orange County. Remember? My first year at college? ~~He was there and we used to talk. He was...oh...clearheaded-independent, it seemed to me.~~ Actually we didn't talk; we quarreled. About why I was studying art history at that snotty school instead of-I don't know what. Organizing or something. He said I was abandoning my history. people.

VALERIAN

Typical. His idea of racial progress is All Voice to the people.

JADE

I think he wanted me to string cowrie beads or sell Afro combs. The system was all fucked up he said and only a return to handicraft and barter could change it. That welfare mothers could do crafts, pottery, clothing in their homes, like the lace-makers of Belgium and voila! dignity and no more welfare.

VALERIAN

That's exactly what the world is waiting for: two billion African pots.

JADE

His intentions were good.

VALERIAN

They were not good. He wanted a race of exotics skipping around being picturesque for him. What were the welfare mothers supposed to put in those pots? Did he have any suggestions about that?

JADE

They'd trade them for other goods.

VALERIAN

Really? Two thousand calabashes for a week of electricity. It's been tried. It was called the Dark Ages.

JADE

Well, the pottery wasn't to be utilitarian. It'd be art.

VALERIAN

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

JADE

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

VALERIAN

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

JADE

Know what?

VALERIAN

That book. The Little Prince.

JADE

No. I never read it.

VALERIAN

Saint-Exupery. Read it some time. And pay attention not to what he says, but what it means.

VALERIAN

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

JADE

For a while.

VALERIAN

You knew better?

JADE

I knew the life I was leaving. It wasn't like what he thought: all grits and natural grace. But he did make me want to apologize for what I was doing, what I felt. For liking 'Ave Maria' better than gospel music, I suppose.

Picasso is better than an Itumba mask. The fact that he was intrigued by them is proof of his genius, not the mask-makers. I wish it weren't so, but...

VALERIAN

~~You look sad.~~ 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.

JADE

~~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 a hundred and twenty acres of green velvet? Can you believe it? He wanted us to go back to Morgan Street and be thrilling.~~

VALERIAN

Us. He was going with you?

JADE

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

VALERIAN

Sydney? A potter?

You can see ~~how much~~ he knows about Sydney. 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.

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. The most beautiful, the brightest boy in the land.

"Street Brothers: Confectioners." He gets into car.
Younger Sydney driving. Valerian enters house. Dialogue
below is voice-over.

W

VALERIAN

When he was just a little thing I came home one day and
went into the bathroom. I was standing thre

JADE

He didn't turn out the way you wanted?

VALERIAN

No.

JADE

You want him to be something else?

VALERIAN

I want him to be something at all.

JADE

Maybe he is.

VALERIAN

Yes. An adolescent. A kitten. But not playful. Complaining. A complaining kitten, Always mewing. Meow. Meow. Meow.

JADE

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

VALERIAN

I don't hate him. I love him. Margaret thinks I don't. But I do. I think about him all the time. You know... this isn't going to sound right...but 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 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 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 pass away. The feeling, I mean. She'd change, get into him, read to him, take him to shows, parks. It 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 real. Well, he got older, and she'd go hot and cold. (CONT'D)

VALERIAN (CONT'D)

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 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 him on her. She's 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 up. I always checked, it was always nothing. All I ended up doing was making him angry with me. I thought of 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's on his own, I guess. On his own. But now- 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. I haven't seen him for three years, and the last couple of times I didn't even 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.

Sunday.

MARGARET ENTERS DOORWAY -

JADE

What? What? What is it?

What is it, Margaret?

SYDNEY AND ONDINE BURST THROUGH THE DOOR -

SYDNEY

What's the matter?

JADE

I don't know.

SYDNEY

She hurt herself?

JADE

I don't know.

To

Outside the house. Darkness. Man is standing under a tree looking at the lit windows of the house. Time passes.

The lights go out at intervals. Camera enters the bedrooms of each of the sleeping inhabitants. At the

camera reveals is something personal about them: i.e.

(perspiring)
Sydney and Ondine touch each other as they sleep in easy

familiar and comfortable ways; Margaret wears a sleeping mask

and hers in the only room with drawn draperies; *many pills on her night* Valerian is

restless and there is an empty balloon glass on his bed table;

Jadine is *Curled d* ~~crouched~~ under a sheet like a small child

To

Dock. Early Morning. Sydney is sitting in a jeep looking out

toward the sea. A row boat is approaching. In the boat are

Gideon, Therese and Alma Estee. Therese is rowing; Gideon

manages the landing and waves to Sydney who does not respond.

The three pile into Sydney's jeep, The women are silent;

is a crate with two live chickens on Therese's lap. Sydney

clearly distancing himself from these three, starts the engine

and drives up the road.

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Gideon: (smiling at Sydney) Beautiful weather.

(It is blistering)

Sydney: (barely agreeing) Uh.

Gideon: No weather like this in the State. Cold like to
kill me. Good money; but oh the cold. Brought water
to me eyes.

Sydney is silent. The two women are silent and still. As
the jeep passes a suddenly dark tangle of trees, Therese turns
her head abruptly and looks deep into the grove. The jeep
approaches the house.

Gideon: (pointing, addressing Alma Estee) Every house in the
States just like that. Beautiful. Beautiful.

Sydney cuts a glance toward Gideon.

To

Driveway All climb out of the jeep, and walk toward the back
of the house Ondine looks out of the kitchen door as they
approach.

Gideon: Morning. Beautiful Day.

Ondine, Morning (looking at the crate of chickens) Are they
young? Tender?

Gideon: Oui, Madame

Sydney: Don't look at it. Look like brooder.

Kitchen door

(To Sydney's back)
Gideon: No, ^{Sir} Madame. Pullet every one.

Ondine: (To the women) Morning. ^{MORNING.}

Alma Esteé: Bon jour.

Ondine motions to basket of laundry. Therese picks it up and moves off saying nothing. Ondine gives Alma a menial chore to do. Alma stares in wonder as she sees some article of waste thrown away that in her world is a luxury. As she looks around her eyes travel up Ondine stretching in her bedroom window.

To

^hWashhouse. Therese slams the basket of laundry floor and takes out a cigarette and lights it.

To

^{Swimming Pool} Valerian's bedroom. Valerian is finishing his breakfast. ^{Pool chairs. Table with pumping up.}

^{enters. In swimming attire.} Margaret pokes her head in the door. ^{forehead, Hair tied.}

Valerian: Well, what have we here? Wonder Woman ^{(sits at}

MARGARET: Please. It's too hot. Then it's all right.

Valerian: What is that between your eyebrows?

Margaret: Frownies.

Valerian: You have trouble frowning?

Margaret: They don't make you frown; they get rid of frown.