

COVER PAGE

The Tarbaby

Wally Parker

~3975 words

©1996 Wally Parker All rights reserved

Printed December 4, 2006

The Tarbaby

It seemed to Cletus Puccoon that he'd been dreaming. One of those dreams where you're trying desperately to run but your legs barely respond, as if you were waist-deep in a pond of molasses. Was he hunting for someone? Escaping from something? As the world crystallized around him, he couldn't remember.

He forced his eyes open. The air outside was a blue steel color. The flat tawny sand stretched like a taut sheet through the still morning to the black edge of the sea. Ponderous breakers swelled up and emerged from the offshore fog, curled and plunged into themselves, their peeling white lightning and booming black thunder barely audible inside the car, then fading away down the empty beach.

The panic that had engulfed his flaccid limbs and tethered time into slow motion now settled on his uncompleted journey. He looked at his watch. Seven thirty. He should've been on the road an hour ago. He'd have to go like hell to make it to the cabin on time. Diane would be confused. Maybe worried. Possibly furious. Diane would be gone. Or maybe she'd wait. But not for long.

He cursed softly as he sat up in the seat. He changed his socks and wiggled his damp, swollen feet into his boots. He opened the door of the car and stepped out into the cold salt air. The surf seemed close, much closer than it had been a half-dozen hours earlier, in the dark. He looked critically at his tires; the rear ones especially seemed to have sunk a couple of inches into the sand. Still, he'd bought those top-rated "go anywhere" Blue Ox tires with the huge herringbone treads and he felt sure he'd get out easily.

Precariously perched on his dashboard like a lucky charm, in wry silence sat a pear-sized black doll modeled after the Tar Baby in *Song of the South*. A loose white shirt hung over its ovoid body; a bonnet perched rakishly on its globular head. Its twiggy

black limbs and tarball skull and torso were made of a plastic that looked like slick licorice or maybe bladderwrack. If he pushed a finger into its tummy, which yielded much like sponge cake but then clung like a woven fingertube, its hands and feet reached out and clasped him in a soft but reptilian embrace. Then and otherwise it stared at him with empty innocent marshmallow eyes, like Little Orphan Annie's, and cried out mutely with red lips bold and sad and poignant as a Stephen Foster ballad. Diane had given it to him for his birthday, just before she'd left, to remind him, as she'd said, "that there's no point cursing at fate."

As he gunned the engine and carefully eased out the clutch pedal, the swamp treads bit against the sand for a moment and the car rose forward. Then suddenly, in an instant, the tires spun and sluiced into the sand like a couple of frightened clams.

Cletus got out and stared for a moment at the car, its back wheels buried to the hubs, its rear end pressed against the beach. He took a deep breath. Then he slogged resolutely across the wide expanse of sand, clambered up the rusty headland and reconnoitered the nearly empty streets of the sleepy little seaside town. A gas station about half a mile away appeared to be open. An old towtruck was parked beside it.

As he walked, his searching eyes finally ascertained that there was, indeed, someone present there, a stout and grizzled figure, and about that time, just as he decided to cross the road, he stepped in a huge wad of gooey pink bubble gum. His shoe came reluctantly up off the pavement, the pink glob on its sole dangling numerous jellyfish tentacles into the other pink glob from which it had been torn. He scrubbed the bottom of his shoe against the concrete. Why should anything be easy?

The attendant, having just got the station open, was understandably reluctant to close up again at eight o'clock on a Friday morning, start the old tow truck and undertake to winch Cletus' stranded car out of the wet sand.

"I dunno," he said. He had a huge potbelly and he breathed laboriously when he talked. "I get a lot of traffic here, see, early. It's Friday and local folks are gettin' out of

town." Red stitchery on a white patch above the pocket of his coveralls proclaimed his name was Gus.

"Well, I'd be gettin' out myself," Cletus said, "but I'm stuck."

"Hunnurt bucks then."

Cletus flipped through his folded money, counting it. "Eighty-six," he said.

"No credit card?"

"No."

Gus whistled and shook his head. "Yeah, okay, eighty then. I get some traffic now, you know. Early. This'll cost me."

In small recompense for the fee Gus threw in a free ounce or two of gasoline with which Cletus was able to remove most of the gum from his boot. Then they climbed into the old mottled-green tow truck with the winch and the snowblade on the front. Gus, his belly barely constrained by the greasy coveralls, fitted himself behind the wheel and they rumbled off in a cloud of oily blue smoke toward the beach.

When they got to the edge of the sand, about fifty yards from Cletus' car, Hugo stopped and lowered the blade into the sand. "This here's my sand-dog," he said. Then they both got out and Gus, perspiring noticeably, dragged the grappling hook and its endless steel cable away from the winch spool and across the beach.

"It's like quicksand out here when tide's up," he growled as he knelt to hook the cable through a tow-loop, the stub of an unlit cigar clasped in a sheen of spittle between his lips. He smiled a ragged yellow grin. "The more you fight it, the more it sucks you in."

Just like the Tarbaby.

Gus got a shovel from his truck and chomped on the butt of his dead cigar while Cletus scraped away what seemed like a ton of sand from in front of the sunken rear wheels. When he was satisfied that this had been done properly, Gus returned to the tow truck and started up the winch, directing Cletus to apply just a little power in

second gear as his car was hauled up the beach.

After they'd freed the car, Cletus was famished. He stopped into the Seaside Luncheonette and ordered bacon and eggs. A good quick breakfast would sustain him while he drove through the day.

Nearby, on the yellowed formica countertop, he found a folded section of newspaper. It contained an unworked crossword puzzle, for the solving of which the waitress lent him her pencil. He breezed through it until he had to find a six-letter word hinted thus: "Word phonologically neutered by annexation." When, many minutes later, the waitress brought his breakfast, he was still at a loss.

"You finished, honey?" she asked, laying down the thick porcelain platter.

He nodded with a shrug. "Clueless, you might say," he said.

She picked up her pencil, glanced at the crossword and said, "Huh," instead, as she turned away with it.

When he'd eaten she brought him his check.

"You finished, honey?" she asked again, hardly pausing as she scooped up his platter and juice glass. He nodded again.

"Finished," he said. He barely had money left for a small tip.

Afterward he drove slowly down the sand-strewn street, past the Merlin drugstore and the Victory movie theater and the Golden Years clothing emporium, all still dark. *They* didn't get a lot of tourists in the morning either.

He'd been reinvigorated by the meal, but still he was tired. There seemed no chance he could make up the time he'd lost already. It was a tough twelve-hour drive and it'd be barely ten hours before Diane would arrive at the door of his cabin in the Obsidian Valley. She'd have just returned from a four-day buying trip in the Middle East, including Turkey. She'd smell exotic. She'd have driven her car to the cabin from the airport, over a hundred miles of country road. It took him two and a half hours, but she'd have made it in two. She'd be ready for their weekend in the remote and splendid

solitude of life along the Obsidian River. Their first weekend – their first long privacy – together. Unless he had an amazing run of luck on the road, he'd still be an hour or two away when she arrived.

Maybe he could make it, he supposed, if he pushed the speed envelope relentlessly enough. It was dangerous, though. Still...

He was near the edge of town, loping past the fluttering blue-and-white pennons of a used-car lot, gathering speed, approaching the other brick fire station with doors agape, when the eyes of an old yellow stoplight, swaying with drooping insouciance above the intersection from catercornered cables, flickered suddenly from green to yellow to red.

He stopped.

Vaguely, as if in a reverie, Cletus first heard and then glimpsed in his mirrors a log truck rumbling up behind him at the light, its valves muttering, its brakes complaining then bellowing a long sigh. The country music station he'd tuned in played three songs in a row – they guaranteed it. The lyrics unfailingly reflected the world of bad luck, where everyone's broke, jilted and – not surprisingly – weary.

Perhaps he'd fallen asleep, because, just as the dee-jette cued up yet another self-pitying lament of the downly trodden, the driver of the log truck hooked two fingers over his airhorn cable and deftly drew it down. Its throaty blast sounded like the fogbound whoop of a Mississippi riverboat or the taurine horn of a diesel locomotive. Cletus came alert with a start and twisted in his seat just far enough to observe a monstrous baleen-toothed chrome grille about to engulf his trunk. Then he sensed an insistent twenty-seven diesel tons pressing ever so gently against his bumper. In the rearview mirrors the looming Peterbilt looked like the prow of the Queen Mary. He went through the red light.

The road wound agreeably through dense thickets of birch and alder along the riverside. The bright sun filtered down sparkling among the leaves like invisibly

pellucid water rippling over chartreuse pebbles. Deep shade spread over the road and kept the air cool. As he approached the crest of the coastal mountains the river fell away far below and the curves became less gradual and more frequent. Then at the end of one long curve he entered the damp semicircular maw of the Syuzlau Tunnel and was enveloped in darkness.

Red brake lights flashed everywhere before him, their reflections glinting off the damp black rock, and he slowed quickly. The car in front of him stopped, as had the car in front of it, and a whole line of cars in front of them. Another car slowed and stopped behind him, and then another. Horns blared, in fun and jest at first, and then with a hint of annoyance. Cletus noticed finally that there was no traffic coming the other way.

After a few minutes a man appeared, walking along the center of the road with a flashlight. The headlights of many cars and a few randomly placed yellowish tunnel lights vaguely illumined the darkness. There had been a wreck ahead, just beyond the far end of the tunnel. Several cars were involved and people were injured. Traffic was unable to pass in either direction. Emergency vehicles were on the way but might have a hard time getting through the rapidly swelling snarl of traffic, cars full of tourists on their way to the coast for the weekend.

Cletus checked his maps. There was another way, around and over the mountains, but he'd have to backtrack and it was easily thirty miles farther. Still, the man with the flashlight seemed to think they'd be stalled here for an hour at least, probably more. Cletus turned around in the tunnel and headed back toward daylight. The line of cars that had been following him now stretched far back toward the sea.

He drove for twenty minutes before he came to the turnoff from which he would follow a series of roads, all paved but mostly narrow and twisting, that meandered up through the forest, along spectacular ledges, across the crest of the coast range and down again to the broad valley floor on the other side where he could once more pick up the main route. That route was now plugged at the tunnel with idling cars unable to

move, their occupants waiting impatiently in the gathering swelter of the summer's day.

Descending into the tree-shaded foothills on the far side two hours later, he remembered that the bridge was out at Duberville, where his friend Rictus lived. A spring flood had piled two houses, a barn, innumerable trees, a boxcar and several head of cattle up against its deck before it'd been ripped from its moorings and swept away, and now, as the new span took shape, a small ferryboat carried the few cars that travelled this seldom-used byway across the river.

Naturally, he arrived just as the ferry was pulling away from the dock. A sign said it'd be back in about an hour.

Another car pulled up shortly after him and its driver assured Cletus that it would, indeed, be an hour, maybe longer, before the ferry returned. The nearest bridge was at least a half-hour away and even farther off his course, so Cletus decided to park the car at the loading ramp and walk the few blocks to the apartment building where Rictus lived.

Rictus was a functionary in county government and the building he lived in was an old six-story slab-and-beam affair with little porches and a peeling concrete exterior. Inside, every wall and ceiling surface was plaster except for the door and window frames, which were brown steel. Some of the apartments, like Rictus', had one or two nice picture windows of redeeming prospect. Rictus lived on the fifth floor and his view of the river was magnificent.

Cletus waited for the single elevator to descend from above. Just as he boarded the car a fresh-faced blonde who smelled like gardenias swept in from the street and called for him to hold it, please. He did.

"Thanks," she said, tilting her head and looking up at him, and she smiled as though they'd known each other all their lives. He wished it were so.

On the way up, the elevator stopped at the second floor, where the blonde who radiated the sweet fragrance of gardenias got off, smiling at him once again, and

Madame Olga, a huge wattled woman who reeked of sour sweat, much like the interior of an old running shoe, got on. The steel cables stretched against their pulleys as the car strained upward and then somewhere beyond the fourth, but not quite at the fifth floor, it stopped again.

Now as he contemplated an immeasurable time suspended in this brass-railed box with Madame Olga, Cletus remembered he had a roll of cherry Lifesavers in his pocket. He offered her one, but, somewhat archly, she declined. He shrugged and took one for himself. Then he pressed the "Emergency" button, which set off a loud alarm. Then he tried pressing every other button on the panel in the hope something would work, whereupon Madame Olga, lunging with all the aerodynamic precision of a hot-air balloon, her dozen bracelets jangling, cuffed him with her plump doughy hand and glared at him with defiant eyes like a bulldog's. She told him he was making her crazy. He wondered with a shudder if she'd meant crazy with desire. The prospect calmed him greatly.

After their release by the building super, which took about twenty minutes, he discovered that Rictus was not home. By this time he had an urgent need to relieve himself.

Behind Rictus' apartment building, peeing in the yellow dirt under the scrawny boughs of a stinking ailanthus, he noticed two scruffy dogs, one atop the other, mating in broad daylight among the windblown trash papers and pale bachelor buttons. Then, on second glance he saw that they weren't actually mating any more, but just kind of stumbling around afterwards doing the doggy equivalent of a cigarette or something. Parting is so awkward when you have a bone in your dick.

Back at the dock, Cletus fished a spare twenty out of his wallet to pay the five-dollar fare across the river. He and the driver who'd arrived right after him were the only passengers.

Once across the river, already many hours behind, Cletus decided to relax and

enjoy the trip. He even stopped for supper.

A half-dozen tiring but uneventful hours later he turned onto the long gravel road that followed the Obsidian for several miles and provided access for a half-dozen other cabins before it came to his. The road was rough and rutted, so he didn't notice at first when the steering wheel started dragging oddly to the right.

Then there was a sound as if someone were jogging on a wooden bridge over his head. The right front fender bucked once or twice and the car swerved sharply into a shallow drainage ditch, where it stopped. The tire was sadly misshapen, squashed against the ground below the berm that now supported the undercarriage of the car.

It took him an hour to walk to the cabin, and there was no moon, but the darkness was aglow with stars. He enjoyed the warm air and the surrealistic play of shadows among the trees. No beast with brazen headlights passed him. The night belonged to the woods, and far to his right the river, whose rushing, slippery whispers he could sometimes hear.

Finally he came to his driveway. The cabin was dark. After he'd turned on the lights he looked everywhere for a note, but found none.

From the kitchen he placed a radiotelephone call to his apartment. Diane had left a message on the answering machine. She was in Venice, where she'd gone from Ankara, and she was soon going on to Salzburg, and then perhaps to Indonesia. She'd be away for another month or so. She recalled they'd agreed to meet this day and time. She wondered why he hadn't picked up the phone. She scolded him for not being there.

He was tired. He lay down on the couch and fell asleep.

Hours later, when he awoke, wisps of fog still clung to the river. The sun was above the ridgeline but still not clear of the trees. Green-edged light danced across the glittering water like butterflies chased by rippling otters in their play. Buntings and chickadees flitted chattering through the aspens. A heron fished intently in the shallows upstream. Cletus carried a cup of fresh coffee onto the deck. A cool breeze swirled above

the rushing water, brushing his cheek with a morning greeting.

Only a day earlier this primordial dawning had seemed destined for sweet sublimity.

Yet informing it now was her absence, a keening emptiness that echoed through everything, the pitiable howls of grieving Valkyries in a latter-day *Götterdämmerung*.

She, in whom he had yearned to vest himself, body and soul. She, whose smile could transform his world into the best of all possible worlds, a world beyond his petty desires, a world he had never imagined existed. She, who, guided by uncannily accurate instincts for the whimsical fancies of the idly rich, had achieved storied success in the world of exotic trinkets, would have transfigured him as the King of Siam. But she wasn't there, and now, as he realized, she never would be.

And there he was, alone in this noble paradise. Alone with the day, and the Tarbaby. Then he remembered his car.

With a sigh of resignation, he strode back into the kitchen and rinsed out his empty coffee cup. Gathering a shovel and some planks, he set out down the road to lift the car from the ditch and change the wheel. By the time he returned the morning sun was well above the trees in the eastern sky and the brisk air along the river had begun to grow warm.

As he settled himself again, with a glass of iced tea now, on the deck overlooking the river, a crow eyed him exactly, even cynically, from its perch near the slim tip of a fir tree on the opposite bank. A crimson finch alighted in the cottonwood near to it and began boldly whistling a cheerful, complicated, mocking song. The crow, annoyed, spread its black wings and, leaping off the swaying branch, labored wearily into the hot summer air.

He gazed absently at the round face of the Tarbaby, now in dumb repose on the table beside him, and thought about the message she'd left. "Where are you, Clete?" she'd said. "Are you standing me up? Are you late again? You know, if you'd been here

now we could have talked. Really, Clete, you have to learn to take responsibility for your own life. Anyway, in a few days I'm off to Salzburg. I'll get in touch when I'm back, okay? 'Bye."

He pondered his culpability in the events of the previous day. He'd stayed up late the night before. Yes. It'd been sophomoric to park on the beach. Yes. He'd done it to save time. He'd had to save time because he'd spent too many extra hours at the exhibition talking business and having dinner with the redhead, whatever her name was. No dice there. Stepping in the gum was careless inattention, an error of eagerness. So, okay. The wreck at the tunnel was of course no work of his; a greater god had done that. The detour had taken much longer than he'd expected, though. Maybe it was a bad choice, but how long he'd have been there, jammed up inside the mountain, he had no way of knowing. Missing the ferry, that was a crapshoot. The thing didn't even have a schedule. Getting stuck with Madame Olga was probably his fault because he'd been spewing a cloud of pheromones for the gardenia blonde and sometimes this did upset the gods. Maybe it was really what had upset Madame Olga. Moreover, like the dog joke, these things hadn't actually delayed him. The flat tire he would own some part in; it had had a couple years' hard driving on it.

But, even had he vanquished all these bugaboos, what then? If he'd gone to his apartment, instead of to the cabin, they might've talked. She could've cooed in his ear from Venice while she floated under the Bridge of Sighs in a gondola. He laughed to himself. Late as he'd been, he after all was here, and she was in the eighteenth century. She hadn't even remembered they'd been going to meet at the cabin.

He raised a heaping white teaspoonful of sugar over his iced tea and slowly tipped it 'til it slid and fell sparkling into his glass. A clitic. That's what the word was. Like tacking "ful" onto the end of a "teaspoon."

He idly poked his finger into the Tarbaby's tummy, which held it firmly while those glossy salamander arms embraced his skin. He squeezed its head and it released

him. He thought about calling Rictus to see if he could get the blonde's phone number. But instead he took from his little library a copy of Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* and spent the day down by the river, beneath a shady tree, reading and musing on fate while the Tarbaby slowly melted into a thick resinous puddle under the fierce rays of the sun.