**Tar Baby** by Toni Morrison

*Tar Baby* is a novel written by Toni Morrison and published in 1981. Morrison was a professor at various universities all over the United States, but she moved to NYC to become a part time writer in the mornings before she went to work as an editor at Random House. Even then, she was immersed in African American fiction works. When Morrison was getting her masters, she studied a lot of Faulkner and Woolf, and her experience with their stream-of-consciousness, multi-perspective narratives affected her own writing greatly.

When Morrison was writing *Tar Baby*, the Civil Rights Movement was just picking up popularity in the 1950s and 60s. As African Americans were fighting to end segregation and violence against them, they were also working to equalize their economic opportunities and potential. The nonviolent tactics of the civil rights movement were deemed passive and too open to assimilation, and during the late 1960s, those who criticized racial integration created the black power movement, emphasizing racial pride and meeting violence with violence.

*Tar Baby* tells of characters who find themselves caught between the diverging and increasingly incompatible agendas of the two movements working for similar end results. The protagonist Jadine Childs is a fashion model who has an education, but Son was raised in an all-black community in Florida. Childs is almost completely assimilated, while Son is capable of pleasing almost everyone but feels most connected to his black community. The tension between these two characters who live with ideals on completely opposite sides of the spectrum create a moving force in the plot. Morrison completely abandons social realism, instead writing about race and women in a realistic and symbolic way.

**Character List**

**B.J. Bridges** B.J. Bridges is one of Michael's favorite teachers. He is also a famous poet. He is invited by Margaret (against the wishes of Valerian) to spend Christmas at Valerian and Margaret's house called L'Arbe de la Croix, but B.J. Bridges does not show up.

**Ernie Paul** Son's childhood friend.

**Drake** Son's childhood friend.

**Aunt Rosa** Aunt Rosa is Son's Aunt. She kindly allows Jadine to stay with her when Jadine visits Florida, and offers Jadine a nightgown when she sees that Jadine is unclothed. Aunt Rosa prides herself in being the ideal southern woman.

**Carl** Carl is one of Son's friends. He gives both Jadine and Son a ride upon their arrival to Florida.

**Old Man (Franklin Green)** Son's father whose real name is Franklin Green.

**Cheyenne** Cheyenne was Son's first wife who committed adultery. She was unintentionally killed by Son during his attempt to punish her for committing adultery.

**Ellen** Ellen is Soldier's wife.
**Soldier** Soldier is among Son's best friends. They have known each other since childhood. Although Jadine finds Soldier annoying, Soldier gives Jadine plenty of information about Son's childhood. Soldier also vouches for Son, telling Jadine that Son would be a great match for Jadine.

**Dawn** Dawn is a friend of Jadine who finds herself attracted to Son. She lives in New York, and, thus, offers Jadine and Son a place to stay when they are in New York.

**Dr. Michelin** Dr. Michelin is a Frenchman who was exiled from Algeria. He is a close friend of Valerian.

**Ryk** Ryk is Jadine's wealthy boyfriend (and almost fiance). Although he is rich, he is not very respectful or affectionate towards Jadine. Jadine believes that he only wants to marry her to prove that he is progressive by marrying a black woman.

**Alma Estée (Mary)** Alma Estée (Called "Mary" by some of the characters in the book) is a bit of a beauty-obsessed character. She is the daughter of Therese and Gideon. She ends up becoming a janitor at the airport on the island after her parents are fired.

**Michael Street** Michael is Margaret and Valerian's son. Throughout the story, he only ever appears in flashbacks. The characters in present-time do, however, talk about him quite often. His parents criticize him for failing to treat black people like normal human beings, and instead treating them as though they are exotic. Otherwise, Michael has good intentions and other characters remember him as a kind-hearted person.

**Thérèse (Mary)** Thérèse is the wife of Gideon and the mother of Alma Estée. She harbors a lot of prejudice against people who are not from the island. She particularly dislikes Americans due to the fact that she had once made a living on the island as a "wet nurse," but once baby formula was invented she was put out of business and nearly starved. She is a very passionate black woman who absolutely hates Ondine and Sydney. She is fired (along with her husband) by Valerian for stealing apples.

**Gideon (Yardman)** Gideon is the husband of Thérèse and the father of Alma Estée. He is a black man who works as a repairman at the L'Arbe de la Croix. He (along with his wife) is fired by Valerian for stealing apples. Gideon lived in the United States for many years in hopes of becoming wealthy until his wife tricked him into moving back to the island.

**Ondine (Nanadine)** Ondine is a black woman who makes a living as the cook for the Streets family. She is married to Sydney. Although she is only Jadine's aunt, she is often affectionately referred to as "Nanadine" by Jadine, who looks at Ondine as a mother figure. She mysteriously dislikes Margaret for much of the book, and she later reveals that this is because Margaret had abused her own son when he was an infant. She shares feeling of resentment with her husband against their niece, Jadine, who decides to leave her aunt and uncle for France as they age, rather than taking care of them.

**Sydney** Sydney is Ondine's husband and Jadine's Uncle. He has worked as a butler for Valerian for many years. He is a very dignified man who expects respect from everyone, and proudly refers to himself as a "Philadelphia Negro." Despite being a servant, he believes that
he is among the most respectable people of the black race. He dislikes Son and does not trust him. His pride causes him to occasionally talk back to Valerian, but he always does as he is told. Once Valerian discovers that his wife, Margaret, regularly abused their son as a child, Sydney is able to take power in the house away from the vulnerable Valerian. Sydney is heartbroken at the end of the book, as he has worked tirelessly to provide for his niece Jadine who chooses to pursue her own desires rather than care for her aunt and uncle as they grow older and less self-sufficient.

Margaret Street Maragaret is the second wife of Valerian, despite being twenty years younger than Valerian. She is also the mother of Michael Street. As a result of her history as a high school beauty queen, she was once referred to as "The Principal Beauty of Maine." Much of her identity has been defined by her physical appearance—beautiful red hair and fair skin. She finds herself pretty depressed, as she was married to Valerian at the young age of 17 and lacks relationships outside of her household. Although at one point she was becoming friends with Ondine (the family's cook), Valerian ordered her not to make friends with the servants. Margaret insists that she and her son have a very deep relationship, despite it being revealed that she abused him when he was an infant. She would discreetly burn him with cigarettes and stab him with pins. She later explained that she did this because she was tired of being controlled by both her husband and her infant son.

Valerian Street Valerian is the wealthy owner of L'Arbe de la Croix. He was once a candy manufacturer, although now he is retired. He is the white boss of all of the major black characters in this book, including Ondine, Gideon, Sydney, and Thérèse. Valerian has a bit of a mean streak, and thrives off of his control and power over those who he employs on the island. He is devastated when he discovers that his wife (Margaret) has abused their son (Michael). This is because he realizes that despite having financial control over his employees, he lacked the power to ensure that his son was safe.

Son (William Green) Son is a passionate protagonist in the book. He is a handsome black man and is Jadine’s lover. Son believes that black and white people are inherently different and should not integrate or live together. He is very loyal to members of the black community. Son's aforementioned passionate nature landed him in quite some trouble when he unintentionally killed his wife for committing adultery. He carries the alias, "Son," due to his criminal past.

Jadine Childs Jadine is the other protagonist in the novel. She is a beautiful black woman who studied in Paris (while working as a model) thanks to Valerian's generous payment of her schooling fees. She attended a very prestigious school called The Sorbonne. Because of her immersion in European culture, she does not believe that she is authentically black. Men often approach her, despite her relationship with Son and engagement to Ryk. Being an orphan, Jadine often feels isolated and family-less, despite being raised by her aunt and uncle (Ondine and Sydney). Jadine's feeling of isolation is represented not only by her independent way of thinking, but also by her lack of confidence in her choices.
In the middle of the night in December, a man tries to swim to the shore after jumping overboard. He manages to get aboard a yacht that lands in the Isle des Chevaliers. The man disembarks and the sound of music and smell of food leads him into a mansion where he hides in a closet.

The mansion is owned by a wealthy white man named Valerian Street. He lives in there with his wife Margaret. They came to live there three years ago from the United States. Valerian has promised his wife that they will go back to the States one day, but he seems to enjoy his time on the island and especially in his greenhouse where he isolates himself all the time.

One morning over breakfast the couple engage in their routine verbal fight. Margaret is excited that their son Michael is coming to visit for Christmas, but Valerian is not convinced that he will come. He objects to the fact that she has invited a lot of guests and that she never cooks. She strikes back by saying that he has come to hate people which is the reason why their son Michael doesn’t visit often.

In the house’s kitchen, the two black servants, Sydney and his wife Ondine, discuss the Christmas dinner details. They are joined by their niece Jadine Childs. Jadine is a beautiful young lady who has come to visit right after finishing her studies (that Valerian paid for) in Paris.

One night, Valerian and Margaret have a heated argument over dinner in the presence of Jadine. The fight ends with Margaret going to her room where she is heard screaming and the only word she utters when they find her is "black." When Sydney goes to check the room with a gun, he comes back with a black man that he says was hiding in the closet. To everybody’s surprise, Valerian invites the man for a drink and to stay.

The next morning Margaret has locked herself up in her room and expresses her disgust at the fact that her husband has invited a stranger who was hiding in her closet for a drink and to stay in the house. She thinks that he has done so only to humiliate her.

At breakfast, Valerian invites the man to sit and eat with him. Valerian learns that the man’s name is Son. He is an American who jumped from a ship and then made his way through the house in search of food. When Jadine is in her room checking the fur coat that her rich white boyfriend has sent to her, she is joined by Son. There is tension in the air between the two as Son frightens Jadine by his looks and language. The two have a fight and Jadine storms out of the room angry and confused.

Days later, however, Jadine becomes more sympathetic towards Son as he has become less frightening after cleaning, shaving, cutting his hair, and putting on new clothes. Jadine eventually invites him for a picnic and the two seem to get along very well despite the differences in their backgrounds.

The day of the Christmas dinner, none of the invited guests, including Michael, come to the house. Valerian decides instead to invite everybody to the dinner; Sydney, Ondine, Jadine, Son, and Margaret all sit around the table to eat and chat. Valerian announces that he fired the two servants Therese and Gideon because they stole apples. Ondine is upset at this news because the two servants were helping her a lot. Tensions mount between the different characters that culminate in a fist fight between Ondine and Margaret. When the
two are separated, Ondine reveals that Margaret was torturing and abusing her son Micheal by sticking pins in his behind and by burning him with cigarettes. This deeply shocks Valeriane. Jadine is also terrified at what happened and asks Son to come to sleep with her in the bed to comfort her.

Son and Jadine leave the island for New York. There they rent an apartment and work in several odd jobs. Despite the fact that the two seem to enjoy the company of each other as lovers, Son insists that he wishes to live in his hometown Eloe. They eventually head there for a visit. Eloe is a small rural town. While Son feels that he is in his element, Jadine is bored and hates everything about it. When they return to New York, their relationship changes for the worst and they fight all the time. After a heated argument, Jadine leaves Son and decides to go back to Paris. She first goes back to the island to recuperate the fur coat that her white boyfriend sent her. Before she travels to Paris, she tells Ondine and Sydney not to inform Son of her whereabouts.

Shortly after Jadine leaves for Paris, Son arrives at the island looking for Jadine. He finds Therese and Gideon who advise him to let go of the girl. When Son insists, Therese tells him that she will take him to Valerian's house in Isle des Chevaliers by boat. As she takes him up the river in a boat, a heavy fog falls and it is very hard to see anything. At the back of the island, Therese tells him to go ashore and he will find his way. He doubts that, telling her that the house is far from here, but she keeps pushing him and telling him that he will find his way. When he is in the water, she moves away and tells him not to go to Valerian's house and to forget her because she has forgotten her ancient properties. She tells him that the horsemen, the descendants of the first slaves of the island, are waiting for him and that he must choose them to free himself from Jadine. The jungle opens its trees and leaves to welcome Son as he has clearly chosen to join the horsemen.

Chapter wise Summary

Chapter 1

The opening of the first chapter describes the history of Isle des Chevaliers since the laborers appeared 300 years ago. When the slaves arrived, they were brought to the island to clear it, and they disturbed the wild birds, the daisy trees, and ultimately the patterns of the weather, changing the course of the island’s river. The oldest house on the island is called L'Arbre de la Croix, and it has a number of architectural quirks and is compared in appearance to a hotel, everywhere except for in its kitchen. But the home’s current owner, Valerian Street, fell in love with it and bought it so he could retire to it from Philadelphia. He still pretends to his wife, Margaret (also known as the “Principal Beauty of Maine”), that they will return to the United States, but when they came to the island, he brought all of his favorite things with him, and he seems committed to living on the island permanently. He spends a lot of time in his greenhouse, where he grows, among other things, hydrangeas, a kind of flower that he misses from the United States. Valerian has one friend on the island—a Frenchman from Algeria named Dr. Michelin, whom Valerian met when he was suffering from a toothache. The two men both feel like exiles from their native lands.
One morning in December, Valerian’s butler, Sydney, serves him breakfast. The two men have a familiar relationship, and they banter about a number of things. Valerian asks Sydney to pick up some ant poison when he is out shopping for the upcoming holiday dinner. Sydney tells Valerian that Margaret expects Michael, their son, to come home for Christmas, and Valerian says she is silly and speculates that she must have been drinking. He also complains that the house is starting to feel like the Thirtieth Street Station, a train station in Philadelphia, because people are always arriving, then leaving the house. Valerian then changes the subject and jokes with Sydney that he should wear comfortable and climate-appropriate shoes like sandals, but Sydney objects that he would be less dignified in sandals.

Margaret comes in wearing a wrinkle-preventing device on her face called “Frownies.” She says that she thinks Ondine has served pineapple for breakfast just to insult her and that sometimes it seems like she is working for Ondine, rather than the reverse. She requests mango, and Valerian teases her about how fattening mangoes are and tells her that her breakfast is full of calories. As they argue, Sydney waits on them. Valerian criticizes Margaret for inviting lots of Christmas guests after he asked her not to, and she says she hates the island and wants to accompany Michael when he returns to the United States after Christmas. Valerian makes her promise she will only go if Michael invites her. They talk about Jadine and whether she will leave the island, then about how Sydney and Ondine seem likely to stay. Valerian mentions that at the beginning of their marriage Margaret used to spend lots of time with Ondine and adds that he put an end to their close association on the grounds that it was inappropriate. Margaret leaves breakfast announcing that she wants a proper Christmas, and she orders Sydney to obtain ingredients for an American Christmas meal, including apples for apple pie.

In the kitchen, Ondine continues to cook while Sydney reenters to serve breakfast to the Streets. Ondine is irritated at Margaret for ordering the mango and for demanding an elaborate Christmas menu. Ondine thinks only poor people eat mangoes, and she thinks that the Christmas menu is impractical. Sydney tells her he is tired of delivering messages between Margaret and Ondine. She says she does not believe Michael will come, nor that Michael loves Margaret. Jadine enters, and Ondine and Sydney are clearly glad to see her. She asks for a hot chocolate and although Sydney raises an eyebrow about drinking something so rich and hot on a tropical morning, Ondine goes to look for some chocolate.

Ondine comes out of the pantry and announces that someone has been stealing chocolate and refolding the wrappers. She praises Jadine’s beauty and comments about how great she looked on a recent magazine cover. Gideon, the odd-jobs man, arrives at the house but does not come into the kitchen. Everyone in the house, including Ondine and Sydney, call him “Yardman,” a general derogatory term for the poor black population of Queen of France. No one knows his real name. Gideon typically brings two women to work with him. The residents of L’Arbe de la Croix always call these women “Mary,” for no one has any interest in their real names either. Ondine is irritated that she cannot give Gideon a written list of chores and errands because he is illiterate, so she gives him an oral list instead. She refuses to ask him for a turkey like Margaret wanted, but she does ask him to get a Christmas tree.

Chapter 2
The chapter opens at night at L’Arbe de la Croix. The narrator looks in on the house’s different residents, most of whom are asleep. In one room, Sydney and Ondine share a bed and lie close to one another. Valerian and Margaret sleep in separate rooms. Valerian sleeps poorly after napping for much of the day in the greenhouse; Margaret’s nighttime ritual involves elaborate beauty precautions. In her own room, Jadine is awake, and she remembers a day she spent in Paris, when she was celebrating her appearance on the cover of Elle magazine and her achievement of academic honors from the Sorbonne. She went shopping to buy fancy ingredients for a celebratory dinner party, and in the grocery store she saw an astonishingly beautiful black woman wearing a yellow dress. Her skin was dark as tar, her cheeks scored with African tribal markings, and she had no eyelashes. She bought three loose white eggs that she carried in her black hands. As she left the store, she stopped, turned, looked directly at Jadine, and spat on the ground.

Thinking of the incident unsettles Jadine because she wanted the woman to respect her. Looking out her window, she sees the hills that the wild horsemen of the island are supposed to ride over. Imagining them riding, though, only brings her back to the woman in yellow and how lonely the woman made her feel. She remembers arguing with the man most in love with her in Paris, a white man named Ryk. She worried that he did not want her for who she really is, because she thinks white men only fetishize her blackness. Jadine did not want to have to like certain “black” things, like “primitive” art works or jazz, when really she prefers forms of European high culture. They made up after the fight, but when the woman spat at her, the old feelings resurfaced, and she ran away. Jadine wonders what she should do in the future and whether her future can or should include her aunt and uncle. Although she has discussed opening a store with them, she does not think they will leave the island.

Valerian wakes up and thinks about his history and about how he grew up as the heir of the Street Brothers Candy Company, with a candy named after him. The Valerians were red and white, made of the leftover sludge from the most popular candy the business made, but they were only popular in the South among blacks. Valerian worked hard at the business when he became head of it, but he always knew he wanted to retire at age sixty-five. On a trip to Maine he met Margaret, and her complexion reminded him of the color of Valerian candies. He courted her, and they got married and had Michael. Valerian had high hopes for a good relationship with Michael, but these hopes died as Michael grew up, and over time, he and Margaret also grew apart. After a fairly boring but adequate adult life, he retired to the island at age sixty-eight, and he built the greenhouse as a way of reasserting a feeling of control over life.

Margaret is stuck in a state somewhere between sleep and waking. She thinks of her increasingly common forgetfulness: She forgets what objects are for and winds up staring at her lipstick, not sure if it is for licking or writing. The forgetfulness creates a low, constant terror in her life. With a half-conscious mind, she also remembers her youth and reflects on the trauma associated with growing up very beautiful in a small town. Her red hair caused a lot of gossip, especially because neither of her parents had red hair. Her father became paranoid about rumors of her mother’s adultery, and he brought his unmarried aunts to visit because they had had red hair in their youth, which was the only proof that Margaret was
his child. Margaret also thinks back to a time early in her marriage when she felt lonely and bored as a young bride and how she started to befriend Ondine. Valerian put a stop to the friendship on the grounds that it was inappropriate. Valerian and Margaret fought for the first time over the issue, and Valerian made Margaret feel bad about having humble origins. Margaret misses Michael and thinks that she would be happy if she could just spend time near him.

Sydney and Ondine have a comfortable night rhythm together in their room, and they sleep well. Ondine dreams of slipping into water and that her heavy legs, swollen from decades of standing, will sink her. Sydney dreams the same dream he dreams every night: of red brick Baltimore, the city he left to become a proud “industrious Philadelphia Negro.” Although he left more than fifty years ago, he always dreams of his roots. Eventually everyone in the house falls asleep. They hear nothing, not even footsteps in the dark.

Chapter 3

The narrator describes the night’s fog as feeling like the thin, wispy hair of “maiden aunts.” Jadine, Margaret, and Valerian sit at dinner, and Sydney waits on them. Valerian gets irritated at how slowly Margaret eats, but Margaret worries that if she eats quickly she will make an etiquette mistake. Jadine tries to make peace by changing the subject to Christmas. As she does so, however, Margaret accidentally leaves the salad utensils on the table after serving herself. Valerian, Sydney, and Jadine look horrified by the mistake, and Margaret feels ashamed.

Jadine picks up the conversation in an attempt to save dinner, but she is unaware that Christmas is a bad topic. The discussion turns to whether Michael will come visit, and Valerian says that there is no chance he will come for Christmas. Margaret asserts that he will because she has invited his favorite teacher, the poet B. J. Bridges. She says she hinted about her invitation to Bridges to Michael by quoting a line from Bridges in a note, and Valerian makes her doubt that she remembered the quote accurately. They continue to fight, and Jadine tries to figure out whether their fighting is more serious and mean-spirited than it was when she first arrived. More important, she wonders whether this fighting is the kind people of different ages who have been married for a long time engage in or if it is something worse.

Valerian apologizes to Jadine and then is silent for a while, and Jadine feels bored. When Valerian speaks again, he says that Margaret is nervous that Michael will not come and that he is nervous Michael will come. Jadine says she does not remember Michael very well and then recalls that when she and Michael last spent time together she was in college, and Michael suggested to her that she was abandoning her racial history by studying art history at the Sorbonne. Valerian expresses frustration at Michael’s view of race. He ridicules in particular a scheme Michael had to get black women on welfare to make and sell African pots, and he asks if Michael’s criticism bothered Jadine. She says that it did a little. Although she knew that her roots were not as wonderful as Michael suggested, she still felt ashamed that she preferred forms of European culture over African or African American cultures. Valerian remarks that Michael has not grown up and references The Little Prince. When
Jadine says she has not read the book, Valerian tells her to read it and pay attention to what it means and not what it says.

Sydney clears the dishes and continues to serve. Valerian tells Jadine she is much more sensible than Michael and adds that he feels that Margaret made Michael into a loser. He then says he thinks Margaret was too young when she had Michael, and he tells a story about how when Michael was little, Valerian would come home from work and find Michael hiding in bathroom cabinet, looking for soft things and humming to himself. He thinks this indicates that Margaret neglected Michael, and he wishes he had attended to him more. Now she is ready to raise him, Valerian says, but Michael is too old to be mothered. Jadine feels she ought to say something in response to Valerian’s recollections, but she does not know what to say. There is silence, and then Margaret enters screaming. Jadine and Valerian both ask her what is wrong, but she will not answer. Sydney and Ondine then come in, and Ondine yells at Margaret to tell them what is going on. Margaret finally stammers that there is something black in her closet, in her things. Valerian starts to tell her she is crazy or drunk, but Ondine sends Sydney to investigate with a gun. Sydney returns holding a black man with dreadlocks at gunpoint. Valerian asks the man if he would like a drink.

Chapter 4

The chapter opens at midday, the day after the man’s appearance. Margaret is in her room thinking about the part of her childhood that she spent in a trailer, and she thinks how her beauty both has and has not taken her far from this period, given that she has locked herself into her trailer-sized bedroom. Recalling last night’s events, she remains angry with Valerian for ignoring her trauma and for inviting the man to dinner. She regards the intruder with disgust and believes that he intended to rape her and likely did sexually disgusting things in her closet. Margaret wishes Jadine would come cheer her up, and she also longs for Michael’s arrival because she feels that he alone puts her at real ease.

Meanwhile, in her own room, Jadine shows Ondine a coat made of ninety sealskins that Ryk has sent her. Ondine asks if the coat means that Jadine will marry Ryk, and Jadine says she is unsure. When Ondine expresses agitation about the stranger in the house, Jadine tries to calm her. Once Ondine leaves, Jadine begins to wrap her Christmas presents. She thinks about whether to buy Michael a Christmas present because of her complicated relation to the Streets, as she is very close to them and at the same time is their dependent. Her thoughts also turn to Ondine and how she seems unnerved by Jadine’s prospective marriage to a white man and by the possibility of leaving the island. Jadine worries that Ondine and Sydney rely too much on her for solutions to their problems. She remembers how Valerian conducted himself so gallantly during dinner with the stranger and how little information they had gained from his evasive answers, including his name. This man is now staying in the guest room at Valerian’s invitation.

While Jadine is in her room thinking, Ondine is in the kitchen cooking. Gideon enters to drop off a chicken he killed and then leaves. Ondine is irritated that he did not pluck the chicken’s feathers. She reflects that in her youth she would have caught the chicken herself, but now she is too old and slow. She begins to pluck the chicken, and Sydney comes in. He begins to
talk about how angry he is with Valerian for letting the man stay in the house because he is worried about the safety of his family. He expresses particular anxiety about the fact that Jadine’s room is right next to the guest room where the man slept, and Ondine tries to calm him down. She tells Sydney that they are too old to find new jobs, so he needs be patient with Valerian’s actions. She also mentions feeling that while Jadine is in the house, nothing bad can befall them. Sydney leaves, and Ondine continues to cook, thinking about how the man is not like her or Sydney and is, instead, a stranger. She then considers that if he stays in the house as a guest of Valerian’s, it will make her mad to serve him.

Out in the yard, Thérèse, one of the “Marys” who comes to do work with Gideon, does the laundry, eats lunch, and thinks about the man who had been sneaking into the Streets’ house for food in the evenings. She and Gideon knew he was in the house before anyone else did, and she had been leaving food for him. In her imagination, he is one of the island’s mythical wild horsemen, a descendant of the first slaves who were brought to the island. While she is daydreaming about this, Gideon arrives and tells her that the Streets have discovered the man and that now he is a guest in the house. She suggests that he has come to carry Jadine away, and she continues to propose fantasies until she reaches the point at which she can no longer express her ideas logically.

While she rambles, Gideon thinks about his past and how he spent a lot of time trying to make his fortune in the United States but was tricked into returning to the island by Thérèse. Gideon regrets coming back and marrying Thérèse, and he feels foolish that he returned to the island without any more wealth than he left it with. Thérèse stops her daydreaming when she realizes that none of her stories include a role for the Streets, and she realizes that she has difficulty imagining what they do, think, or feel. She does not even know their names.

Back in her bedroom, Jadine continues to delight in her sealskin coat. She finds its suppleness seductive, almost overwhelmingly so. After admiring the coat, she goes to take a shower. When Jadine emerges, the man is in her room and his appearance startles her. His hair in particular, with its long, unkempt dreadlocks, frightens her. She now sees the man as Margaret must have seen him—as a figure of menace. Collecting herself, she begins to talk to him and asks him his name, which he still does not reveal. He looks at pictures of her from when she was a model, nicknamed “the Copper Venus.” Jadine tells him things about modeling that make it seem very glamorous. She also tells him that Valerian and Margaret support her. He thinks she is very beautiful, and he remembers when he was hiding how he used to sneak into her room to watch her sleep. He stopped doing this when he began to worry that he smelled like a wild animal and that his smell would wake her up.

The man snaps himself out of his reverie by asking her how many sexual favors she had to perform to advance her modeling career. Shocked, Jadine hits him in the face. He grabs her wrists, and she spits at him and tries to kick him, but he is much stronger than she and stops her. Disgusted, she tells him that he smells terrible and that if he rapes her, he will be killed. He responds by saying he has no interest in raping a white girl like her. She curses him out for calling her white and for trying to tell her how a black woman should be and act. She also tells him he smells like an animal, and he presses himself against her and tells her he can
smell her too, and then he releases her. Jadine says she will tell Valerian what he did, and he says to go ahead but to leave out the fact that he told her he smelled her.

She leaves her room and goes outside, where the gravel hurts her feet because all she is wearing are thin gold slippers. Resolving to tell Valerian what happened in her bedroom, Jadine feels she will have to omit the man’s question about sexual favors and the discussion of smell. A mix of fear and shame hit her as she considers the whole encounter, and then she thinks about her childhood in Baltimore. As a child, she resolved never to let men break her after she saw a female dog be mounted by male dogs and then be punished for it. Her anger is directed toward Valerian for the situation with the man, but she also wonders if she is overreacting and considers the complicated issues of race and racial affiliation that the episode with the man raised. Finally she decides to go speak with Valerian, but she finds him laughing with the man.

Chapter 5

Jadine reports to Margaret that she saw Valerian and the man laughing together, and the two of them discuss what they should do about him. They decide to call the police, but their plan is cancelled when they see the man that day cleaned up and nicely dressed.

While Jadine was outside thinking, the man has been in Jadine’s room showering—the water that runs off of him is dark. When he gets out of the shower, he looks in the mirror, sees how wild his hair looked, and realizes that his hair must have been part of what scared Jadine. When he leaves Jadine’s room, he intentionally leaves his pajamas behind for her to find. He thinks about how everyone in the house is afraid of him, except for Valerian. Their fear is humorous to him because he has no intention of being violent, particularly toward the women.

After cleaning up, the man recalls his arrival on the island and how he had not intended to stop at L’Arbe de la Croix. He chose to stop at the house because of how nice and civilized it looked. Throughout this internal monologue, he constantly reiterates that he did not follow the women from the boat onto the island. He is trying to remind himself that he did not come to the house because of Jadine. His first night, he had climbed into a tree to look into the house and felt a fruit that might be either an avocado or a poisonous ake fruit. He initially decided to avoid it but then changed his mind and took a bite, and it turned out to be an avocado. The man eventually found his way into L’Arbe de la Croix, and when he saw Jadine sleeping he was mesmerized, going back, night after night, to see her. Watching her, he thought about his concern for not following the women. His purpose changed as Jadine’s beauty won him over.

The man’s memories carry him up to the present day and to his only true name. Though in recent years he has gone by a variety of aliases, the only one that is really his is not even on his papers. The name is “Son,” a nickname from his family and his small hometown. He watches Gideon working through the window and notes how clean he is and how dirty Gideon is. Son feels heartbroken as he thinks about how hard Gideon works.
From the greenhouse, Valerian looks out to the laundry. The view makes him think of his childhood because there was a laundry shed behind his childhood house. An old black woman worked there. The day Valerian’s father died, he went to see this woman, and when he told her about his father, she told him to help her with the washing. He washed clothes until his knuckles turned red and took pleasure in it. After that day, the woman was fired. When he moved to L’Arbe de la Croix, Valerian had the washing shed built even though it was impractical.

Valerian regrets telling Jadine that his move to the island was related to Margaret’s relationship with Michael. He thinks that the real reason he wanted to move was Philadelphia’s modernization. Thinking about Philadelphia makes Valerian think about his first wife, whom he did not love and who had two abortions during their marriage and died long after they had divorced. When he is in the greenhouse, her ghost often visits him. Thinking of her reminds him of how Michael’s ghostly presence appeared to him at dinner the night before Margaret discovered Son. When the ghostly Michael appeared, he seemed to be smiling in a welcoming way, and Valerian thinks that the smile might have been what prompted him to ask Son to stay. Michael, the young Socialist, would have wanted the threatening black man to be welcomed at dinner. Valerian refuses to tell Margaret as much, but he really hopes Michael will come for Christmas, and he hopes that if Michael comes, there will be a reconciliation between them. He remembers again the day he came home and found Michael under the sink.

Son comes into the greenhouse and tells Valerian his given name: William Green. Valerian asks Son what he was really doing in Margaret’s closet, and Son tells him that he got lost looking for Jadine’s bedroom. Ants come into the greenhouse, and Son tells Valerian he should use mirrors to repel the ants. Son then picks up a cyclamen plant that refuses to flower and he shakes it. He tells Valerian that the shaking will simulate wind and that the plant should flower soon. Valerian tells Son he will buy him a new suit if he is right. Son tells Valerian a joke, and Valerian is laughing at this joke as Jadine arrives at the greenhouse.

Thérèse and Gideon take Son into town, and Gideon gives Son a haircut. Afterward, Gideon, Son, Thérèse, and Alma Estée have dinner together, and Son seems relaxed. Thérèse asks Son if it is true that American women kill their own babies, and Gideon tells her she is foolish. In Thérèse’s imagination, America is full of sexual perversion and strange gender dynamics. Gideon tells Son not to listen to Thérèse because she is a member of the island’s blind race, a group of people descended from the first slaves who came to the island. These people supposedly live in the swamp and roam the hills on horseback.

Thérèse reveals that she was responsible for leaving the window of L’Arbe de la Croix open so Son could get in, and she talks about how much she hates Ondine and nicknames her “machete-hair.” Gideon tells Son that she is just bitter because the American blacks ignore her. He also explains to Son that Thérèse used to be a wet nurse for white women but that the invention of formula put her out of business. Thérèse leaves the room, and Gideon tells Son he might be able to get work on the island and then asks if he wants to sleep with Jadine,
whom he refers to as “that yalla.” When the two men leave the house, Alma Estée asks Son if he will buy her a wig in America.

Back at the house, Son tries to apologize to Jadine for the fight they had in her room, and she asks him how he knew how to make Valerian’s flower bloom. He replies that he grew up in the country. She feels uncomfortable by how attractive he is. After Son leaves, Jadine thinks about how glad she is that she booked a secret ticket back to New York for after Christmas. She worries that her training in art history makes her unable to see Son properly or to really assess her feelings about him, because she gets distracted by how attractive he is.

After leaving Jadine, Son goes to the kitchen and apologizes to Ondine for scaring her. He also tells her he is an outlaw because he fled an insurance claim after he had a car accident in the United States. Ondine is reluctant to accept his apology, and she irritates Son by calling Gideon Yardman, but still he persists in trying to win her over. When Sydney comes in, Son apologizes to him too, and Sydney gives him a hard time but softens a little when Son asks if he can eat in the kitchen with them.

At night, Son eats with Ondine and Sydney in the kitchen, and Jadine, Margaret, and Valerian eat in the dining room. Everyone is in good spirits. Valerian cracks old jokes, and Margaret talks excitedly about Christmas. After dinner, Son has trouble falling asleep, and he thinks about how he feels separated from other men by his wanderings and by his time abroad. He has no past to hold on to and no rituals to mark the passing of his life. He is eager to go home but feels strangely compelled to try to stay at L’Arbe de la Croix every time he thinks of Jadine.

In the morning, he invites Jadine on a picnic, and she agrees. The thought of her leaving the island scares him. During lunch she sketches him, and he tells her the story of the first money he ever earned, adding that he does not need much more money than he made. She tells him he is lazy and that he fulfills stereotypes about black men. They then talk about his hometown of Eloé, Florida. She says her hometown is three places: Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Paris. When she prods him for his name, he insists that she call him “Son.” She refuses, saying it is not a real name. Son explains that he left Eloé because he killed someone, and she says she hates killers. He reveals that his victim was his wife and that he killed her by accident after crashing his car into their house followed by his discovery of her adultery. Noticing that Jadine has tucked her legs underneath her in a defensive crouch, Son tells her that he would not kill her and he loves her. She reacts angrily, but he calms her. After much coaxing, she unfolds her legs and allows him to hold and stroke one of her feet.

Jadine suddenly announces that she needs to get back to the house. While they drive she reviews the reasons she cannot sleep with him, the chief one being that he would be unmanageable and unpredictable. They run out of gas on the swampy part of the island and while he goes to fill up a bottle, she explores. She comes to a clearing and is amazed at how much the swamp looks like something out of a picture. After walking too far, Jadine sinks into a tar pit. She struggles to get free while swamp women seem to watch her from the trees, and finally she succeeds. When Son returns, she is in her underwear trying to clean herself off. They drive back to the house, with Jadine chagrined and Son grinning to himself.
Back at the house, Margaret says that Son is bad luck and hints that he wants Margaret because Son was in her closet. Jadine surprises herself by defending him. She is amazed at the depth of her anger toward Margaret, a white woman, for presuming that Son desires Margaret and not her.

Chapter 6

On Christmas Eve day, everyone prepares for Christmas, and optimism is in the air. Valerian and Margaret have slept together for the first time in a while, Margaret plans to cook the Christmas dinner herself, and Valerian apologizes to Margaret for being insensitive when Son appeared. In the kitchen Ondine complains to Sydney about the elaborate menu Margaret has planned, and she worries about Jadine’s relationship with Son. At night none of the invited guests arrive and Michael has not called, but Margaret and Valerian still hold out hope for Christmas Day.

In the morning there is still no word from Michael. The characters exchange gifts in a casual, individual way rather than in a group ceremony, and Margaret stops cooking halfway through her recipes, leaving Ondine to finish with much irritation. Ondine fears that Jadine has secret plans to leave the island. While Ondine cooks, Margaret sits by the pool, and Son scares her when he approaches. She tells him about Michael and about the work Michael does on an Indian reservation. She thinks it is wonderful that Michael influences the Indians to stay close to their heritage. As she talks she lets it slip that Jadine plans to leave the island soon.

At night the Streets and Sydney’s family eat together with Son, and everyone is trying extra hard to have a good time. Margaret makes up excuses for Michael’s silent absence, and everyone pretends Margaret cooked the meal. Son says he is disappointed Gideon could not come, and Valerian asks who Gideon is. Son tells everyone that they call Gideon and Thérése by the wrong names. Valerian says he fired Gideon and Thérèse in the course of the day for stealing some of the apples he imported for Margaret’s apple pie recipe. Ondine is outraged that he fired Gideon and Thérèse without asking her or Sydney for their opinion. Son fumes that Valerian can so casually dismiss the people on whose labor and land he has made a fortune. He thinks capitalism is a giant system of waste. He becomes more furious when Jadine defends Valerian’s actions.

Son asks Valerian whether he would have given Gideon and Thérèse some apples if they had asked for them, and Valerian says he would have, but they chose to steal instead. Son says this is an absurd response given that Gideon rowed the apples eighteen miles to bring them to Valerian and that Valerian just wanted the apples so that Margaret could play the role of an American mother. In his mind, Valerian sees a hundred European knights of chivalry riding the hills, while in Son’s mind, he sees a hundred black blind horsemen roving the island, still connected to the land. Valerian demands that Son leave the house, and Son refuses. Jadine tries to smooth things over, but Valerian says he does not care about a cook’s hurt feelings. He and Sydney argue, and Ondine insults Margaret, saying she is better than her. Valerian says Ondine is fired, and Margaret throws a glass of water at her. Ondine slaps
Margaret, and the two women grapple. Valerian demands that the harbor police be called, but no one obeys his orders.

The two women are separated, and they hurl racial slurs at each other. Then Ondine reveals the truth: When Michael was young, Margaret used to torture him by sticking him with pins and burning him with cigarettes. Ondine was witness to the ongoing practice. She gets hysterical, and Sydney leads her away. Valerian is speechless and horrified. Margaret is still and quiet; she does not deny it.

Jadine and Son go upstairs together to her room. Jadine asks Son what the night means, and he says that white people and black people should not sit down together. He tells her to go to sleep, and she tells him he can stay with her but cannot have sex with her. He takes off his shirt to get ready for bed, and she notices that his hands are very big and powerful. They begin a sexually charged conversation, with her saying she does not want sex, and him saying he does not either, while both act the opposite. They turn off the light. She asks what he would do to her, if he were going to do something to her. He asks her to close her eyes. Then Son has her imagine what it is like to be a star in the sky. He says stars “throb” rather than twinkle and that when they can no longer throb, they fall out of the sky.

Chapter 7

Son arrives in New York in advance of Jadine and feels bewildered by the fast pace of city life. The city is crowded and dehumanizing. He feels alienated from the black people he encounters and is eager for Jadine to arrive, although he begins to worry she will not come. In his mind he reviews the days after Christmas, and he feels nervous about whether he managed to make Jadine fall in love with him during that time. He is still conflicted about her, thinking spitefully of the first time he met her and her dismissive, white attitude, but also of the fragile nature underneath that needs to be protected.

While Son worries, Jadine arrives and takes a taxi from the airport into New York. She is delighted to be back in the city and feels like she is reentering a lover’s arms. She is determined to make New York belong to her, and she imagines how great it will be to explore it with Son.

Son wants to go to Eloë, though. Jadine and Son move into Dawn’s vacant apartment in New York and spend all their time together. Jadine is glad Son is so handsome, and she loves introducing him to her friends. Son and Jadine have a variety of exploits in the city, where they eat junk food, drink lots of alcohol, read tabloid stories, and play board games and cards. Son tells Jadine more about his marriage to Cheyenne and how he killed her accidentally. Jadine tells him more about her life as a model and how she left the United States for Europe because she felt the States offered her limited life choices. Jadine feels a little guilty about leaving Ondine and Sydney without saying goodbye but does not feel guilty about leaving the Streets.

Son does a series of odd jobs, and Jadine thinks about starting to model again or about working for an art history professor she had when she was a student. But neither Son nor Jadine really seems to care about money, and they do not have any savings. As they spend
more and more time together, Jadine starts to feel like less of an orphan, and she and Son feel like they are the only two left in love in New York City. They stop leaving the apartment or seeing other people and only spend time with each other. Spring begins to arrive. Finally they leave for Eloe.

Chapter 8

Valerian is in great pain and sits in his greenhouse thinking about the time he found Michael hiding under the sink. He used to believe that Margaret had a drinking problem, and he is very upset now to realize that he was wrong and that her long history of erratic behavior resulted from guilt about abusing Michael, not from alcoholism. After the Christmas dinner, Margaret tried to explain her behavior to Valerian, but she sickened him when she told him that she abused Michael because it felt delicious. Valerian wanted to hurt her during her explanation but could not.

At two in the morning on Christmas night, Sydney comes into the dining room to see Valerian. Sydney and Ondine lack financial security, and their financial future depends on Valerian. Sydney asks Valerian if he plans to fire them, and Valerian says he does not know because all he can think about is the image of Michael under the sink. Valerian tries to achieve an emotional release by crying and wants to cry tears of blood, but he cannot cry. Finally, around dawn, he goes to bed.

The morning after Christmas, Margaret wakes up very early and feels relieved that her secret was revealed. She washes her hair very vigorously and feels hopeful about the future, but the rest of the people at L’Arbe de la Croix are full of sorrow or anxiety. Sydney and Ondine remain worried about being fired, and Valerian is still in a state of shock. Margaret insists on trying to tell Valerian more details of her abuse of Michael, and she insists that she had not really hurt him, still trying to explain her actions.

A few nights after Christmas, Margaret announces to Valerian that she has called Michael and told him to uninvite B. J. Bridges for New Year’s. Valerian is horrified and incredulous that she has had the nerve to contact Michael, but she insists that Michael is not damaged. Valerian notices that she actually looks prettier and also stronger. He asks her why Michael did not confide in him, and she speculates that he may have been ashamed. Now Valerian finally begins to cry because he cannot understand why Michael still loves her. She begs Valerian to hit her, but he will not. He tells her that perhaps he will hit her tomorrow, but when the next day comes she asks him again and he again says tomorrow. Frustrated, Margaret cannot think of a way to lift either of their moods.

New Year’s Day arrives and Margaret asks Ondine why she kept Michael’s abuse quiet. Margaret thinks Ondine wanted to feel superior to her. Ondine admits she kept it quiet was because she was afraid Valerian would fire her, and maybe Sydney, too. Margaret says Ondine should have stopped her and mentions that she was only nineteen, while Ondine was thirty or thirty-five. Ondine corrects her and says that she was only twenty-three. After Margaret suggests that maybe they can be friends now, Ondine smiles but is not receptive. After New Year’s, Valerian retreats to his greenhouse and spends most of his time there,
letting the plants go wild. In his guilty haze, he has lost any sense of the value of order there. A dead plant is as good as a live one. Giving up, he lets the ants invade.

Chapter 9

Jadine and Son travel to Eloe, Florida. When they get there, Jadine cannot believe how rural and small the town looks. The first stop is at the home of Son’s friend Soldier. When Son talks to Soldier, he uses a lot of slang and a different language pattern than the one Jadine is accustomed to hearing. Son asks Jadine if she will stay with Soldier and his wife, Ellen, while Son goes to see his father. She is reluctant because she has trouble understanding the style of speech that Eloe’s residents use and because she is upset at the division she notices between men and women. Eventually she agrees to stay behind, and Son goes to see his father, whom everyone calls Old Man.

As he approaches Old Man’s house, Son thinks it looks smaller than he remembered it. While he waits for Old Man to get home, Son thinks about his brothers and sisters, all of whom have scattered. When Old Man returns, he looks at Son and drops some onions onto the floor in surprise. Son asks Old Man if he received the money orders Son sent, and Old Man says he did but that he was reluctant to redeem them, out of fear of drawing attention to Son’s whereabouts. Old Man tells Son that he and Jadine cannot stay together in Eloe because they are unmarried and that Jadine should stay with Aunt Rosa. Son initially objects to this plan, but Old Man replies that since Son told him the truth, he must obey the rules. He also tells Son that Cheyenne’s mother is now dead and that Son should be safe in Eloe. As Son leaves, Old Man asks Son why he never wrote any messages with the money orders. Son is embarrassed and makes an excuse that he did not want to give away where he was.

Back at Soldier’s, while Son was gone Jadine grew bored. To amuse herself, she began taking pictures of Eloe residents. But when Son returns, he angrily grabs the camera away. Jadine is hurt and also unhappy to learn that she must sleep at Aunt Rosa’s. They go to a dive joint with music, and before Son drops her off for the night, they manage to have sex in the car. She thinks no one knows about it, but he knows everyone does.

At Rosa’s, Jadine falls asleep right away, but in the middle of the night she wakes up feeling claustrophobic. She thinks that Eloe is blacker than any place she has ever been and loud with plants and animals. Rosa appears, having been woken by Jadine’s movements, and she finds that Jadine is naked. She gives Jadine a nightgown and refers to her as her daughter. She makes Jadine feel ashamed about her nakedness, and Jadine looks forward to Sunday when she and Son are supposed to leave Eloe. In the morning Jadine finds Son sitting in the kitchen. She thinks he is beautiful and wants to sit in his lap but feels constrained by the presence of Drake and Soldier, who look at Son with the same admiration she feels. They admire him and Jadine both.

Sunday arrives, and while Son drives Aunt Rosa to church, Jadine stays behind with Soldier. Soldier tells Jadine about Cheyenne and says that Son should never have married her. He asks her if she and Son will get married, and she says she does not know but that she guesses so. Jadine feels uncomfortable and tells Soldier that he asks too many questions. He tells her
that she has a temper and then asks if she or Son is controlling their relationship. She responds that neither of them is controlling it. Soldier tells her this is a good thing because Son does not like being controlled. Soldier then tells her that she should plan on staying longer in Eloe because Ernie Paul is on his way to visit, and Son will want to wait. When Son returns, Jadine wants to leave, but he persuades her into staying by telling her that he will sneak into Rosa’s to sleep with her. She reflects to herself that the people of Eloe think sex is dirty and strange, but she decides to stay. They go for a drive, and she takes pictures until she runs out of film. At night Son sneaks into Jadine’s room, and while they make love Jadine feels as if she is somehow in competition with Cheyenne. Son falls asleep, and Jadine realizes that she left the door unlatched when she let Son in. She imagines that all of the black women from her life and from Son’s have crept through the open door and stand in the bedroom. This feeling unnerves her, and she tries to wake Son so he will go shut the door, but he will not wake. Finally she yells at them, and the women bare their breasts to her. One of the women present is the woman with the yellow dress, and she holds out the eggs Jadine had seen her with in Paris. Jadine begins to cry, and Son wakes up. He holds her until morning arrives.

In the morning, Jadine feels like Eloe is “rotten,” and she reflects that all those stories she heard about southern small towns being pleasant and romantic were lies told by those who could not live anywhere else. After she arrives back in New York by herself, she waits for Son to arrive, but he does not return when he had said he would. At first Jadine does not mind his absence, but as time passes, she begins to feel angry and like an orphan again. In the meantime, she looks for a place for them to live and analyzes the nightmare she had in Eloe.

When Son finally returns to the city, he and Jadine fight frequently. She wants him to get an education or to run a store with her, and she suggests taking financial assistance from Valerian, but Son rejects the idea of asking Valerian for anything. They fight physically, with him hitting her and her biting and slapping him. She says that she has taken every opportunity presented to her in her life and worked to make the best of it, while he has been consistently lazy. In response, he holds her out the window by her wrists, and she is so scared that she wets her pants. She does not apologize, however, and instead asks him if he wants to be “a yardman” all his life. He yells that Yardman’s name is Gideon and that all her education has been useless if it has not taught her about the world’s racial realities and the hardships faced by people like Gideon and himself. Once he has gotten his say, he pulls her back in the window, and they sweetly make up.

Later, Son proposes going back to work in the shipping industry, and Jadine accuses him of wanting to escape now that things are hard and of being afraid of New York. He says he can make it in New York and that he is not afraid. He also tells her that she cannot understand where he is coming from because she is not from anywhere, whereas he is from Eloe. Jadine tells him that she is fine not being from anywhere if it means not being from Eloe, since Eloe is terrible. They continue to fight about the future, but he asks her to marry him and she says yes, on the condition that he goes to school. He agrees to this proposal but asks that they get
their own apartment. Jadine begins to fill out applications for schools for Son. She is starting to look old and as a result has trouble getting modeling work. She talks about Eloe as a cradle to Son, and it angers him that she makes living in Eloe sound easy, when in reality life in Eloe is very hard. He tries to imagine what kind of woman Jadine will be in fifty years and wonders if she will grow to be like Thérèse, Ondine, or Aunt Rosa as she ages.

In September, with two weeks to go until registration for school, a dividend check arrives in the mail with interest from a stock Valerian had given to Jadine. Son refuses to put money from Valerian toward his education, and his refusal angers Jadine. They both feel that their efforts to save each other are failing, and Jadine realizes she is not saving Son from the women who appeared in her nightmare, while Son realizes he is not rescuing Jadine from Valerian. Son tells Jadine that there is no such thing as mixing races and that people either abandon their own race or choose it. He says that a black woman who raises her child as white is robbing him of his culture. As he talks, he gets increasingly angry and physically aggressive and invokes the story of the tar baby before leaving the apartment for a few hours.

When he returns, Jadine tells him that to move forward they need to forget the past and that he needs to give up his slave mentality. She then tells him that anything traced back far enough, including his first dime made, is soiled with the taint of a history of racial and sexual violence. She says further that if he pursues the past, he will only ever get stuck. Furious, Son leaves, and when he returns, Jadine is gone. He opens an envelope that contains Jadine’s pictures from Eloe and finds that his friends and family members all look ridiculous and stupid. He determines that he must find Jadine.

Chapter 10

The trees on Isle des Chevaliers are restless, but on Dominique, nature is beaten into submission by the tourist industry. There, Jadine sits at a hotel and waits for a ride to L’Arbe de la Croix. As she sits, she reflects on her decision to leave Son and feels that to stay with him would have been too difficult because of his ties to his culture. When her driver takes her past the swamp where she got stuck in the tar, she feels her legs burn from the memory. When Jadine arrives at L’Arbe de la Croix, she finds Margaret cleaning out Valerian’s closet. Margaret tells her that Valerian is now feeble and also that Michael will attend Berkeley for graduate school. Margaret is tidying Valerian’s things and shows the pants that he has never worn, which are all made out of natural fibers like linen or silk. Margaret says that she now dresses Valerian and that Sydney will teach her to shave him. Leaving Margaret, Jadine finds Ondine in the kitchen, and she expresses surprise about Margaret’s new degree of power over Valerian. Ondine says that Valerian intentionally kept Margaret stupid and that his suffering is repayment. Jadine tries to explain her relationship with Son, but Ondine is not receptive. Still angry that Jadine left the island without a goodbye after Christmas, Ondine is also mad that she plans to fly to Paris. She believes that Jadine would not have returned to the island unless her sealskin coat was there, and she accuses Jadine of lacking proper affection for herself and Sydney. She thinks Jadine should stay and take care of them.
Ondine tells Jadine that her first priority is to be a daughter. If Jadine never learns to be a daughter, then according to Ondine, she will never grown up to be a real woman. Jadine rejects Ondine’s argument and says that she must go to Paris. She asks Ondine not to tell Son where she has gone. After Jadine leaves, Sydney enters the kitchen and agrees with Ondine that Jadine is ungrateful. Sydney then walks to the greenhouse, and he notices that the walkway’s bricks are coming loose and that ants are eating some electrical cords. He reflects that the island has disrupted their surroundings and as he enters the greenhouse, he comments to Valerian that the island is starting to get in bad condition.

Sydney cares for Valerian, who is very frail now. He also takes advantage of Valerian’s diminished state to turn off the radio and pour himself a glass of Valerian’s wine. He tells Valerian that he should get some sandals, which he will appreciate at this time next year. Valerian insists that he is going back to Philadelphia, but Sydney disagrees. The power dynamic has shifted, and now the servant is making the decisions.

At the airport, Jadine encounters Alma Estée, who is now a bathroom attendant, and Jadine does not remember her. Alma Estée wears a cheap wig and asks if Jadine killed Son. Jadine thinks that Alma Estée looks like an animal, and she gives her a couple of francs as she leaves to board her plane. When Jadine says goodbye, she calls Alma “Mary.” On the plane Jadine gives herself a manicure and decides that she will stop asking herself what went wrong with Son. As the plane flies, it sails far above marching columns of soldier ants. The narrator tells the story of the queen ant, who only copulates once in her lifetime. After the act, the male ant dies, and the queen saves his sperm in her womb until the time comes for her to found a colony. In the story, the queen ant wonders about what the male ant thought as he quivered and died.

Son arrives in Queen of France in pursuit of Jadine and stops in the market, where he finds Thérèse. She is very happy to see him again and tells him that Gideon now works as a taxi driver. Together they walk to find Gideon, and Gideon tells Son that if Son is going to Isle des Chevaliers, he hopes Son plans to commit murder. Son says he has to find Jadine, and Gideon says that Son must leave her be. Alma Estée enters wearing her cheap wig, and her appearance in the wig makes Son sad. He tries to take it off, but she jumps away. She tells Son about seeing Jadine at the airport, and Son continues to feel that he must follow her. Gideon refuses to take Son to the island, but Thérèse offers to take him instead. Practically blind, she must navigate by the currents. As they drive in her boat, the sky gets foggier until Son can barely see. Thérèse leaves Son on the backside of the island, far away from L’Arbe de La Croix, and after he steps ashore, she yells after him that he has a choice. Thérèse says that he can either join the island’s wild horsemen, who are waiting for him, or he can go after Jadine. She believes he must join the horsemen and reunite with his heritage. Son stumbles onto shore, and as he picks up speed his vision fades, and the island opens to accommodate him as he joins the horsemen running.
**Major Themes**

**The Shackles of Femininity**

Tar Baby explores how being a woman imprisons the female characters. The novel’s male characters tend to see the women as stupid or inferior, simply because they are women. Gideon constantly criticizes Thérèse for her ignorance, while Valerian ignores Margaret’s desire to leave the island. Son insults Jadine by asking her how many sexual favors she had to perform to be given expensive presents and modeling jobs. The men do not see the women as individuals.

With the exception of Jadine, the women in the novel are associated with motherhood and fertility, sometimes positively and sometimes negatively. Ondine mothers Jadine, Thérèse mothers Alma Estée and Son, and Thérèse once worked as a wet nurse. Margaret longs to see her son, Michael, but it turns out that she abused him when he was a child. Thérèse believes that white women kill their babies, in part because Valerian's first wife had a series of abortions. Margaret’s actions and Thérèse’s beliefs show that being a mother does not always bring fulfillment to women and can sometimes imprison them as well. Margaret’s unhappiness as a wife and mother led her to abuse her child. Over the course of the novel, Jadine tries on the different options available to women: a career woman in Paris, a daughter on Isle des Chevaliers, and a mother figure to Son in New York. But none of these roles leads to satisfaction, and the constraints of her gender continue to bind and frustrate her.

**Nature vs. Civilization**

The conflict between nature and civilization runs throughout Tar Baby. Most characters embody either nature or civilization/culture. For example, Son, Thérèse, Gideon, the residents of Eloe, and the wild horsemen represent nature. These characters value racial and familial connection, and they demonstrate the importance of places of origin. They have a strong belief in the past and in the reality of myth, and they believe that no actions in the present can be divorced from the actions of the past. In contrast, Jadine and her urban friends believe in the importance of education and European forms of culture, and they deny the values associated with nature. For them, nature is something to be mastered or overpowered. They appreciate the idea of a kind of cosmopolitan rootlessness, where people are free to separate from their racial, familial, and geographical pasts. Nevertheless, Sydney seems to blend values from both nature and civilization: He places a lot of importance on family and believes in the importance of education. But he rejects the natural world in favor of the lively Philadelphia of his youth and young adulthood. He shrinks from anything, or anyone, that seems wild, including Son, and this makes Sydney unyielding and a little unlikable.

To some degree, the black characters align with nature, and the white characters with civilization. As she struggles to figure out what it means to be black, Jadine moves from the civilization side to the nature side. She goes to rural Florida to visit Son’s hometown, and together she and Son seem to reject the material trappings of civilization. But, at the end, Jadine chooses civilization and white culture by returning to Europe. Son too must choose
between nature and civilization at the end of the novel; readers do not know which he chooses. The novel itself argues that, despite the character of Sydney, nature and civilization cannot be synthesized, but it does not seem to favor one over the other either.

**The Connections Between Youth and Power**

When a character looks young or beautiful, that character tends to have a lot of power. Son looks magnificent after he showers and goes to charm Valerian in the greenhouse. Margaret’s beauty also once captivated Valerian. Likewise, aging reflects a character’s loss of control or influence. As Valerian loses power, he becomes exhausted and begins to age rapidly, and he has become an invalid by the end of the novel. Jadine starts to look old as she and Son fight constantly in New York, but, having abandoned Son and the compromises she was forced to make with him, Jadine begins to look young again when she boards the plane for Paris. Conversely, some characters seem ageless or of indeterminate age. Thérèse and the wild horsemen exist in perfect harmony with nature, and they remain untamed. Ondine, a servant, has always seemed old to Margaret, and Old Man’s age is reflected in his nickname. These ageless or old characters seem able to withstand the impact of other people or change on their physical beings. The faces and bodies of characters reflect their personalities and the outcome of decisions they once made.

**Black life as subordinate**

Undeniably, these characters and their stories are trying to tell us something through their point of view, but ironically, they are often misguided by the limitations of their point of view. For instance, when taken as singular, the wet-nurse in early retirement represents a kind of transition away from communal dependence; in the future, it seems families will not have to work as hard to survive because of luxury. But when taken in harmony with all the rest of these stories, as well as the constant thematic portraits to this effect, it is clear that Toni Morrison is depicting the range of options for black people. They can be beautiful and exotic, so that people like Michael can fetishize them, or they can find work by becoming subordinate to white people.

**Women and men as family**

Morrison paints pictures of gender dynamics that hinge on gender, because in addition to the racial injustice that she demonstrates through the various stories and the way race limits them, she also recognizes that for black women, the limitations are doubled. Because women are viewed as inferior by men, the families in her novel suffer unnecessarily, but when held in balance, the issue of gender is only an opportunity to help the family in different ways. Therefore, the issue is misogyny, not gender.

**Wealth and the illusions of happiness**

Although many people go off to try and live happy, healthy lives, that doesn't mean that they succeed. The people who are left behind often mention those who leave as if they are dead, in this novel. In fact, some of the characters are barely part of the story, but in the community, they are still held as valuable parts of the broader black family, so there is an
illusion present. The illusion is that happiness is something that should be gained by leaving one's community, but actually, the full picture is that people should leave their community to find a way to help their community later. In this story, we see both sides of the coin—how enlightened, traveled people help to instill their friends with hope, and how "better-than-thou" escapists harm the hope of their black communities.