THE NIGHTINGALES

The Time

February 1979
8:08 PM

The Characters

ACTOR #1

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS – 67

ACTOR #2

ROSE WILLIAMS – 27
ANAÏS NIN – 46
WANDA – 25
LAURA WINGFIELD - 23

ACTOR #3

BILLY NASH – 18
KIP KIERNAN - 22

ACTOR #4

GORE VIDAL – 53

ACTOR #5

TRUMAN CAPOTE – 54

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.

A breakfront holds a vast collection of mismatched wine and martini glasses, a typewriter case, a wind-up portable Victrola, 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; and a stack of books. 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.

PUNCTUATION NOTE

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

A SPECIAL NOTE ON SONGS AND RECORDINGS

For performances of copyrighted songs, arrangements and recordings mentioned in this Play (including but not limited to blues music, Bartók's "Evening in Transylvania;" the albums *Doris Day – Early Days*, Chuck Mangione's *Feels So Good* and *The Best of Bessie Smith;* and "Stardust"), the permission of the copyright owners must be obtained.

THE NIGHTINGALES

(At rise, the room is empty. Just barely audible is the sound of ocean waves.

The desk telephone begins to ring. Concurrently, the waves go silent.

After two rings, we hear the shout from a man upstairs, TENNESSEE WILLIAMS)

TENN (O.S.)
Billy!
(nothing)
BILLY?!

(1930's blues music can be heard.

A YOUNG WOMAN, mid-twenties, appears from the kitchen and walks up the stairs. The music disappears with her)

TENN (O.S.) (Continued)
BILLY!

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

BILLY
(catching his breath, into phone)
Hello! ... Hi, Mitch, it's Billy ... No, not right now. Can I take a message? ... Tonight? ... But, Mitch, I don't think Tom, uh, Tenness-- ... It just isn't the best-- ... You did? ... Sure, I'll tell him. ... Yeah, you caught me in the pool. ... Maybe next time. ... Bye.

(BILLY hangs up the phone)

TENN (O.S.)
(still from upstairs)
Who was that, baby?

BILLY
Mitch.

TENN (O.S.)
(pause)
Wha'did he want?

BILLY
He's sending a courier. To pick it up.

(Silence)

TENN (O.S.)
When?

BILLY
Tonight.
(pause)
Two hours.

TENN (O.S.)
What time is it now?

BILLY
Somewhere around ten after eight.

(BILLY begins collecting empty glassware and takes them into the kitchen.

Slowly -- very slowly -- TENNESSEE WILLIAMS, 67, descends the stairs.

Revealed first are his worn loafers, followed by unpressed trousers and a rumpled dress shirt. His face sports a once neatly trimmed moustache and beard -- now unkempt -- and the remainder of his face unshaven)

TENN
Did you tell him I'm not yet finished?

BILLY
(entering from the kitchen)
Did you want me to? He said you knew.

TENN
(sitting in the desk chair)
Knew what, baby?

(TENN opens a bottom drawer of the desk and retrieves a half full bottle of bourbon)

BILLY
That a courier was coming to pick up the script tonight. Mitch said he told you last week.

TENN
He may have. I stopped listening to my agents twenty plays ago.

(TENN picks up the phone receiver, preparing to dial)

BILLY
What are you doing?

TENN
("obviously")
Calling him back. To cancel the pickup.

(BILLY takes a few steps towards TENN)

BILLY
Tom ... I ... I don't think that'd be good for you.

(TENN pours himself two fingers into a nearby empty drinking glass)

TENN
What did you just say?

BILLY
(quickly)
I don't know about these things, but Mitch sounded pretty em-- ... empha--

TENN
"Emphatic"?

BILLY
Yeah. Like this had to happen.

TENN
(two healthy sips from the glass)
Or what?

BILLY
I don't know or what. But isn't it almost finished?

TENN
It's a Tennessee Williams' *play*, baby, not a needlepoint sampler.

BILLY
Okay, I don't know what that is, but I thought you were close. Just pages, you said.

TENN
And how long do you think it takes to write those pages when I cry and sweat and bleed over every single word, no, *syllable* that-- oh, this pointless.

(TENN begins to dial)

BILLY
Mitch wasn't fuckin' around.

(Before the final turn of the rotary dial, TENN stops. He quietly sets the receiver in its cradle)

TENN
I don't care if Mitch *sends* the damned courier. Not *my* dime.

BILLY
Would it help to talk it through? The play?

TENN
Possibly, but not with you. Anyway, it's just one more play destined for the literary ash heap. Ten years and mounting.

BILLY
But you seemed so close.

TENN
(finishing off his drink)
The muse disagrees.

(BILLY goes to the Victrola and begins searching for an album)

BILLY
I'll put on music, Tom.

TENN
Don't bother. I can no longer bamboozle myself into a state of creativity. Tricks in my pocket, things up my sleeve.

BILLY
If talking to *me* won't help, then who?
(no response)
Is there anyone // I can--

TENN
Shadows. And worse.

(BILLY has found a record he wants.

The opening strains of 'Sentimental Journey,' from *Doris Day - Early Days*, begin to play.

A slight smile from TENN as he listens for a bit)

TENN (Continued)
You don't even know who that is.

BILLY
I pulled the record.

TENN
Doris Day. 1949. Same year as ...

BILLY
(pause)
What?

(TENN pours himself another drink)

BILLY (Continued)
What, Tom?
(pause)
Tom?

(From upstairs we hear a woman's voice)

YOUNG WOMAN (O.S.)
Tom?

(TENN looks up to the unseen bedroom above, then closes his eyes.

Frustrated, BILLY exits to the backyard.

TENN remains seated, eyes closed, listening to the music)

TRU (O.S.)
(from inside the kitchen)
Stand back! A couple o' hot dishes, comin' through!

(TRUMAN CAPOTE, 25, runs in from the kitchen. He is slim, trim and agile with a mop of blond hair and delicate, very nearly feminine features.

TRU'S clothes are 1949 modern. He carries aloft a plate and a platter of food.

Immediately behind him is ANAÏS NIN, 46, holding two plates. ANAÏS wears a Christian Dior form-fitting tuxedo; her dark hair is cut short, and her complexion is flawless, like a porcelain doll.

She speaks immediately upon entering, with a strong French accent ...)

ANAÏS
Which one you faggots is going to make me a B&B? I've worked up the thirst of a lumberjack.
(looking around)
Where's Gore?

(When TENN speaks, he has the voice and energy of himself 30 years ago)

TENN
In the little boys' room, Anaïs.

TRU
With whom?

(TRU laughs as he and ANAÏS set out the plates and platters)

TRU (Continued)
I'll make it for you, Anaïs. A B&B ... that's Butane and Benzedrine, yes?

ANAÏS
Thank you, mon ami, but I've finally trained Gore to have just the right touch.

TRU
Oh, *do tell*!

(TRU and ANAÏS lock arms and skip their way into the kitchen just as GORE VIDAL, 24, makes his way down the stairs. He wears a tweed jacket and wool trousers.

GORE is already speaking as he descends the last few stairs)

GORE
Bird, did I tell you that I just learned what "capote"--

(He stops when he sees that it is only TENN in the room)

TENN
What?

GORE
Hmm?

TENN
What Capote what?

GORE
Nothing. Not important.
(to change the subject)
Yes, sorry about the London production of <u>Streetcar</u>, Bird. Is Vivien really as god-awful as the critics paint her?

TENN
Oh, Vivien Leigh is quite mad, baby, at least most of the time. And Larry Olivier, is a certifiably lousy director. I wouldn't give two shits, but they ruined my play.

GORE
Anaïs and I loved Summer and Smoke.

TENN
Oh, *you* were the ones.

GORE
You were due for a few disappointments, after Menagerie and Streetcar.

TENN
(pouring another drink)
Why?

GORE
They can't all be hits, Tennessee.

TENN
Why?

GORE
Because you must suffer. When you no longer suffer, you'll know you're dead.

TENN
Not true, Vidal. Success and failure are equally catastrophic.

(TRU and ANAÏS enter together from the kitchen with more food)

TRU
Make room for Anaïs Nin and a cheesy fondue!

ANAÏS
The coffee table, darling. It will encourage conversation.

TENN
(an aside to GORE)
Hardly seems necessary.

(TRU agrees and sets a platter on the table. ANAÏS deposits her plates on any available surfaces)

GORE
(sitting, to TENN)
A lot of food. You hosting a Tupperware party?

ANAÏS
A buffet of French hors d'oeuvres. In my honor, I presume.

TENN
And it all looks so delicious, babies.

TRU
It's Frank's menu.

ANAÏS
Where *is* sweet Frankie?

TENN
Had to go out. He'll be back.

TRU
(an aside to ANAÏS)
Likely cruising 38th and Broadway.

ANAÏS
(ignoring TRU)
And where is my drink?

GORE
What would you like?

ANAÏS
Yes. Chéri will be bartender this evening.
(to GORE)
A B&B, please.
(to TENN)
You have?

TENN
We have.

(GORE heads to the kitchen. As he does ...)

TRU
I'll // have a--

GORE
Nope.

ANAÏS
Impolie. [Rude] What would you like, Truman?

TRU
Nothing, mon ami. Just wanted to see if he would do it.

ANAÏS
I do not know why he dislikes you so.

TRU
I do. Jealousy.

GORE (O.S.)
(from the kitchen)
You, Capote, are the world's greatest liar!

TRU
(a realization)
Of course! *That's* why he dislikes me!

ANAÏS
Just Gore. Everyone else *adores* you, chéri.

TRU
(matter-of-factly)
Oh, no. People don't *adore* me. People are *fascinated* by me, but they don't *adore* me.

GORE
Fascinated like when // one is unable--

TRU
You don't know what it's like to be me. When I walk into a room, there's shock on people's faces. Why I'm so outrageous, so ridiculous and so squeaking and so carrying on is simply to relieve them of the sudden embarrassment. I have to do that every time I walk into a room.

(A moment)

TENN
Babies, I haven't told you that I'm moving next month.

TRU
Again?! You change addresses more than a mob informant.

ANAIS
Where to, chéri?

TENN
Key West. I have found a sort of Tom Thumb bungalow.

TRU
Key West? It's so ... remote.

TENN
Yes, part of its appeal. And the water. The eternal turquoise, and bubbling foam of the sea and sky. And the most beautiful people I've ever met in my life.

GORE (O.S.)
Is it rude to ask how much this paradise is setting you back?

ANAÏS
It is.

TENN
Twenty-two thousand, plus plus. But it's not *real* money, babies. I rerouted some of the proceeds from the sale of <u>Streetcar</u> to Warner Brothers.

TRU
You've become a whore, Tennessee.

TENN
Everyone's a whore in Los Angeles. It's a city where everyone and everything is presumed to be up for sale.

ANAÏS
Los Angeles is an abomination. America has only three cities of any consequence ... San Francisco, New York and New Orleans. Everywhere else is Cleveland.
(to TENN)
Will Frankie be moving with you to Key West?

TENN
That decision has ... yet to be decided. There are aspects -- *night life* aspects -- of living in New York that Frank is quite fond of and would miss should he move.

TRU
Glory holes can be located in even the smallest of burgs. So I'm told.

TENN
You've worked your share of glory holes.

TRU
Not three at a time.

(GORE enters from the kitchen with two drinks)

GORE
Bird, did I tell you that I just learned what "capote" means in Italian? It translates as "condom."

TRU
It does *not*!

GORE
(handing ANAÏS her drink)
It most certainly does. Condom, rubber ...

ANAÏS
Merci.

GORE
(relishing the word)
... prophylactic.

ANAÏS
Gore, chéri, you're mistaken. More accurately "cloak." Or cape. Wrap.

GORE
Exactly! All describing a condom.
(laughs)
Just having some fun with you, Capote.

(The second drink is GORE'S: a bourbon, same as TENN)

TRU
It doesn't bother me. "Capote" isn't my birth name, anyway.