VINTAGE

TAR BABY

TONI MORRISON

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About the Book

Into a white millionaire’s Caribbean mansion comes Jadine, a graduate of the Sorbonne, art historian – an American black now living in Paris and Rome; and Son, a criminal on the run: uneducated, violent, contemptuous – an American black from small-town Florida. He is a threat to her freedom – she is a threat to his identity ...

About the Author

Toni Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. She is the author of many novels, including *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved* (made into a major film), *Paradise* and, most recently, *A Mercy*. She has also received the National Book Critics Circle Award and a Pulitzer Prize for her fiction.

ALSO BY TONI MORRISON

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Paradise
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Song of Solomon
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The Dancing Mind
Playing in the Dark:
Whiteness and the Literary Imagination

FOR

Mrs. Caroline Smith
Mrs. Millie McTyeire
Mrs. Ardelia Willis
Mrs. Ratnah Wofford
Mrs. Lois Brooks
—and each of their sisters,
all of whom knew
their true and ancient
properties

Tar Baby

Toni Morrison

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

For it hath been declared
unto me of you, my brethren, by them
which are of the house of
Chloe, that there are
contentions among you.

I CORINTHIANS 1:11

FOREWORD

MY EAR IS so close to the radio I have to be shouted away lest it ruin my hearing forever. Or I am cross-legged on the linoleum floor, breathing through my mouth, rapt, watching the giveaway eyes of the grown-up telling the story. All narrative begins for me as listening. When I read, I listen. When I write, I listen—for silence, inflection, rhythm, rest. Then comes the image, the picture of the thing that I have to invent: the headless bride in her wedding dress; the forest clearing. There is performance, too: "zzz went the saw," accompanied by gesture. And cadence: "Old man Simon Gillicutty, caaatch me." I need to use everything—sound, image, performance—to get at the full meaning of the story because I may be called upon to re-tell it for the pleasure of adults. Their judgment of my interpretation is critical.

Once upon a time there was this farmer. He planted himself a garden. . . .

They are waiting. My mother is smiling in anticipation, but it is my grandmother I want most to please.

Yummy food, unique attention, playfulness, or loving sternness—these features are often summoned to sweeten one's memory of a grandmother. Whether true or screened by time and loss, the relationship between grandmother and child usually surfaces as a warm and satisfying one. Mine, too, is sugared, but so much deeper than satisfaction that I don't want to share it. Like the greedy child who can't get close enough to the radio, I want it all to myself. She told us stories to keep us working at tedious tasks: picking through baskets of wild grapes to sort out the bruised; to take our

minds off pain and chicken pox; to split open the dreary world to expose an enchanted one.

I was not my grandmother's favorite. No matter, she was mine. I see her cutting lard into biscuit dough. I see my hands in hers as she dances with me. I smell the drops of turpentine in a teaspoon of sugar given to us in springtime. The school dresses she sewed, two each for my sister and me—plaid with a white collar; and once, she made us bobby suits. Most important, she was the one who wanted my dreams, mine alone, to interpret when she played the numbers. They were important to her, so I recalled them, shaped them into stories which, like hers, needed interpretation.

Once upon a time there was this farmer. He planted himself a garden. . . .

Very funny, then scary, then funny again. Yet puzzling. At some level the tar baby story begged and offered understanding beyond "outlaw peasant outwits inventive master with wit and cunning." It's clear why the rabbit ate as much lettuce and cabbage as he could. It's clear why the farmer had to stop him. But why a tar figure? And why (in the version I was told) is it dressed as a female? Did the farmer understand the rabbit so well he could count on its curiosity? But the rabbit isn't curious at all; he passes by the tar baby, casually acknowledging its presence with "Good morning." It is his being ignored and her being ill-mannered that annoy, then infuriate him. He threatens, then strikes her. Now he is stupid; if one of his paws sticks, why try another? The inventive farmer has succeeded but gets involved in a form of punishment, and having understood motivation so well earlier, now misunderstands completely. Now the stupid rabbit becomes the clever one, pretending that the punishment he fears most is being returned to his own neighborhood. He knows the farmer would reckon this return to the 'hood as supreme torture, worse than death, so into the briar patch he is unceremoniously, gleefully

thrown. The figure of tar, having done its work, falls out of the action of the tale, yet remains not only as its strange, silent center, but also as the sticky mediator between master and peasant, plantation owner and slave. Constructed by the farmer to foil and entrap, it moves beyond trickery to art. The principal relationship is not limited to the rabbit and the farmer; it is also between the rabbit and the tar figure. She snares him; he knows it, yet compounds his entanglement while demanding to be freed. A love story, then. Difficult, unresponsive, but seducing woman and clever, anarchic male, each with definitions of independence and domesticity, of safety and danger that clash. The novel signals this conflict at the beginning: “He believed he was safe.” “Believed” rather than thought in order to stamp doubt, suggest unease.

It was the image of tar, however, artfully shaped, black, disturbing, threatening yet inviting, that led me to African masks: ancient, alive, and breathing, their features exaggerated, their power mysterious. A blatant sculpture sitting at the heart of the folktale became the bones of the narrative. All of the characters are themselves masks. And like African masks, the novel merged the primal and the contemporary, lore and reality. It was a blend that proved heady, even dizzying, but I believed the plotline solid and familiar enough to withhold or contain a reader’s sense of vertigo. If so, the original tale would have earned a new life. Which brings me back to the linoleum floor, listening to the women singing and telling their way through a buried history to stinging truth, enchanting the world where I was “born and bred at.”

They said she was dying. Something like “albumen” in the blood, a visiting doctor said. She mustn’t eat the whites of eggs. That was the diagnosis and the prescription. It was a brew of hit-and-miss medical attention, faith in God’s will, and a conviction that illness was mostly caused by food. (One of her daughters died at eighteen either of sitting on

wet grass and catching “cold in the womb” or of the blackberry cobbler she ate the night before. In any case, my grandmother woke to find her sweet baby girl sleeping beside her as cold as frost.) Whatever the cause, my grandmother became very ill. Everyone available watched over her, and at some point I was sent into the bedroom to read to her. Something from the Bible, they said, to comfort her. I read solemnly, not understanding a word. I wanted to tell her a story instead—to amuse, maybe even cure her. Or recount a dream I’d had. But that would be frivolous, indeed, compared to the Bible. Silently she thrashed, turning restlessly under the sheet. I thought she wanted to run, to get away from this stupid grandchild who was awed by her assignment and inadequate to the task. Or perhaps she just wanted to go, to leave life, get quit of it. Minus income, she and her husband were living by turns with one offspring, then another. Although each of her daughters was pleased to have her and cared for her with fierce devotion, she was, in fact, like her husband, homeless. This sequence of beds—none their own—must have been unsettling if not humiliating. At the time I thought it a lovely life—traveling between towns, neighborhoods, “visiting” members of one’s family. But watching her walk her bedsheets, whip her head to and fro on the pillow . . . I don’t know. Of course, she was ill. Albumen and all. . . . But surely she could not die or want to. A few days later, when they told me she was dead, I thought, now no one will ask for my dreams. No one will insist I tell her a story.

Once upon a time, a long time ago . . .

There were four of us in the room: me, my mother, my grandmother, and my great-grandmother. The oldest one intemperate, brimming with hard, scary wisdom. The youngest, me, a sponge. My mother gifted, gregarious, burdened with insight. My grandmother a secret treasure whose presence anchored the frightening, enchanted world. Three women and a girl who never stopped listening,

watching, seeking their advice, and eager for their praise. All four of us people the writing of *Tar Baby* as witness, as challenge, as judges intent on the uses to which stories are put and the manner of their telling.

But only one of them needed my dreams.

HE BELIEVED HE was safe. He stood at the railing of H.M.S. *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. Seven girlish white cruisers bobbed in the harbor but a mile or so down current was a deserted pier. Carefully casual, he went below to the quarters he shared with the 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, he ducked through the passageway and returned to the top deck. He swung one leg over the railing, hesitated and considered diving headfirst, but, trusting what his feet could tell him more than what his hands could, changed his mind and simply stepped away 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. 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—toward 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 trod 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 trod 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 woman it pushed him. He fought hard to break through, but couldn't. The hand was forcing him away from the shore. The man turned his head to see what lay behind him. All he saw was water, blood-tinted by a sun sliding into it like a fresh heart. Far away to his right was *Stor Konigsgaarten*, lit fore and aft.

His strength was leaving him and he knew he should not waste it fighting the current. He decided to let it carry him for a while. Perhaps it would disappear. In any case, it would give him time to regain strength. He floated as best he could in water that heaved and pulsed in the ammonia-scented air and was getting darker all the time. He knew he was in a part of the world that had never known and would never know twilight and that very soon he might be zooming toward the horizon in a pitch-black sea. Queen of France was already showing lights scattered like teardrops from a sky pierced to weeping by the blade tip of an early star. Still the water-lady cupped him in the palm of her hand, and nudged him out to sea. Suddenly he saw new lights—four of them—to his left. He could not judge the distance, but knew they had just been turned on aboard a small craft. Just as suddenly the water-lady removed her hand and the

man swam toward the boat anchored in blue water and not the green.

As he neared it, he circled. He heard nothing and saw no one. Moving port side, he made out *Seabird II* and a three-foot rope ladder gently tapping the bow. He grabbed a rung and hoisted himself up and aboard. Panting lightly he padded across the deck. There was no trace of the sun and his canvas shoes were gone.

He sidled along the deck, his back against the walls of the wheelhouse, and looked into its curved windows. No one was there, but he heard music from below and smelled food cooked with a heavy dose of curry. He had nothing in mind to say if anyone suddenly appeared. It was better not to plan, not to have a ready-made story because, however tight, prepared stories sounded most like a lie. The sex, weight, the demeanor of whomever he encountered would inform and determine his tale.

He made his way aft and cautiously descended a short flight of stairs. The music was louder there and the smell of curry stronger. The farthest door stood ajar and from it came the light, the music and the curry. Nearer to him were two closed doors. He chose the first; it opened into a dark closet. The man stepped into it and closed the door softly after him. It smelled heavily of citrus and oil. Nothing was clear so he squatted where he was and listened to what seemed to be radio or record-player music. Slowly he moved his hand forward in the dark and felt nothing as far as his arm could reach. Moving it to the right he touched a wall. He duck-waddled closer to it and sank to the floor, his back against the wall.

He was determined to remain alert at all costs, but the water-lady brushed his eyelids with her knuckles. He dropped into sleep like a rock.

The engine did not wake him—he had slept with the noise of heavier ones for years. Nor did the boat’s list. Before the engines was the forgotten sound of a woman’s voice—so

new and welcoming it broke his dream life apart. He woke thinking of a short street of yellow houses with white doors which women opened wide and called out, “Come on in here, you honey you,” their laughter sprawling like a quilt over the command. But nothing sprawled in this woman’s voice.

“I’m never lonely,” it said. “Never.”

The man’s scalp tingled. He licked his lips and tasted the salt caked in his mustache.

“Never?” It was another woman’s voice—lighter, half in doubt, half in awe.

“Not at all,” said the first woman. Her voice seemed warm on the inside, cold at the edges. Or was it the other way around?

“I envy you,” said the second voice, but it was farther away now, floating upward and accompanied by footsteps on stairs and the swish of cloth—corduroy against corduroy, or denim against denim—the sound only a woman’s thighs could make. A delicious autumn invitation to come in out of the rain and curl up by the stove.

The man could not hear the rest of their talk—they were topside now. He listened awhile longer and then stood up slowly, carefully, and reached for the doorknob. The passageway was brightly lit—the music and curry smell gone. Through the space between doorjamb and door he saw a porthole and in it, deep night. Something crashed to the deck and a moment later rolled to the door saddle where it stopped in a finger of light at his foot. It was a bottle and he could just make out Bain de Soleil on the label. He did not move. His mind was blank but on call. He had not heard anyone descend, but now a woman’s hand came into view. Beautifully shaped, pink nail polish, ivory fingers, wedding rings. She picked up the bottle and he could hear her soft grunt as she stooped. She stood and her hand disappeared. Her feet made no sound on the teak

boards, but after a few seconds had passed he heard a door—to the galley, perhaps—open and close.

He was the only man aboard. He felt it—a minus something, which eased him. The two or three—he didn't know how many many—women who were handling the boat would soon dock at a private pier where there would be no customs inspector stamping passports and furrowing his brow with importance.

The light from the passage allowed him to examine the closet. It was a shelved storage room with a mixture of snorkeling and fishing gear and ship's supplies. A topless crate took up most of the room on the floor. In it were twelve miniature orange trees, all bearing fruit. The man pulled off one of the tiny oranges no bigger than a good-sized strawberry and ate it. The meat was soft, fiberless and bitter. He ate another. And another. And as he ate a wide surgical hunger opened up in him. He had not eaten since the night before, but the hunger that cut through him now was as unaccounted for as it was sudden.

The boat was under way and it did not take him long to realize that they were headed out, not for Queen of France after all. But not very far, he thought. Women with polished fingernails who needed suntan oil would not sail off into the night if they were going very far. So he chewed bitter oranges and waited on his haunches in the closet. When the boat finally drew along and the engine was cut, his hunger was no longer formal; it made him squeeze his fingers together to keep from bolting out of the closet toward the kitchen. But he waited—until the light footsteps were gone. Then he stepped into the passageway spotted in two places by moonlight. Topside he watched two figures moving behind the beam of a heavy-duty flashlight. And when he heard a car's engine start up, he went below. Quickly he found the galley, but because lights would not do, he patted counter surfaces for matches. There weren't any and the stove was electric. He opened a little refrigerator and

discovered its bottled water and half a lime. Elsewhere, in refrigerator light, he located a jar of Dijon mustard, but nothing of the curry food. The dishes were rinsed and so was a white carton. The women had not *cooked*—they had warmed up carry-out food that they'd brought aboard. The man ran his finger deep into corners of the white carton and up its sides. Whatever had been left, they must have given to the gulls. He looked in the cupboards: glasses, cups, dishes, a blender, candles, plastic straws, multicolored toothpicks and at last a box of Norwegian flat bread. He covered the bread with mustard, ate it and drank all that was left of the bottled water before going back on deck. There he saw the stars and exchanged stares with the moon, but he could see very little of the land, which was just as well because he was gazing at the shore of an island that, three hundred years ago, had struck slaves blind the moment they saw it.

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THE END OF the world, as it turned out, was nothing more than a collection of magnificent winter houses on Isle des Chevaliers. When laborers imported from Haiti came to clear the land, clouds and fish were convinced that the world was over, that the sea-green green of the sea and the sky-blue sky of the sky were no longer permanent. Wild parrots that had escaped the stones of hungry children in Queen of France agreed and raised havoc as they flew away to look for yet another refuge. Only the champion daisy trees were serene. After all, they were part of a rain forest already two thousand years old and scheduled for eternity, so they ignored the men and continued to rock the diamondbacks that slept in their arms. It took the river to persuade them that indeed the world was altered. That never again would the rain be equal, and by the time they realized it and had run their roots deeper, clutching the earth like lost boys found, it was too late. The men had already folded the earth where there had been no fold and hollowed her where there had been no hollow, which explains what happened to the river. It crested, then lost its course, and finally its head. Evicted from the place where it had lived, and forced into unknown turf, it could not form its pools or waterfalls, and ran every which way. The clouds gathered together, stood still and watched the river scuttle around the forest floor, crash headlong into the haunches of hills with no notion of where it was going, until exhausted, ill and grieving, it slowed to a stop just twenty leagues short of the sea.

The clouds looked at each other, then broke apart in confusion. Fish heard their hooves as they raced off to carry

the news of the scatterbrained river to the peaks of hills and the tops of the champion daisy trees. But it was too late. The men had gnawed through the daisy trees until, wild-eyed and yelling, they broke in two and hit the ground. In the huge silence that followed their fall, orchids spiraled down to join them.

When it was over, and houses instead grew in the hills, those trees that had been spared dreamed of their comrades for years afterward and their nightmare mutterings annoyed the diamondbacks who left them for the new growth that came to life in spaces the sun saw for the first time. Then the rain changed and was no longer equal. Now it rained not just for an hour every day at the same time, but in seasons, abusing the river even more. Poor insulted, brokenhearted river. Poor demented stream. Now it sat in one place like a grandmother and became a swamp the Haitians called Sein de Vieilles. And witch's tit it was: a shriveled fogbound oval seeping with a thick black substance that even mosquitoes could not live near.

But high above it were hills and vales so bountiful it made visitors tired to look at them: bougainvillea, avocado, poinsettia, lime, banana, coconut and the last of the rain forest's champion trees. Of the houses built there, the oldest and most impressive was L'Arbe de la Croix. It had been designed by a brilliant Mexican architect, but the Haitian laborers had no union and therefore could not distinguish between craft and art, so while the panes did not fit their sashes, the windowsills and door saddles were carved lovingly to perfection. They sometimes forgot or ignored the determination of water to flow downhill so the toilets and bidets could not always produce a uniformly strong swirl of water. But the eaves were so wide and deep that the windows could be left open even in a storm and no rain could enter the rooms—only wind, scents and torn-away leaves. The floor planks were tongue-in-groove, but the hand-kilned tiles from Mexico, though beautiful to

behold, loosened at a touch. Yet the doors were plumb and their knobs, hinges and locks secure as turtles.

It was a wonderful house. Wide, breezy and full of light. Built in the days when plaster was taken for granted and with the sun and the airstream in mind, it needed no air conditioning. Graceful landscaping kept the house just under a surfeit of beauty. Every effort had been made to keep it from looking “designed.” Almost nothing was askew and the few things that were had charm: the little island touches here and there (a washhouse, a kitchen garden, for example) were practical. At least that was the judgment of discriminating visitors. They all agreed that except for the unfortunate choice of its name it was “the most handsomely articulated and blessedly unrhetorical house in the Caribbean.” One or two had reservations—wondered whether all that interior sunlight wasn’t a little too robust and hadn’t the owner gone rather overboard with the recent addition of a greenhouse? Valerian Street was mindful of their criticism, but completely indifferent to it. His gray eyes drifted over the faces of such guests like a four o’clock shadow on its way to twilight. They reminded him of the Philadelphia widows who, when they heard he was going to spend the whole first year of his retirement in his island house, said, “You’ll be back. Six months and you will be bored out of your mind.” That was four Decembers ago, and the only things he missed were hydrangeas and the postman. The new greenhouse made it possible to reproduce the hydrangea but the postman was lost to him forever. The rest of what he loved he brought with him: some records, garden shears, a sixty-four-bulb chandelier, a light blue tennis shirt and the Principal Beauty of Maine. Ferrara Brothers (Domestic and International) took care of the rest, and with the help of two servants, the Principal Beauty and mounds of careful correspondence he was finally installed for the year on a hill high enough to watch the sea from three sides. Not that he was interested.

Beyond its providing the weather that helped or prevented the steamers bringing mail, he never gave the sea a thought. And whatever he did think about, he thought it privately in his greenhouse. In the late afternoons, when the heat had to be taken seriously, and early in the morning, he was there. Long before the Principal Beauty had removed her sleeping mask, he turned the switch that brought the “Goldberg” Variations into the greenhouse. At first he’d experimented with Chopin and some of the Russians, but the Magnum Rex peonies, overwhelmed by all that passion, whined and curled their lips. He settled finally on Bach for germination, Haydn and Liszt for strong sprouting. After that all of the plants seemed content with Rampal’s Rondo in D. By the time he sugared his breakfast coffee, the peonies, the anemones and all their kind had heard forty or fifty minutes of music which nourished them but set Sydney the butler’s teeth on edge although he’d heard some variety of it every day for forty years. What made it bearable now was that the music was confined to the greenhouse and not swarming all through the house as it often did back in Philadelphia. He could hear it only thinly now as he wiped moisture beads from a glass of iced water with a white napkin. He set it near the cup and saucer and noticed how much the liver spots had faded on his employer’s hand. Mr. Street thought it was the lotion he rubbed on nightly, but Sydney thought it was the natural tanning of the skin in this place they had all come to three years ago.

Except for the kitchen, which had a look of permanence, the rest of the house had a hotel feel about it—a kind of sooner or later leaving appearance: a painting or two hung in an all right place but none was actually stationed or properly lit; the really fine china was still boxed and waiting for a decision nobody was willing to make. It was hard to serve well in the tentativeness. No crystal available (it too was closed away in Philadelphia) so a few silver trays had to do for everything from fruit to petits fours. Every now and

then, the Principal Beauty, on one of her trips, brought back from the States another carton chock-full of something Sydney asked for: the blender, the carborundum stone, two more tablecloths. These items had to be carefully selected because they were exchanged for other items that she insisted on taking back to Philadelphia. It was her way of keeping intact the illusion that they still lived in the States but were wintering near Dominique. Her husband encouraged her fantasy by knotting every loose string of conversation with the observation “It can wait till we get home.” Six months after they’d arrived Sydney told his wife that periodic airing of trunk luggage in the sunlight was more habit than intention. They would have to tear down that greenhouse to get him off the island because as long as it was there, he’d be there too. What the devil does he do in there, she had asked him.

“Relaxes a little, that’s all. Drinks a bit, reads, listens to his records.”

“Can’t nobody spend every day in a shed for three years without being up to some devilment,” she said.

“It’s not a shed,” said Sydney. “It’s a greenhouse I keep telling you.”

“Whatever you call it.”

“He grows hydrangeas in there. And dahlias.”

“If he wants hydrangeas he should go back home. He hauls everybody down to the equator to grow Northern flowers?”

“It’s not just that. Remember how he liked his study back at the house? Well, it’s like that, except it’s a greenhouse kind of a study.”

“Anybody build a greenhouse on the equator ought to be shame.”

“This is not the equator.”

“Could of fooled me.”

“Nowhere near it.”

“You mean there’s some place on this planet hotter than this?”

“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 someplace else.”

“He’ll be here till he dies,” Sydney told her. “Less that greenhouse burns up.”

“Well, I’ll pray nothing happens to it,” she said, but she needn’t have. 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 Blancs and read seed catalogs while he sipped the wine. Sometimes he gazed through the little greenhouse panes at the washhouse. Other times he checked catalogs, 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 a fifty-six-foot Palaos called *Seabird II* and the boat skills of the Filipino 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 a.m. Sydney banged while the Filipino chatted with the taxi driver. The dentist roared out 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 change 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.

This encounter, born in encouraged hatred, ended in affection. The good doctor let Valerian swallow a little of his brandy through a straw and against his better judgment, and Valerian recognized a man who took his medical oaths seriously. They got good and drunk together that night, and the combination of Novocain 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 abscess 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.

Both had been married before and the long years of a second marriage had done nothing to make either forget his first. The memory of those years of grief in the wake of a termagant was still keen. Michelin had remarried within a year of his divorce, but Valerian stayed a bachelor for a long time and on purpose until he went out for an after lunch stroll on a wintry day in Maine, a stroll he hoped would get rid of the irritable boredom he'd felt among all those food industry appliance reps. His walk from the inn had taken him only two blocks to the main street when he found himself in the middle of a local Snow Carnival Parade. He saw the polar bear and then he saw her. The bear was standing on its hind feet, its front ones raised in benediction. A rosy-cheeked girl was holding on to one of the bear's forefeet like a bride. The plastic igloo behind them threw into dazzling relief her red velvet coat and the ermine muff she waved to the crowd. The moment he saw her something inside him knelt down.

Now he sat in the December sunlight watching his servant pour coffee into his cup.

"Has it come?"

"Sir?"

"The salve."

"Not yet." Sydney removed the lid from a tiny box of saccharin tablets and edged it toward his employer.

"They take their sweet time."

"Mail's cut back to twice a week I told you."

"It's been a month."

"Two weeks. Still botherin you?"

"Not right this minute, but they'll start up again." Valerian reached for the sugar cubes.

“You could be a little less hardheaded about those shoes. Sandals or a nice pair of huaraches all day would clear up every one of them bunions.”

“They’re not bunions. They’re corns.” Valerian plopped the cubes into his cup.

“Corns too.”

“When you get your medical degree call me. Ondine bake these?”

“No. Mrs. Street brought them back yesterday.”

“She uses that boat like it’s a bicycle. Back and forth; back and forth.”

“Why don’t you get one of your own? That thing’s too big for her. Can’t water-ski with it. Can’t even dock it in the town. They have to leave it in one place and get in another little boat just to land.”

“Why should I buy her a boat and let it sit ten months out of a year? If those nitwits don’t mind her using theirs, it’s fine with me.”

“Maybe she’d stay the whole year if she had one.”

“Not likely. And I prefer she should stay because her husband’s here, not because a boat is. Anyway, tell Ondine not to serve them anymore.”

“No good?”

“One of the worst things about being old is eating. First you have to find something you can eat and second you have to try not to drop it all over yourself.”

“I wouldn’t know about that.”

“Of course not. You’re fifteen minutes younger than I am. Nevertheless, tell Ondine no more of these. Too flaky. They fly all over no matter what you do.”

“Croissant supposed to be flaky. That’s as short a dough as you can make.”

“Just tell her, Sydney.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And find out if the boy can straighten those bricks. They are popping up all over the place.”

“He needs cement he said.”

“No. No cement. He’s to pack them down properly. The soil will hold them if he does it right.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Mrs. Street awake?”

“I believe so. Anything else special you going to want for the holidays?”

“No. Just the geese. I won’t be able to eat a bit of it, but I want to see it on the table anyway. And some more thalomide.”

“You want Yardman to bring you thalomide? He can’t even pronounce it.”

“Write a note. Tell him to give it to Dr. Michelin.”

“All right.”

“And tell Ondine that half Postum and half coffee is revolting. Worse than Postum alone.”

“Okay. Okay. She thought it would help.”

“I know what she thought, but the help is worse than the problem.”

“That might not be what the trouble is, you know.”

“You are determined to make me have an ulcer. I don’t have an ulcer. You have an ulcer. I have occasional irregularity.”

“I *had* an ulcer. It’s gone now and Postum helped it go.”

“I’m delighted. Did you say she was awake?”

“She was. Could have gone back to sleep, though.”

“What did she want?”

“Want?”

“Yes. Want. The only way you could know she was awake is if she rang you up there. What did she want?”

“Towels, fresh towels.”

“Sydney.”

“She did. Ondine forgot to—”

“What were the towels wrapped around?”

“Why you keep thinking that? Everything she drinks you see her drink. A little dinner wine, that’s all and hardly more

than a glass of that. She never was a drinker. You the one. Why you always trying to make her into one?”

“I’ll speak to Jade.”

“What could Jade know that I don’t?”

“Nothing, but she’s as honest as they come.”

“Come on, now, Mr. Street. It’s the truth.”

Valerian held a pineapple quarter with his fork and began cutting small regular pieces from it.

“All right,” said Sydney, “I’ll tell you. She wanted Yardman to stop by the airport before he comes Thursday.”

“What for, pray?”

“A trunk. She’s expecting a trunk. It’s been shipped already, she said, and ought to be here by then.”

“What an idiot.”

“Sir?”

“Idiot. Idiot.”

“Mrs. Street, sir?”

“Mrs. Street, Mr. Street, you, Ondine. Everybody. This is the first time in thirty years I’ve been able to enjoy this house. Really live in it. Not for a month or a weekend but for a while, and everybody is conspiring to ruin it for me. Coming and going, going and coming. It’s beginning to feel like Thirtieth Street Station. Why can’t everybody settle down, relax, have a nice simple Christmas. Not a throng, just a nice simple Christmas dinner.”

“She gets a little bored, I guess. Got more time than she can use.”

“Insane. Jade’s here. They get on like schoolgirls, it seems to me. Am I wrong?”

“No, you’re right. They get along fine, like each other’s company, both of them.”

“They don’t like it enough to let it go at that. Apparently we are expecting *more* company, and since I am merely the owner and operator of this hotel, there is no reason to let me know about it.”

“Can I get you some toast?”