

ARNA BONTEMPS

A Summer Tragedy

ARNA BONTEMPS (1902-1973) was born in Alexandria, Louisiana, but grew up in California where he graduated from Pacific Union, College. In the early 1920s, after completing graduate work at the University of Chicago, Bontemps moved to New York City and became associated with the talented black writers of the Harlem Renaissance. He explored his black American Heritage in poems, stories, novels, plays, essays, and children's literature. He also preserved much of that heritage in anthologies of folklore, slave narratives, short stories, and poetry. In addition to writing and editing, Bontemps held several teaching jobs before becoming librarian at Fisk University, a position he held for over twenty years. His books include *God Sends Sunday* (1931), *Black Thunder* (1936), *Personals* (1963), and *The Old South* (1973). "A Summer Tragedy," reprinted from *The Old South*, describes an elderly couple's preparations to carry out a solemn decision.

Old Jeff Patton, the black share farmer, fumbled with his bow tie. His fingers trembled and the high, stiff collar pinched his throat. A fellow loses his hand for such vanities after thirty or forty years of simple life. Once a year, or maybe twice if there's a wedding among his kinfolks, he may spruce up, but generally fancy clothes do nothing but adorn the wall of the big room and feed the moths. That had been Jeff Patton's experience. He had not worn his stiff-bosomed shirt more than a dozen times in all his married life. His swallow-tailed coat lay on the bed beside him, freshly brushed and pressed, but it was as full of holes as the overalls in which he worked on weekdays. The moths had used it badly. Jeff twisted his mouth into a hideous toothless grimace as he contended with the obstinate bow. He stamped his good foot and decided to give up the struggle.

"Jennie," he called.

"What's that, Jeff?" His wife's shrunken voice came out of the adjoining room like an echo. It was hardly bigger than a whisper.

"I reckon you'll have to he'p me wid this heah bow tie, baby," he said meekly. "Dog if I can hitch it up."

Her answer was not strong enough to reach him, but presently the old woman came to the door, feeling her way with a stick. She had a wasted, dead-life appearance. Her body, as scrawny and gnarled as a string bean, seemed less than nothing in the ocean of frayed and faded petticoats that surrounded her. These hung an inch or two above the tops of her heavy unlaced shoes and showed little grotesque piles where the stockings had fallen down from her negligible legs.

"You oughta could do a heap mo' wid a thing like that'n me—beingst as you got yo' good sight."

“looks like I oughta could,” he admitted. “But my fingers is gone democrat on me. I get all mixed up in the looking glass an’ can’t tell wicha way to twist the devilish thing.”

Jennie sat on the side of the bed, and old Jeff Patton got down on one knee while she tied the bow knot. It was a slow and painful ordeal for each of them in this position. Jeff’s bones cracked, his knee ached, and it was only after a half dozen attempts that Jennie worked a semblance of a bow into the tie.

“I got to dress maself now,” the old woman whispered. “These is ma old shoes an’ stockings, and I ain’t so much as unwrapped ma dress.”

“Well, don’t worry ‘bout me no mo’, baby,” Jeff said. “That ‘bout finishes me. All I gotta do now is slip on that old coat ‘n ves’ an’ I’ll be fixed to leave.”

Jennie disappeared again through the dim passage into the shed room. Being blind was no handicap to her in that black hole. Jeff heard the cane placed against the wall beside the door and knew that his wife was on easy ground. He put on his coat, took a battered top hat from the bed post, and hobbled to the front door. He was ready to travel. As soon as Jennie could get on her Sunday shoes and her old black silk dress, they would start.

Outside the tiny log house, the day was warm and mellow with sunshine. A host of wasps were humming with busy excitement in the trunk of a dead sycamore. Gray squirrels were searching through the grass for hickory nuts, and blue jays were in the trees, hopping from branch to branch. Pine woods stretched away to the left like a black sea. Among them were scattered scores of log houses like Jeff’s, houses of black share farmers. Cows and pigs wandered freely among the trees. There was no danger of loss. Each farmer knew his own stock and knew his neighbor’s as well as he knew his neighbor’s children.

Down the slope to the right were cultivated acres on which the colored folks worked. They extended to the river, more than two miles away, and they were today green with the unmade cotton crop. A tiny thread of a road, which passed directly in front of Jeff’s place, ran through these green fields like a pencil mark.

Jeff, standing outside the door, with his absurd hat in his left hand, surveyed the wide scene tenderly. He had been forty-five years on these acres. He loved them with the unexplained affection that others have for the countries to which they belong.

The sun was hot on his head, his collar still pinched his throat, and the Sunday clothes were intolerably hot. Jeff transferred the hat to his right hand and began fanning with it. Suddenly the whisper that was Jennie’s voice came out of the shed room.

“You can bring the car round front whilst you’s waitin’,” it said feebly. There was a tired pause; then it added, “I’ll soon be fixed to go.”

“A’right baby,” Jeff answered. “I’ll get it in a minute.”

But he didn’t move. A thought struck him that made his mouth fall open. The mention of the car brought to his mind with new intensity, the trip he and Jennie were about to take. Fear came into his eyes; excitement took his breath. Lord, Jesus!

“Jeff...O Jeff,” the old woman’s whisper called.

He awakened with a jolt. “Hunh, baby?”

“What you doin’?”

“Nuthin. Jes studyin’. I jes been turnin’ things round ‘n round in ma mind.”

“You could be getting’ the car,” she said.

“Oh yes, right away, baby”

He started round the shed, limping heavily on his bad leg. There were three frizzly chickens in the yard. All his other chicks had been killed or stolen recently. But the frizzly chickens had been saved somehow. That was fortunate indeed, for these curious creatures had a way of devouring “poison” from the yard and in that way protecting against conjure and black luck and spells. But even the frizzly chickens seemed now to be in a stupor. Jeff thought they had some ailment; he expected all three of them to die shortly.

The shed in which the old T-model Ford stood was only a grass roof held up by four corner poles. It had been built by tremulous hands at a time when the little rattletrap car had been regarded as a peculiar treasure. And, miraculously, despite wind and downpour, it still stood.

Jeff adjusted the crank and put his weight upon it. The engine came to life with a sputter and bang that rattled the old car from radiator to trail light. Jeff hopped into the seat and put his foot on the accelerator. The sputtering and banging increased. The rattling became more violent. That was good. It was good banging, good sputtering and rattling, and it meant that the aged car was still in running condition. She could be depended on for this trip.

Again Jeff’s thought halted as if paralyzed. The suggestion of the trip fell into the machinery of his mind like a wrench. He felt dazed and weak. He swung the car out into the yard, made a half turn, and drove around to the front door. When he took his hands off the wheel, he noticed that he was trembling violently. He cut off the motor and climbed to the ground to wait for Jennie.

A few minutes later she was at the window, her voice rattling against the pane like a broken shutter.

“I’m ready, Jeff.”

He did not answer, but limped into the house and took her by the arm. He led her slowly through the big room, down the step, and across the yard.

“You reckon I’d oughta lock the do’?” he asked softly.

They stopped and Jennie weighed the question. Finally she shook her head.

“Ne’ mind the do’,” she said. “I don’t see no cause to lock up things.”

“You right,” Jeff agreed. “No cause to lock up.”

Jeff opened the door and helped his wife into the car. A quick shudder passed over him. Jesus! Again he trembled.

“How come you shaking so?” Jennie whispered.

“I don’t know,” he said.

“You mus’ be scairt, Jeff.”

“No, baby, I ain’t scairt.”

He slammed the door after her and went around to crank up again. The motor started easily. Jeff wished that it had not been so responsive. He would have liked a few more minutes in which to turn things around in his head. As it was, with Jennie chiding him about being afraid, he had to keep going. He swung the car into the little pencil-mark road and started off toward the river, driving very slowly, very cautiously.

Chugging across the green countryside, the small battered Ford seemed tiny indeed. Jeff felt a familiar excitement, a thrill, as they came down the first slope to the immense levels on which the cotton was growing. He could not help reflecting that the

crops were good. He knew what that meant, too. He made forty-five of them with his own hands. It was true that he had worn out nearly a dozen mules, but that was the fault of the old man Stevenson, the owner of the land. Major Stevenson had the old notion that one mule was all a share farmer needed to work a thirty-acre plot. It was an expensive notion, the way it killed mules from overwork, but the old man held to it. Jeff thought it killed a good many share farmers as well as mules, but he had no patience with weakness in men. Women or children might be tolerated if they were puny, but a weak man was a curse. Of course, his own children—

Jeff's thought halted there. He and Jennie never mentioned their dead children any more. And naturally, he did not wish to dwell upon them in his mind. Before he knew it, some remark would slip out of his mouth and that would make Jennie feel blue. Perhaps she would cry. A woman like Jennie could not easily throw off the grief that comes from losing five grown children within two years. Even Jeff was still staggered by the blow. His memory had not been much good recently. He frequently talked to himself. And, although he had kept it a secret, he knew that his courage had left him. He was terrified by the least unfamiliar sound at night. He was reluctant to venture far from home in the daytime. And that habit of trembling when he felt fearful was now far beyond his control. Sometimes he became afraid and trembled without knowing what had frightened him. The feeling would just come over him like a chill.

The car rattled slowly over the dusty road. Jennie sat erect and silent with a little absurd hat printed to her hair. Her useless eyes seemed very large, very white in their deep sockets. Suddenly Jeff heard her voice, and he inclined his head to catch the words.

"Is we passed Delia Moore's house yet?" she asked

"Not yet," he said.

"You must be drivin' mighty slow, Jeff?"

"Nah, baby, I ain't scairt."

"You know how we agreed—we gotta keep on goin'."

Jewels of perspiration appeared on Jeff's forehead. His eyes rounded, blinked, became fixed on the road.

"I don't know," he said with a shiver, "I reckon it's the only thing to do."

"Hm."

A flock of guinea fowls, pecking in the road, were scattered by the passing car. Some of them took to their wings; others hid under the bushes. A blue jay, swaying on a leafy twig, was annoying a roadside squirrel. Jeff held an even speed till he came near Delia's place. Then he slowed down noticeably.

Delia's house was really no house at all, but an abandoned stone building converted into a dwelling. It sat near a crossroads, beneath a single black cedar tree. There Delia, a cattish old creature of Jennie's age, lived alone. She had been there for more years than anyone could remember, and long ago had won the disfavor of such women as Jennie. For in her younger days Delia had been a gayer, yellower, and saucier than seemed proper in those parts. Her ways with menfolks had been dark and suspicious. And the fact that she had had as many husbands as children did not help her reputation.

"Yonder's old Delia," Jeff said as they passed.

"What she doin'?"

"Jes sittin' in the do'," he said.

"She see us?"

“Hm,” Jeff said. “Musta did.”

That relieved Jennie. It strengthened her to know that her old enemy had seen her pass in her best clothes. That would give the old she-devil something to chew her gums and fret about, Jennie thought. Wouldn't she have a fit if she didn't find out? Old evil Delia! This would be just the thing for her. It would pay her back for being so evil. It would also pay her, Jennie thought, for the way she used to grin at Jeff—long ago, when her teeth were good.

The road became smooth and red, and Jeff could tell by the smell of the air that they were nearing the river. He could see the rise where the road turned and ran along parallel to the stream. The car chugged on monotonously. After a long silent spell, Jennie leaned against Jeff and spoke,

“How many bale o' cotton you think we got standin'?” she said.

Jeff wrinkled his forehead as he calculated.

“'Bout twenty-five, I reckon.”

“How many you make las' year?”

“Twenty-eight,” he said. “How come you ask that?”

“I's jes thinkin',” Jennie said quietly.

“It don't make a speck o' difference though,” Jeff reflected. “If we get much or if we get little, we still gunna be in debt to old man Stevenson when he gets through counting up agin us. It's took us a long time to learn that.”

Jennie was not listening to these words. She had fallen into a trancelike meditation. Her lips twitched. She chewed her gum and rubbed her gnarled hands nervously. Suddenly, she leaned forward, buried her face in the nervous hands, and burst into tears. She cried aloud in a dry cracked voice that suggested the rattle of fodder on dead stalks. She cried aloud like a child, for she had never learned to suppress a genuine sob. Her slight old frame shook heavily and seemed hardly able to sustain such violent grief.

“What's the matter, baby?” Jeff asked awkwardly. “Why you cryn' like all that?”

“It's jes thinkin',” she said.

“So you the one what's scairt now, hunh?”

“I ain't scairt, Jeff. I's jes thinkin' 'bout leavin' eve'thing like this—eve'thing we been used to. It's right sad-like.”

Jeff did not answer, and presently Jennie buried her face again and cried.

The sun was almost overhead. It beat down furiously on the dusty wagon-path road, on the parched roadside grass and the tiny battered car. Jeff's hands, gripping the wheel, became wet with perspiration; his forehead sparkled. Jeff's lips parted. His mouth shaped a hideous grimace. His face suggested the face of a man being burned. But the torture passed in his expression softened again.

“You mustn't cry, baby,” he said to his wife. “We gotta be strong. We can't break down.”

Jennie waited a few seconds, then said, “You reckon we oughta do it, Jeff? You reckon we oughta go 'head an' do it, really?”

Jeff's voice choked; his eyes blurred. He was terrified to hear Jennie say the thing that had been in his mind all morning. She had egged him on when he had wanted more than anything in the world to wait, to reconsider, to think things over a little longer. Now she was getting cold feet. Actually, there was no need of thinking the question through

again. It would only end in making the same painful decision once more. Jeff knew that. There was no need of fooling around longer.

“We jes as well to do like we planned,” he said. “They ain’t nothin’ else for us now—it’s the bes’ thing.”

Jeff thought of the handicaps, the near impossibility of making another crop with his leg bothering him more and more each week. Then there was always the chance that he would have another stroke, like the one that had made him lame. Another one might kill him. The least it could do would be to leave him helpless. Jeff gasped—Lord Jesus! He could not bear to think of being helpless, like a baby on Jennie’s hands. Frail, blind Jennie.

The little pounding motor of the car worked harder and harder. The puff of steam from the cracked radiator became larger. Jeff realized that they were climbing a little rise. A moment later the road turned abruptly and he looked down upon the face of the river.

“Jeff.”

“Hunh?”

“Is that the water I hear?”

“Hm, Tha’s it.”

“Well, which way you goin’ now?”

“Down this-a way,” he said. “The road runs ‘long ‘side o’ the water a lil piece.”

She waited a while calmly. Then she said, “Drive faster.”

“A’right, baby,” Jeff said.

The water roared in the bed of the river. It was fifty or sixty feet below the level of the road. Between the road and the water there was a long smooth slope, sharply inclined. The slop was dry, the clay hardened by prolonged summer heat. The water below, roaring in a narrow channel, was noisy and wild.

“Jeff.”

“Hunh?”

“How far you goin’?”

“Jes a lil piece down the road.”

“You ain’t scairt, is you, Jeff?”

“Nah, baby,” he said trembling. “I ain’t scairt.”

“Remember how we planned it, Jeff. We gotta do it like we said. Brave-like.”

“Hm.”

Jeff’s brain darkened. Thing suddenly seemed unreal, like figure in a dream. Thought swam in his mind foolishly, hysterically, like little blind fish in a pool within a dense cave. They rushed again. Jeff soon became dizzy. He shuttered violently and turned to his wife.

“Jennie, I can’t do it. I can’t.” His voice broke pitifully.

She did not appear to be listening. All the grief had gone from her face. She sat erect, her unseeing eyes wide open, strained and frightful. Her glossy black skin had become dull. She seemed as thin, as sharp and bony, as a starved bird. Now, having suffered and endured the sadness of tearing herself away from beloved things, she showed no anguish. She was absorbed with her own thoughts, and she didn’t even hear Jeff’s voice shouting in her ear.

Jeff said nothing more. For an instant there was light in his cavernous brain. The great chamber was, for less than a second, peopled by characters he knew and loved.

They were simple, healthy creatures, and they behaved in a manor that he could understand. They had quality. But since he had already taken leave of them long ago, the remembrance did not break his heart again. Young Jeff Patton was among them, the Jeff Patton of fifty years ago who went down to New Orleans with a crowd of country boys to the Mardi Gras doings. The gay young crowd, boys with candy-stripped shirts and rouged brown girls in noisy silks, was like a picture in his head. Yet it did not make him sad. On that very trip Slim Burns had killed Joe Heasley—the crowd had been broken up. Since then Jeff Patton’s world had been the Greenbriar Plantation. If there had been other Mardi Gras carnivals, he had not heard of them. Since then there had been no time; the years had fallen on him like waves. Now he was old, worn out. Another paralytic stroke (like the one he had already suffered) would put him on his back for keeps. In that condition, with a frail blind woman to look after him, he would be worse off than if he were dead.

Suddenly Jeff’s hands became steady. He actually felt brave. He slowed down the motor of the car and carefully pulled off the road. Below the water of the stream boomed, a soft thunder in the deep channel. Jeff ran the car onto the clay slope, pointed it directly toward the stream, and put his foot heavily on the accelerator. The little car leaped furiously down the steep incline toward the water. The movement was nearly as swift and direct as a fall. The two old black folks, sitting quietly side by side, showed no excitement. In another instant the car hit the water and dropped immediately out of sight.

A little later it logged in the mud of a shallow place. One wheel of the crushed and upturned little Ford became visible above the rushing water.

Questions for Discussing and Writing

1. What is the first indication that Jeff and Jennie are planning something tragic on this summer day? How many times do they have second thought about their intentions?
2. How does the opening scene characterize Jeff and Jennie? What specific details of action and dialogue reveal the nature of their relationship to one another?
3. Why is the couple no longer attached to the land where they have worked and lived for so many years?
4. Why is appropriate that Jeff’s point of view dominates the story? Where is there a shift in the point of view? Why is it included?
5. In how many senses does the story record a summer tragedy? What other summer tragedies have led the Pattons to enact this one? Do you think their decision is justifiable? Explain your answer.