

## OLD FRIENDS

### The Time

February 1979

### The Characters

Tennessee Williams

Billy Nash

Gore Vidal

Truman Capote

### The Setting

Tennessee Williams' small but comfortable Duval Street bungalow in Key West.

There are four open entryways visible in the room. One opening leads to a small foyer, one to a kitchen, another to stairs leading to an upstairs bedroom and bath, and a fourth out to the backyard where there is a small artist's studio and gazebo. There are no doors.

An upstage breakfront holds a vast collection of mismatched wine and martini glasses, a typewriter case, a phonograph, dozens of record albums, and a large signed and framed photograph of Eugene O'Neill. Bookshelves packed tight line the remaining wall space.

A sofa and two end chairs feature rattan and wicker frames, with pale yellow cushions that have lost much of their cush. In one of the chairs sits a very large, very ugly pillow. Worn straw matting carpets the room and faded royal blue draperies provide strong contrast to the creamy walls.

A teak coffee table holds three non-matching ashtrays; several glasses in a variety of shapes, each with what's left of various spirits; a stack of books; and a black wool Greek fisherman's hat. A few smaller tables are also in the room, as is a petite pouf.

A small desk is home to a telephone, notepaper, pencils and a photograph of Hart Crane. A large black-and-white console television dominates one corner of the room.

#### PUNCTUATION NOTE

Two slash marks -- // -- indicate overlapping text.

#### A SPECIAL NOTE ON SONGS AND RECORDINGS

For performances of copyrighted songs, arrangements, recordings, and/or video mentioned in this Play (including but not limited to "Missing You," "Friends," "Leader of the Pack" and "Stardust"), the permission of the copyright owners must be obtained.

OLD FRIENDS

(The room is empty.)

Silence. A long silence.

The sound of shattering glass and a heavy thud from the foyer, quickly followed by a man's scream from upstairs.

The man, TENNESSEE WILLIAMS, then calls out in a voice with a strong Southern lilt mixed with terror)

TENN (O.S.)

Billy?!

(nothing)

Oh my GOD!

(with more panic)

BILLY?!

(A very wet and very naked BILLY NASH, 18, runs in from the backyard. As he crosses the room to the foyer, he is attempting to wrap a large beach towel around his waist.

BILLY quickly disappears into the foyer)

TENN (O.S.) (Continued)

(still from upstairs)

BILLY?!

BILLY (O.S.)

(from the foyer)

They broke a window!

TENN (O.S.)

Which one?

BILLY (O.S.)

Does it matter?

(We now see what appears to be the elongated shadow of TENN from the unseen stair landing. It extends across much of the room)

TENN (O.S.)  
Careful of the glass, baby.

BILLY (O.S.)  
It's everywhere.

TENN (O.S.)  
Another rock?

BILLY (O.S.)  
A marble crucifix.

TENN (O.S.)  
(mostly to himself)  
Well, points for fecundity.

(TENN'S shadow begins to disappear  
as he starts up the stairs)

TENN (O.S.) (Continued)  
Just leave it for the morning, baby.

BILLY (O.S.)  
I don't mind, Tom. Won't take me long to // clean it up and--

TENN (O.S.)  
Now, Billy, just do what I say. Don't touch // the glass--

(BILLY appears from the foyer, the  
towel now secured about his waist)

BILLY  
It's more glass than you think.

TENN (O.S.)  
You're not barefoot, are you?

BILLY  
No.

(He is)

BILLY (Continued)  
Should I tape some cardboard or // at least some--

TENN (O.S.)  
Leave. It. Alone.

(A moment)

BILLY  
But Tom ...

TENN (O.S.)  
I require the evidence.

(BILLY considers, then starts for the backyard)

TENN (O.S.) (Continued)  
A bit too quiet down there, baby. You coming up?

(BILLY goes to the television and switches it on. As he does ...)

BILLY  
I'm only saying, it would take me two minutes.

TENN (O.S.)  
HONEST TO CHRIST!

(BILLY exits to the backyard as the television finds its own very loud voice, a TV broadcast of the CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite from February 26, 1979)

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)  
--Evening News with Walter Cronkite.

CRONKITE (V.O.)  
Good evening. For parts of North America, the sun went out today. For a little under three minutes, the forces of darkness ruled in daylight as a great swath of shadow up to one hundred and ninety miles wide cut across the continent, from the coast of Oregon to Greenland. It was the last total eclipse of the sun for North America until the year two-thousand seventeen. Thousands of scientists and amateur viewers saw stars and the planets Mars, Venus and Mercury briefly dominate the daytime skies. There's been a good deal said in recent days about the way ancients responded to an eclipse ...

(The broadcast continues for several seconds and then is joined by a doorbell being rung once, then again. When there is no response, there comes a very loud rapping from the front door beyond the foyer.

When this also yields no response, we hear the creak of the front door and a new MAN'S VOICE calling out)

MAN'S VOICE  
(tentatively)  
Hello? Bird?  
(no response)  
Billy? Tenn?  
(still nothing)  
It's Vidal ... Gore Vidal ... I'm coming in.

(A moment, then GORE VIDAL appears tentatively from the foyer. He is 53, nattily attired in a subtle pinstripe suit, a silk shirt with French cuffs and a Hermés tie. He carries a small robin's egg blue Tiffany & Co shopping bag and a nine-inch tall marble crucifix.)

GORE peers about the room, then at the television, then tries again)

GORE

(louder)

Hello?

(There is still no response. GORE walks over to the TV, places the crucifix on top, and dials down the volume of the set.)

He listens)

GORE (Continued)

Billy?

(nothing)

Bird?

(more nothing)

Tennessee?

(Silence.)

GORE finds a place to set the Tiffany bag, then checks his watch. A book on a downstage shelf catches his eye. He removes the book and cracks it open.

A moment after he does, BILLY appears from the backyard, now wearing a pair of extremely brief cutoff jeans and a pooka shell necklace, and drying his hair with a small towel. He is also perusing a February 1979 copy of Playgirl magazine and doesn't notice GORE reading as he turns and heads up the stairs. Likewise, GORE doesn't notice BILLY.

Just as BILLY disappears, GORE turns in response to a perceived noise, but sees he is still alone. GORE sits in the non-pillowed bamboo chair with the book, which he continues to examine.)

(A sudden scream from TENN fills the bungalow, quickly followed by the sound of human scuffling and overturned furniture from the bedroom above.

GORE jumps at the scream, momentarily paralyzed. He rushes to the base of the stairs just as BILLY appears, running down from the bedroom, carrying a bed tray stacked with dirty dishes and glassware)

BILLY  
(frightened)  
Who are--

GORE  
(threatening)  
Who are you?!

BILLY  
How did you // get in here?!

GORE  
(shouting)  
TENN!

BILLY  
You're Gore Vidal.

TENN (O.S.)  
WHAT.

GORE  
And you are?

BILLY  
Billy Nash. Tom's friend.

GORE  
I saw the broken window.

(BILLY carries the tray into the kitchen)

BILLY (O.S.)  
You're early.

GORE  
My flight was ahead of // schedule.

TENN (O.S.)  
Who is that downstairs?  
(no response)  
Billy, who are you talking to?

(GORE turns to ascend the stairs as  
BILLY rushes out of the kitchen,  
sans tray)

BILLY  
(a strained whisper)  
No! Please don't. He hates surprises.

GORE  
Then why am I here?

BILLY  
I'll bring him down. It'll take a few minutes. I'm glad you  
came ... last night was especially awful.

TENN (O.S.)  
(matter of fact)  
Billy, I can *hear* you whispering. What are you plotting?  
Who's *down* there?

BILLY  
(starts up the stairs, but stops)  
You turned off the TV.

GORE  
Just the volume. Your letter didn't // say how you would--

BILLY  
How come?

GORE  
The television?

TENN (O.S.)  
BILLY?!

(BILLY turns and disappears up the  
stairs)

GORE  
(a loud whisper)  
Wait a minute! Tell me ...

(But BILLY is gone.)

GORE starts to return the book to  
its shelf.

But then he stops, removes an  
expensive fountain pen from a coat  
pocket, writes something on the  
title page and returns the book to  
the shelf.)

(GORE then notices the vast number of LP records and begins examining those)

TENN (O.S.)

(shouting)

Gore?! Baby, is that you?!

GORE

(loud, directing his voice upstairs)

'Tis I, Bird!

TENN (O.S.)

Goddamnit, baby! Don't move! I'll be right down.

(GORE continues to review the albums and quickly finds one he likes.

A loud thumping from upstairs.

GORE removes the LP from its sleeve, places it on the open phonograph and turns it on. The Rolling Stones song "Miss You" begins to play softly.

GORE moves slightly to the music while he examines the back of the "SOME GIRLS" album cover.

Slowly -- very slowly -- TENNESSEE WILLIAMS, 67, descends the stairs, a deliberate step at a time.

Revealed first are his slippers, followed by cotton pajama bottoms and a patterned flannel robe over a stained undershirt. His face sports a once neatly trimmed moustache and beard -- now unkempt and the remainder of his face unshaven -- and black eyeglass frames with thick lenses.

One hand grips the stair rail and the other is held by BILLY, who is providing more support than Mister Williams would admit. BILLY now wears a '70s era t-shirt.

Before he has even reached the bottom step, TENN proves that his lungs, at least, are in fine working order)

TENN  
WHAT IS THAT GODDAMN MUSIC?

GORE  
It's the Stones, you old coot.

TENN  
Well turn it the fuck off, baby. Who said you could touch my things?

(GORE lifts the arm from the turntable as TENN moves into the room)

TENN (Continued)  
(for the thousandth time)  
Did Billy here tell you I'm dying?

BILLY  
You're not dy--

(TENN shoots BILLY a look that makes it clear BILLY should speak no further)

GORE  
(playing along)  
If that's the case, Bird, then I'm quite relieved I didn't wait even one more day.

(GORE goes to TENN and hugs him tenderly. TENN reciprocates. It is a brief moment between two old companions.

It is TENN who breaks the embrace)

TENN  
Careful, baby. Don't bruise the fruit.  
(looking around)  
What are you drinking?

GORE  
Nothing. Yet.

TENN  
Billy, you didn't offer Mister Vidal a tonic? You make us appear uncivilized.

BILLY  
I didn't have a chance, Tom.

GORE  
Why on earth was the television so loud with no one watching?

BILLY

He likes the noise.

TENN

It creates the illusion that someone is home.

GORE

But you are // home.

TENN

My humble domicile was recently twice the victim to burglaries, you know.

GORE

Yes, Isherwood told me the story. And more.

TENN

I must sit.

(BILLY removes the hideous pillow  
and helps ease TENN into the chair.  
As he does ...)

TENN (Continued)

Billy, I'm parched. As is Mister Vidal, I'm most certain.

(to GORE)

What will you have to drink, baby?

GORE

Whatever's easy.

TENN

Oh, no. That makes it ever more difficult. Billy, two bourbons, please. Thank you.

(BILLY starts off)

TENN (Continued)

And some nuts. Or olives. Or something. You decide. Do we have any more of those delightful Triscuits?

BILLY

We might.

(BILLY exits into the kitchen. We  
hear him, and sometimes see him, as  
he prepares drinks and snacks)

TENN

Quit hovering, baby, and tell me to what I owe this magnificent visit. And so unexpected.

(GORE sits on the sofa, near TENN)

GORE

As I said, I was speaking to Chris Isherwood and he told me what's been happening. You've had some rather nasty few weeks.

TENN

Yes, 1979 is already proving to be a very trying year. But I thought you were in Ravello.

(TENN fumbles in his robe pocket for a pack of cigarettes and his hygienic cigarette holder)

GORE

I was. Which is why I didn't hear the news or otherwise I would have been here sooner.

TENN

And you came back from Italy just to see little ol' me?

GORE

Of course, dear Bird. Well, mostly.

(During the following, TENN inserts a cigarette into the holder, then retrieves an engraved Zippo lighter from the other robe pocket and lights his cigarette)

GORE (Continued)

There's also this fucking lawsuit with the contemptible Capote. I'm told by those in the know that the little fag is now practically suicidal.

TENN

You should take no joy in Truman's threats of self-eradication.

GORE

Oh, he'll never do it. Although it *would* be his best career move.

(standing to pace)

This entire enterprise has cost me a fucking fortune.

TENN

No sympathy here, baby. I begged you to drop the suit.

(changing the subject)

Yes, it's been quite horrible here with // these burglaries and--

GORE

It's impossible to avoid, even in Italy, all of the lies about me that Capote spews forth from that mincing, faggotty mouth of his.