



Home Layout Samples

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Home Layout Samples

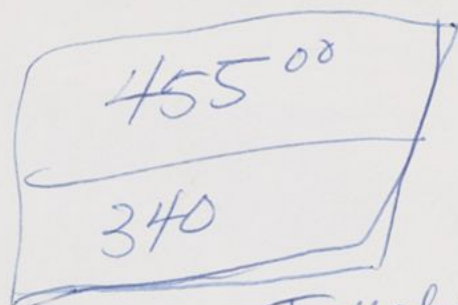
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ALFRED A. KNOFF

Jennifer Kurdyla

Dear Toni,

Enclosed are the two layout options for Home, which I understand Bob already discussed with you. Please let him or me know if you approve of the italic text over the small caps.

Thank you very much, and please don't hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns.

Best,

Jennifer

212-572-2404

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ALSO BY TONI MORRISON

Fiction

A Mercy

Love

Paradise

Jazz

Beloved

Tar Baby

Song of Solomon

Sula

The Bluest Eye

Nonfiction

The Dancing Mind

Playing in the Dark:

Whiteness and the Literary Imagination

Home

Home

TONI MORRISON



ALFRED A. KNOFF NEW YORK

2012

Whose house is this?
Whose night keeps out the light
In here?

Say, who owns this house?

It's not mine.

I dreamed another, sweeter, brighter
With a view of lakes crossed in painted boats,
Of fields wide as arms open for me.

This house is strange.

Its shadows lie.

Say, tell me, why does its lock fit my key?

ONE

They rose up like men. We saw them. Like men they stood. We shouldn't have been anywhere near that place. Like most farmland outside Lotus, Georgia, this here one had plenty scarey warning signs. The threats hung from wire mesh fences with wooden stakes every fifty or so feet. But when we saw a crawl space that some animal had dug—a coyote maybe or a coon dog—we couldn't resist. Just kids we were. The grass was shoulder high for her and waist high for me so, looking out for snakes we crawled through it on our bellies. The reward was worth the harm grass juice and clouds of gnats did to our eyes, because there right in front of us, about fifty yards off, they stood like men. Their raised hooves crashing and striking, their manes tossing back from wild white eyes. They bit each other like dogs but when they stood, reared up on their hind legs, their forelegs around the withers of the other, we held our breath in

wonder. One was rust-colored, the other deep black, both sunny with sweat. The neighs were not as frightening as the silence following a kick of hind legs into the lifted lips of the opponent. Nearby, colts and mares, indifferent, nibbled grass or looked away. Then it stopped. The rust-colored one dropped his head and pawed the ground while the winner loped off in an arc, nudging the mares before him.

As we elbowed back through the grass looking for the dug out place, avoiding the line of parked trucks beyond, we lost our way. Although it took forever to re-sight the fence, neither of us panicked until we heard voices, urgent but low. I grabbed her arm and put a finger to my lips. Never lifting our heads, just peeping through the grass, we saw them pull a body from a wheelbarrow and throw it into a hole already waiting. One foot stuck up over the edge and quivered, as though it could get out, as though with a little effort it could break through the dirt being shoveled in. We could not see the faces of the men doing the burying, only their trousers, but we saw the edge of a spade drive the jerking foot down to join the rest of itself. When she saw that black foot with its creamy pink and mud-streaked sole being whacked into the grave, her whole body began to shake. I hugged her shoulders tight and tried to pull her trembling into my own bones because, as a brother four years older, I thought I could handle it. The men were long gone and the moon was a cantaloup by the time we felt safe enough to disturb even one blade of grass and move on

our stomachs searching for the scooped-out part under the fence. When we got home we expected to be whipped or at least scolded for staying out so late, but the grown ups did not notice us. Some disturbance had their attention.

Since you're set on telling my story whatever you think and whatever you write down, know this: I really forgot about the burial. I only remembered the horses. They were so beautiful. So brutal. And they stood like men.

TWO

*B*reathing. How to do it so no one would know he was awake. Fake a deep rhythmic snore, drop the bottom lip. Most important the eyelids should not move and there must be a regular heartbeat and limp hands. At 2:00 a.m. when they checked to determine if he needed another immobilizing shot they would see the patient on the second floor in room 17, sunk in a morphine sleep. If convinced, they might skip the shot and loosen his cuffs, so his hands could enjoy some blood. The trick of imitating semi-coma, like playing dead face down in a muddy kill zone, was to concentrate on a single neutral object. Something that would smother any random hint of life. Ice, he thought, a cube of it, an icicle, an ice-crusting pond, or a frosted landscape. No. Too much emotion attached to frozen hills. Fire, then? Never. Too active. He would need something that stirred no feelings, encour-

aged no memory—sweet or shameful. Just searching for such an item was agitating. Everything reminded him of something loaded with pain. Visualizing a blank sheet of paper drove his mind to the letter he had gotten—the one that had closed his throat: “Come fast. She be dead if you tarry.” Finally, he settled on the chair in the corner of the room as his neutral object. Wood. Oak. Lacquered or stained. How many slats in its back? Was the seat flat or curved for a bottom? Hand crafted or machine made? If hand crafted who was the carpenter and where did he get his lumber? Hopeless. The chair was provoking questions not blank indifference. What about the ocean on a cloudy day seen from the deck of a troop ship—no horizon or hope of one? No. Not that, because among the bodies kept cool below some, maybe, were his home boys. He would have to concentrate on something else, a night sky, starless or, better, train tracks. No scenery, no trains, just endless, endless tracks.

They had taken his shirt and laced boots but his pants and army jacket (neither an effective suicide instrument) were hanging in the locker. He only had to get down the hall to the exit door that was never locked after a fire broke out on that floor and a nurse and two patients died. That was the story Crane, the chatterbox orderly, rapidly chewing gum while washing the patient's armpits, had told him, but he believed it was a simple cover story for the staff's smoke breaks. His first escape plan was to

knock Crane out when next he came to clean up his soiling. That required loosening the cuffs, but it was too ad hoc, so he chose another strategy.

Two days earlier, when he was handcuffed in the back seat of the patrol car, he had swerved his head wildly to see where he was and where he was going. He had never been in this neighborhood. Central City was his territory. Nothing in particular stood out except the violent neon of a diner sign and a huge yard sign for a tiny church: AME Zion. If he succeeded in getting through the fire exit that's where he would head: to Zion. Still, before escape, he would have to get shoes somehow, someway. Walking anywhere in winter without shoes would guarantee his being arrested and back in the ward until he could be sentenced for vagrancy. Interesting law, vagrancy, meaning standing outside or walking without clear purpose anywhere. Carrying a book would help, but being barefoot would contradict “purposefulness” and standing still could prompt a complaint of “loitering.” Better than most, he knew that being outside wasn't necessary for legal or illegal disruption. You could be inside, living in your own house for years and still men with or without badges but always with guns could force you, your family, your neighbors to pack up and move—with or without shoes. Twenty years ago, as a four year old, he had a pair, though the sole of one flapped with every step. Residents of fifteen houses had been ordered to leave

Home

"Well, hallelujah." Sarah joined Cee's laughter with a low chuckle. "Always the sweetest."

"Always the juiciest," echoed Cee.

"Can't beat the girl for flavor."

"Can't beat her for sugar."

Sarah slid a long, sharp knife from a drawer and, with intense anticipation of the pleasure to come, cut the girl in two.

FIVE

Women are eager to talk to me when they hear my last name. Money! They snigger and ask the same questions: who named me that or if anybody did. If I made it up to make myself feel important or was I a gambler or thief or some other kind of crook they should watch out for! When I tell them my nick name, what folks back home call me, smart money, they scream with laughter and say: ain't no such thing as dumb money, just dumb folks. Got any more! You must have mine. No end of easy talk after that and it's enough to keep a friendship going way after it's dried up just so they can make lame jokes: hey, smart money, gimme some. Money, come on over here. I got a deal you gonna love.

Truthfully, other than getting lucky back in Lotus and some street girls in Kentucky, I've had only two regular

women. I liked the small breakable thing inside each one. Whatever their personality, smarts or looks, something soft lay inside each. Like a bird's breastbone, shaped and chosen to wish on. A little v, thinner than bone and lightly hinged, that I could break with a forefinger if I wanted to, but never did. Want to, I mean. Knowing it was there, hiding from me, was enough.

It was the third woman who changed everything. In her company the little wishbone v took up residence in my own chest and made itself at home. It was her forefinger that kept me on edge. I met her at a cleaners. Late fall, it was, but in that ocean lapped city, who could tell? Sober as sunlight, I handed her my army issue and couldn't take my eyes away from hers. I must have looked the fool, but I didn't feel like one. I felt like I'd come home. Finally. I'd been wandering. Not totally homeless, but close. Drinking and hanging out in music bars on Jackson Street, sleeping on the sofas of drinking buddies or outdoors, betting my forty-three dollars of army pay in crap games and pool halls. And when that was gone, I took quick day jobs until the next check came. I knew I needed help but there wasn't any. With no army orders to follow or complain about I ended up in the streets with none.

I remember exactly why I hadn't had a drink in four days and needed to dry clean my clothes. It was because of that morning when I walked over by the bridge. A crowd was milling there along with an ambulance. When I got close

enough I saw a medic's arms holding a little girl vomiting water. Blood ran from her nose. A sadness hit me like a pile driver. My stomach fell and just the thought of whiskey made me want to heave. I rushed off feeling shakey then I spent a few nights on benches in the park until the cops ran me off. When on the fourth day I caught my reflection in a store window I thought it was somebody else. Some dirty, pitiful looking guy. He looked like the me in a dream I kept having where I'm on a battlefield alone. Nobody anywhere. Silence everywhere. I keep walking but I don't find anybody at all. Right then I decided to clean up. To hell with the dreams. I needed to make my home boys proud. Be something other than a haunted, half crazy drunk. So when I saw this woman at the cleaners, I was wide open for her. If it wasn't for that letter, I'd still be hanging from her apron strings. She had no competition in my mind except for the horses, a man's foot and ycidra trembling under my arm.

You are dead wrong if you think I was just scouting for a home with a bowl of sex in it. I wasn't. Something about her floored me, made me want to be good enough for her. Is that too hard for you to understand? Earlier you wrote about how sure I was that the beat up man on the train to Chicago would turn around when they got home and whip the wife who tried to help him. Not true. I didn't think any such thing. What I thought was that he was proud of her but didn't want to show how proud he was to the other men on the train. I don't think you know much about love.

productions and after classes, the place hummed with intense argument and sweat misted the foreheads of Mr. Stone and his students. Lily thought they were more animated then than they were on stage. She couldn't help overhearing these quarrels, but she didn't understand anger that wasn't about a scene or how to say some lines. Now that the Skylight was shut down, Mr. Stone arrested, and she out of a job it was clear she should have listened closely.

It must have been the play. The one that caused the problem, the picketing, then the visit from two government men in snap brim hats. The play, from her point of view, wasn't very good. Lots of talking, very little action, but not so bad it had to be closed. Certainly not as bad as the one they rehearsed but couldn't get permission to perform. "The Morrison Case" it was called if her memory was right.

The pay was less at Wang's Heavenly Palace Dry Cleaners and there were no tips from actors. Yet working in daylight was an improvement over walking in darkness to get to and from her tiny rented room to the theater. Lily stood in the pressing room, recalling a recent irritation that had blossomed into anger. The response she had recently gotten from the real estate agent had her seething. Frugal and minding her own business, she had added enough to what her parents left her to leave the rooming house and put a down payment on a house of her

own. She had circled an advertisement for a lovely one for five thousand dollars and, although it was far from her work at the cleaners, she would happily commute from so nice a neighborhood. The stares she had gotten as she strolled the neighborhood did not trouble her, since she knew how neatly dressed she was and how perfect her straightened hair. Finally, after a few afternoon strolls, she consulted a realtor. When she described her purpose and the couple of houses on sale she had found, the agent smiled and said, "I'm really sorry."

"They're sold already?" asked Lily.

The agent dropped her eyes then decided not to lie. "Well, no, but there are restrictions."

"On what?"

The agent sighed. Obviously not wanting to have this conversation, she lifted her desk blotter and pulled out some stapled papers. Turning a page, she showed Lily an underlined passage. Lily traced the lines of print with her forefinger:

No part of said property hereby conveyed shall ever be used or occupied by any hebrew or by any person of the ethiopian, malay, or asiatic race excepting only employees in domestic service.

"I've got rentals and apartments in other parts of the city. Would you like . . ."

"Thank you," said Lily. She raised her chin and left the office as quickly as pride let her. Nevertheless, when her anger cooled and after some mulling, she returned to the agency and rented a second floor, one bedroom apartment near Jackson Street.

Although her employers were far more considerate than the actresses at Skylight Studio, after six months of pressing and steaming for the Wangs, and even after they gave her a seventy-five cents raise, she was feeling stifled. She still wanted to buy that house or one like it. Into that restlessness stepped a tall man with a bundle of army issue clothes for 'same day' service. The Wang couple, at lunch in the back room, had left her to attend the counter. She told the customer the 'same day' service applied only if requests were made before noon. He could pick his things up the next day. She smiled when she spoke. He did not return the smile, but his eyes had such a quiet, far away look—like people who made their living staring at ocean waves—she relented.

"Well, I'll see what I can do. Come back at 5:30."

He did and, holding the clothes hangers over his shoulder, waited on the sidewalk for half an hour until she came out. Then he offered to walk her home.

"Do you want to come up?" Lily asked him.

"I'll do anything you say."

She laughed.

They slid into each other, becoming a couple of sorts

within a week. But months later, when he said he had to leave her for family reasons, Lily felt one abnormal pulse beat. That was all.

MEANTIME THE SMALL mechanics of life needed attention: unpaid bills, frequent gas leaks, mice, runs in her last pair of hose, hostile quarrelling neighbors, dripping faucets, frivolous heating, street dogs and the insane price of hamburger. None of these irritations did Frank take seriously and in all honesty she could not blame him. She knew that buried underneath the pile of complaints lay her yearning for her own house. It infuriated Lily that he shared none of her enthusiasm for achieving that goal. In fact he seemed to have no goals at all. When she questioned him about the future, what he wanted to do, he said, "Stay alive." Oh, she thought. The war still haunted him. So, whether annoyed or alarmed, she forgave him much: like that time in February when they went to a church convention held in a high school football field. Known more for table after table of delicious free food than for proselytizing, the church welcomed everybody. And everybody came—not only members of the congregation. The non-believers, crowding the entrance and lining up for food, outnumbered the Believers. Literature passed out by serious-looking young people and sweet faced elders was stuffed into purses and side pockets. When the

Home

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"Always the juiciest," echoed Cee.

"Can't beat the girl for flavor."

"Can't beat her for sugar."

Sarah slid a long, sharp knife from a drawer and, with intense anticipation of the pleasure to come, cut the girl in two.

SIXTEEN

WOMEN ARE EAGER TO TALK TO ME WHEN THEY HEAR MY LAST NAME. MONEY? THEY SNIGGER AND ASK THE SAME QUESTIONS: WHO NAMED ME THAT OR IF ANYBODY DID. IF I MADE IT UP TO MAKE MYSELF FEEL IMPORTANT OR WAS I A GAMBLER OR THIEF OR SOME OTHER KIND OF CROOK THEY SHOULD WATCH OUT FOR! WHEN I TELL THEM MY NICK NAME, WHAT FOLKS BACK HOME CALL ME, SMART MONEY, THEY SCREAM WITH LAUGHTER AND SAY: AIN'T NO SUCH THING AS DUMB MONEY, JUST DUMB FOLKS. GOT ANY MORE? YOU MUST HAVE MINE. NO END OF EASY TALK AFTER THAT AND IT'S ENOUGH TO KEEP A FRIENDSHIP GOING WAY AFTER IT'S DRIED UP JUST SO THEY CAN MAKE LAME JOKES: HEY, SMART MONEY, GIMMEE SOME. MONEY, COME ON OVER HERE. I GOT A DEAL YOU GONNA LOVE.

TRUTHFULLY, OTHER THAN GETTING LUCKY BACK IN

LOTUS AND SOME STREET GIRLS IN KENTUCKY, I'VE HAD ONLY TWO REGULAR WOMEN. I LIKED THE SMALL BREAKABLE THING INSIDE EACH ONE. WHATEVER THEIR PERSONALITY, SMARTS OR LOOKS, SOMETHING SOFT LAY INSIDE EACH. LIKE A BIRD'S BREASTBONE, SHAPED AND CHOSEN TO WISH ON. A LITTLE V, THINNER THAN BONE AND LIGHTLY HINGED, THAT I COULD BREAK WITH A FOREFINGER IF I WANTED TO, BUT NEVER DID. WANT TO, I MEAN. KNOWING IT WAS THERE, HIDING FROM ME, WAS ENOUGH.

IT WAS THE THIRD WOMAN WHO CHANGED EVERYTHING. IN HER COMPANY THE LITTLE WISHBONE V TOOK UP RESIDENCE IN MY OWN CHEST AND MADE ITSELF AT HOME. IT WAS HER FOREFINGER THAT KEPT ME ON EDGE. I MET HER AT A CLEANERS. LATE FALL, IT WAS, BUT IN THAT OCEAN LAPPED CITY, WHO COULD TELL? SOBER AS SUNLIGHT, I HANDED HER MY ARMY ISSUE AND COULDN'T TAKE MY EYES AWAY FROM HERS. I MUST HAVE LOOKED THE POOL, BUT I DIDN'T FEEL LIKE ONE. I FELT LIKE I'D COME HOME. FINALLY. I'D BEEN WANDERING. NOT TOTALLY HOMELESS, BUT CLOSE. DRINKING AND HANGING OUT IN MUSIC BARS ON JACKSON STREET, SLEEPING ON THE SOFAS OF DRINKING BUDDIES OR OUTDOORS, BETTING MY FORTY-THREE DOLLARS OF ARMY PAY IN CRAP GAMES AND POOL HALLS. AND WHEN THAT WAS GONE, I TOOK QUICK DAY JOBS UNTIL THE NEXT CHECK CAME. I KNEW I NEEDED HELP BUT THERE WASN'T ANY. WITH NO ARMY ORDERS TO FOLLOW OR COMPLAIN ABOUT I ENDED UP IN THE STREETS WITH NONE.

I REMEMBER EXACTLY WHY I HADN'T HAD A DRINK IN

FOUR DAYS AND NEEDED TO DRY CLEAN MY CLOTHES. IT WAS BECAUSE OF THAT MORNING WHEN I WALKED OVER BY THE BRIDGE. A CROWD WAS MILLING THERE ALONG WITH AN AMBULANCE. WHEN I GOT CLOSE ENOUGH I SAW A MEDIC'S ARMS HOLDING A LITTLE GIRL VOMITING WATER. BLOOD RAN FROM HER NOSE. A SADNESS HIT ME LIKE A FILE DRIVER. MY STOMACH FELL AND JUST THE THOUGHT OF WHISKEY MADE ME WANT TO HEAVE. I RUSHED OFF FEELING SHAKY THEN I SPENT A FEW NIGHTS ON BENCHES IN THE PARK UNTIL THE COPS RAN ME OFF. WHEN ON THE FOURTH DAY I CAUGHT MY REFLECTION IN A STORE WINDOW I THOUGHT IT WAS SOMEBODY ELSE. SOME DIRTY, PITIFUL LOOKING GUY. HE LOOKED LIKE THE ME IN A DREAM I KEPT HAVING WHERE I'M ON A BATTLEFIELD ALONE. NOBODY ANYWHERE. SILENCE EVERYWHERE. I KEEP WALKING BUT I DON'T FIND ANYBODY AT ALL. RIGHT THEN I DECIDED TO CLEAN UP. TO HELL WITH THE DREAMS. I NEEDED TO MAKE MY HOME BOYS PROUD. BE SOMETHING OTHER THAN A HAUNTED, HALF CRAZY DRUNK. SO WHEN I SAW THIS WOMAN AT THE CLEANERS, I WAS WIDE OPEN FOR HER. IF IT WASN'T FOR THAT LETTER, I'D STILL BE HANGING FROM HER APRON STRINGS. SHE HAD NO COMPETITION IN MY MIND EXCEPT FOR THE HORSES, A MAN'S FOOT AND YCIDRA TREMBLING UNDER MY ARM.

YOU ARE DEAD WRONG IF YOU THINK I WAS JUST SCOUTING FOR A HOME WITH A BOWL OF SEX IN IT. I WASN'T. SOMETHING ABOUT HER FLOORED ME, MADE ME WANT TO BE GOOD ENOUGH FOR HER. IS THAT TOO HARD FOR YOU TO UNDER-