

Music for Chameleons, Truman Capote

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SHE IS TALL AND SLENDER, perhaps seventy, silver-haired, soigné, neither black nor white, a pale golden rum color. She is a Martinique aristocrat who lives in Fort de France but also has an apartment in Paris. We are sitting on the terrace of her house, an airy, elegant house that looks as if it was made of wooden lace: it reminds me of certain old New Orleans houses. We are drinking iced mint tea slightly flavored with absinthe.

Three green chameleons race one another across the terrace; one pauses at Madame's feet, flicking its forked tongue, and she comments: "Chameleons. Such exceptional creatures. The way they change color. Red. Yellow. Lime. Pink. Lavender. And did you know they are very fond of music?" She regards me with her fine black eyes. "You don't believe me?"

During the course of the afternoon she had told me many curious things. How at night her garden was filled with mammoth night-flying moths. That her chauffeur, a dignified figure who had driven me to her house in a dark green Mercedes, was a wife-poisoner who had escaped from Devil's Island. And she had described a village high in the northern mountains that is entirely inhabited by albinos: "Little pink-eyed people white as chalk. Occasionally one sees a few on the streets of Fort de France."

"Yes, of course I believe you."

She tilts her silver head. "No, you don't. But I shall prove it."

So saying, she drifts into her cool Caribbean salon, a shadowy room with gradually turning ceiling fans, and poses herself at a well-tuned piano. I am still sitting on the terrace, but I can observe her, this chic, elderly woman, the product of varied bloods. She begins to perform a Mozart sonata.

Eventually the chameleons accumulated: a dozen, a dozen more, most of them green, some scarlet, lavender. They skittered across the terrace and scampered into the salon, a sensitive, absorbed audience for the music played. And then not played, for suddenly my hostess stood and stamped her foot, and the chameleons scattered like sparks from an exploding star.

Now she regards me. "Et maintenant? C'est vrai?"

"Indeed. But it seems so strange."

She smiles. "Alors. The whole island floats in strangeness. This very house is haunted. Many ghosts dwell here. And not in darkness. Some appear in the bright light of noon, saucy as you please. Impertinent."

"That's common in Haiti, too. The ghosts there often stroll about in daylight. I once saw a horde of ghosts working in a field near Petionville. They were picking bugs off coffee plants."

She accepts this as fact, and continues: "Oui. Oui. The Haitians work their dead. They are well known for that. Ours we leave to their sorrows. And their frolics. So coarse, the Haitians. So Creole. And one can't bathe there, the sharks are so intimidating. And their mosquitoes: the size, the audacity! Here in Martinique we have no mosquitoes. None." "I've noticed that; I wondered about it."

"So do we. Martinique is the only island in the Caribbean not cursed with mosquitoes, and no one can explain it."

"Perhaps the night-flying moths devour them all."

She laughs. "Or the ghosts."

"No. I think ghosts would prefer moths."

"Yes, moths are perhaps more ghostly fodder. If I was a hungry ghost, I'd rather eat anything than mosquitoes. Will you have more ice in your glass? Absinthe?"

"Absinthe. That's something we can't get at home. Not even in New Orleans."

"My paternal grandmother was from New Orleans."

"Mine, too."

As she pours absinthe from a dazzling emerald decanter: "Then perhaps we are related. Her maiden name was Dufont. Alouette Dufont."

"Alouette? Really? Very pretty. I'm aware of two Dufont families in New Orleans, but I'm not related to either of them."

"Pity. It would have been amusing to call you cousin. Alors. Claudine Paulot tells me this is your first visit to Martinique."

"Claudine Paulot?"

"Claudine and Jacques Paulot. You met them at the Governor's dinner the other night."

I remember: he was a tall, handsome man, the First President of the Court of Appeals for Martinique and French Guiana, which includes Devil's Island. "The Paulots. Yes. They have eight children. He very much favors capital punishment."

"Since you seem to be a traveler, why have you not visited here sooner?"

"Martinique? Well, I felt a certain reluctance. A good friend was murdered here."

Madame's lovely eyes are a fraction less friendly than before. She makes a slow pronouncement: "Murder is a rare occurrence here. We are not a violent people. Serious, but not violent."

"Serious. Yes. The people in restaurants, on the streets, even on the beaches have such severe expressions. They seem so preoccupied. Like Russians."

"One must keep in mind that slavery did not end here until 1848."

I fail to make the connection, but do not inquire, for already she is saying: "Moreover, Martinique is très cher. A bar of soap bought in Paris for five francs costs twice that here. The price of everything is double what it should be because everything has to be imported. If these troublemakers got their way, and Martinique became independent of France, then that would be the close of it. Martinique could not exist without subsidy from France. We would simply perish. Alors, some of us have serious expressions. Generally speaking, though, do you find the population attractive?"

"The women. I've seen some amazingly beautiful women. Supple, suave, such beautifully haughty postures; bone structure as fine as cats. Also, they have a certain alluring aggressiveness."

"That's the Senegalese blood. We have much Senegalese here. But the men—you do not find them so appealing?"

"No."

"I agree. The men are not appealing. Compared to our women, they seem irrelevant, without character: vin ordinaire. Martinique, you understand, is a matriarchal society. When that is the case, as it is in India, for example, then the men never amount to much. I see you are looking at my black mirror."

I am. My eyes distractedly consult it—are drawn to it against my will, as they sometimes are by the senseless flickerings of an unregulated television set. It has that kind of frivolous power. Therefore, I shall

overly describe it—in the manner of those “avant-garde” French novelists who, having chosen to discard narrative, character, and structure, restrict themselves to page-length paragraphs detailing the contours of a single object, the mechanics of an isolated movement: a wall, a white wall with a fly meandering across it. So: the object in Madame’s drawing room is a black mirror.

It is seven inches tall and six inches wide. It is framed within a worn black leather case that is shaped like a book. Indeed, the case is lying open on a table, just as though it were a deluxe edition meant to be picked up and browsed through; but there is nothing there to be read or seen—except the mystery of one’s own image projected by the black mirror’s surface before it recedes into its endless depths, its corridors of darkness.

“It belonged,” she is explaining, “to Gauguin. You know, of course, that he lived and painted here before he settled among the Polynesians. That was his black mirror. They were a quite common artifact among artists of the last century. Van Gogh used one. As did Renoir.”  
“I don’t quite understand. What did they use them for?”

“To refresh their vision. Renew their reaction to color, the tonal variations. After a spell of work, their eyes fatigued, they rested themselves by gazing into these dark mirrors. Just as gourmets at a banquet, between elaborate courses, reawaken their palates with a sorbet de citron.” She lifts the small volume containing the mirror off the table and passes it to me. “I often use it when my eyes have been stricken by too much sun. It’s soothing.”

Soothing, and also disquieting. The blackness, the longer one gazes into it, ceases to be black, but becomes a queer silver-blue, the threshold to secret visions; like Alice, I feel on the edge of a voyage through a looking-glass, one I’m hesitant to take.

From a distance I hear her voice—smoky, serene, cultivated: “And so you had a friend who was murdered here?”

“Yes.”

“An American?”

“Yes. He was a very gifted man. A musician. A composer.”

“Oh, I remember—the man who wrote operas! Jewish. He had a mustache.”

“His name was Marc Blitzstein.”

“But that was long ago. At least fifteen years. Or more. I understand you are staying at the new hotel. La Bataille. How do you find it?”

“Very pleasant. In a bit of a turmoil because they are in the process of opening a casino. The man in charge of the casino is called Shelley Keats. I thought it was a joke at first, but that really happens to be his name.”

“Marcel Proust works at Le Foulard, that fine little seafood restaurant in Schoelcher, the fishing village. Marcel is a waiter. Have you been disappointed in our restaurants?”

“Yes and no. They’re better than anywhere else in the Caribbean, but too expensive.”

“Alors. As I remarked, everything is imported. We don’t even grow our own vegetables. The natives are too lackadaisical.” A hummingbird penetrates the terrace and casually balances on the air. “But our sea-fare is exceptional.”

“Yes and no. I’ve never seen such enormous lobsters. Absolute whales; prehistoric creatures. I ordered one, but it was tasteless as chalk, and

so tough to chew that I lost a filling. Like California fruit: splendid to look at, but without flavor."

She smiles, not happily: "Well, I apologize"—and I regret my criticism, and realize I'm not being very gracious.

"I had lunch at your hotel last week. On the terrace overlooking the pool. I was shocked."

"How so?"

"By the bathers. The foreign ladies gathered around the pool wearing nothing above and very little below. Do they permit that in your country? Virtually naked women parading themselves?"

"Not in so public a place as a hotel pool."

"Exactly. And I don't think it should be condoned here. But of course we can't afford to annoy the tourists. Have you bothered with any of our tourist attractions?"

"We went yesterday to see the house where Empress Josephine was born."

"I never advise anyone to visit there. That old man, the curator, what a chatterbox! And I can't say which is worse—his French or his English or his German. Such a bore. As though the journey getting there weren't tiring enough."

Our hummingbird departs. Far off we hear steel-drum bands, tambourines, drunken choirs ("Ce soir, ce soir nous danserons sans chemise, sans pantalons": Tonight, tonight we dance without shirts, without pants), sounds reminding us that it is Carnival week in Martinique.

"Usually," she announces, "I leave the island during Carnival. It's impossible. The racket, the stench."

When planning for this Martinique experience, which included traveling with three companions, I had not known our visit would coincide with Carnival; as a New Orleans native, I've had my fill of such affairs. However, the Martinique variation proved surprisingly vital, spontaneous and vivid as a bomb explosion in a fireworks factory. "We're enjoying it, my friends and I. Last night there was one marvelous marching group: fifty men carrying black umbrellas and wearing silk tophats and with their torsos painted with phosphorescent skeleton bones.

I love the old ladies with gold-tinsel wigs and sequins pasted all over their faces. And all those men wearing their wives' white wedding gowns! And the millions of children holding candles, glowing like fireflies. Actually, we did have one near-disaster. We borrowed a car from the hotel, and just as we arrived in Fort de France, and were creeping through the midst of the crowds, one of our tires blew out, and immediately we were surrounded by red devils with pitchforks—"

Madame is amused: "Oui. Oui. The little boys who dress as red devils. That goes back centuries."

"Yes, but they were dancing all over the car. Doing terrific damage. The roof was a positive samba floor. But we couldn't abandon it, for fear they'd wreck it altogether. So the calmest of my friends, Bob MacBride, volunteered to change the tire then and there. The problem was that he had on a new white linen suit and didn't want to ruin it."

"Therefore, he disrobed. Very sensible."

"At least it was funny. To watch MacBride, who's quite a solemn sort of fellow, stripped to his briefs and trying to change a tire with Mardi Gras madness swirling around him and red devils jabbing at him with pitchforks. Paper pitchforks, luckily."

"But Mr. MacBride succeeded."

"If he hadn't, I doubt that I'd be here abusing your hospitality."  
"Nothing would have happened. We are not a violent people."  
"Please. I'm not suggesting we were in any danger. It was just—well, part of the fun."  
"Absinthe? Un peu?"  
"A mite. Thank you."  
The hummingbird returns.  
"Your friend, the composer?"  
"Marc Blitzstein."

"I've been thinking. He came here once to dinner. Madame Derain brought him. And Lord Snowdon was here that evening. With his uncle, the Englishman who built all those houses on Mustique—"  
"Oliver Messel."

"Oui. Oui. It was while my husband was still alive. My husband had a fine ear for music. He asked your friend to play the piano. He played some German songs." She is standing now, moving to and fro, and I am aware of how exquisite her figure is, how ethereal it seems silhouetted inside a frail green lace Parisian dress. "I remember that, yet I can't recall how he died. Who killed him?"

All the while the black mirror has been lying in my lap, and once more my eyes seek its depths. Strange where our passions carry us, floggingly pursue us, forcing upon us unwanted dreams, unwelcome destinies.

"Two sailors."

"From here? Martinique?"

"No. Two Portuguese sailors off a ship that was in harbor. He met them in a bar. He was here working on an opera, and he'd rented a house. He took them home with him—"

"I do remember. They robbed him and beat him to death. It was dreadful. An appalling tragedy."

"A tragic accident." The black mirror mocks me: Why did you say that? It wasn't an accident.

"But our police caught those sailors. They were tried and sentenced and sent to prison in Guiana. I wonder if they are still there. I might ask Paulot. He would know. After all, he is the First President of the Court of Appeals."

"It really doesn't matter."

"Not matter! Those wretches ought to have been guillotined."

"No. But I wouldn't mind seeing them at work in the fields in Haiti, picking bugs off coffee plants."

Raising my eyes from the mirror's demonic shine, I notice my hostess has momentarily retreated from the terrace into her shadowy salon. A piano chord echoes, and another. Madame is toying with the same tune. Soon the music lovers assemble, chameleons scarlet, green, lavender, an audience that, lined out on the floor of the terra-cotta terrace, resembles a written arrangement of musical notes. A Mozartean mosaic.

The end