



TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

THE MAGIC TOWER | MOONY'S KID DON'T CRY

THE DARK ROOM | SOME PROBLEMS FOR THE MOOSE LODGE

THE PRETTY TRAP AND OTHER PLAYS

ONE ACT PLAYS

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

ONE-ACT PLAYS

THE MAGIC TOWER, MOONY'S KID
DON'T CRY, THE DARK ROOM,
SOME PROBLEMS FOR THE
MOOSE LODGE, THE PRETTY TRAP
AND OTHER PLAYS

“Just as young painters make their stabs at impressionism and cubism, in his early one-acts Williams tried his hand with political satire, expressionism, social realism, and even drawing-room comedy.”
—Eli Wallach and Anne Jackson

“Within his early one-acts there are intriguing prototypes of characters and seeds of ideas Williams developed more fully in his later, larger dramas.”
—*The New York Times*

“Williams was always confronting the future; a shaman with a typewriter, he dug into the darkest depths of the American psyche in search of dramatic truths.”

—Randy Gener, *American Theater Magazine*

“The peak of my virtuosity was in the one-act plays. Some of which are like firecrackers in a rope.”

—Tennessee Williams in a 1950 letter to Elia Kazan

“Reading these plays of the very young Tennessee, then of the successful Tennessee Williams, and finally of the troubled man of the 1970s he had become, we are offered a panoramic yet detailed view of the themes, the demons, and the wit of this iconic playwright.”

—Terrence McNally, from his foreword,
“An Invisible Cat Enters, Mewing”

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

ONE-ACT PLAYS

FOREWORD BY
TERRENCE McNALLY

EDITED BY
THOMAS KEITH

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TENNESSEE WILLIAMS: 1911–83

- 1908 Williams's sister, Rose Isabelle, is born 19 November in Columbus, Mississippi.
- 1911 Thomas Lanier Williams III is born on 26 March in Columbus, Mississippi.
- 1911–18 Rose, Tom, and their mother, Edwina Dakin Williams, live with Edwina's parents, the Reverend Walter Dakin, an Episcopal priest, and his wife Rosina Otte Dakin, chiefly in Clarksdale, while father Cornelius Coffin Williams works as a travelling salesman.
- 1918 The Williams family moves to St Louis where father becomes a branch manager at the International Shoe Company.
- 1919 Williams's younger brother, Walter Dakin, born on 21 February 1919, in St Louis.
- 1926 After only one semester at Soldan High School in St Louis, Williams transfers to University City High School.
- 1928 Publishes the first story for which he is paid – "The Vengeance of Nitrosis" – in *Weird Tales*. Goes on a European trip with his maternal grandfather.
- 1929 In September, Williams enters the University of Missouri and joins Alpha Tau Omega fraternity. In October the stock market crashes resulting in the Great Depression.
- 1932 Williams's father withdraws him from the University of Missouri for failing ROTC (Reserve Officers Training Course) and starts him as a clerk at the International Shoe Company, a job he loathes.
- 1935 First production of Williams's one-act play – *Cairo! Shanghai! Bombay!* – by Memphis Garden Players, a group of amateur actors.
- 1936 In January, Williams enrolls at Washington University in St Louis and writes the one-act play *Twenty-Seven Wagons Full of Cotton*.
- 1937 Writes a full-length, leftist play, *Candles to the Sun*, about a coal-mine strike, staged by the Mummies (amateur group of actors) in St Louis. Rose is committed to Farmington (Missouri) State Mental Hospital; Williams is heartbroken and feels tremendous guilt.
- 1937–39 Studies playwriting at the University of Iowa with Edward Charles Mabie, nicknamed "the Boss"; Mummies stage *Fugitive Kind*. Graduates from Iowa with a BA in English. Writes another leftist play, *Not About Nightingales*, about a prison riot in Pennsylvania. Becomes a vagabond, travelling to New Orleans where he possibly has his first homosexual experience in the French Quarter.
- 1939 Meets Audry Wood, his agent for over thirty years. Signs his name Tennessee Williams for the first time in a short story "Field of Blue Children" in *Story Magazine*. Receives a \$100 prize in a competition organised by the Group Theatre (where Elia Kazan's wife, Molly Day Thacher, is one of the readers) for his collection of one-act plays *American Blues*. Wins a grant of \$1,000 from the Rockefeller Foundation.

- 1940 Studies playwriting with John Gassner and Erwin Piscator at the New School for Social Research. His first professional production of a play – *The Battle of Angels* – has a disastrous Boston try-out on 30 December but closes on 11 January 1941 after the City Council protests about its sexual content.
- 1941–42 Travels around the country, writing one-act plays, stories, and poems; visits Key West for the first time; has the first of his four cataract operations. Collaborates on *You Touched Me!* with Donald Windham. Meets Jordan Masee, Sr, a model for Big Daddy.
- 1943 Works for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) on a screenplay *The Gentleman Caller* (later *The Glass Menagerie*) but is fired after only six months. Rose has a prefrontal lobotomy, leaving her mentally challenged for life; the operation is referenced in *Suddenly Last Summer*.
- 1944 National Institute for Arts and Letters awards Williams \$1,000 for *Battle of Angels*. Margo Jones, theatre founder and longtime friend, directs the one-act play *The Purification* at the Pasadena Playhouse in California. *The Glass Menagerie* premieres in Chicago on 26 December.
- 1945 *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams's first big success, runs for 561 performances on Broadway, winning the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award and the Donaldson Award. He publishes thirteen one-act plays in *Twenty-Seven Wagons Full of Cotton*.
- 1947 *A Streetcar Named Desire*, directed by Elia Kazan, opens on 3 December at the Barrymore Theatre on Broadway and runs for 855 performances, spawning two road companies. Williams meets his longtime companion and lover Frank Merlo (1929–63), a US Navy veteran.
- 1948–49 Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* is published on 3 January 1948. *Streetcar* wins the triple crown of the Pulitzer, New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, and the Donaldson Award. It premieres across the world (e.g., Mexico, Belgium, France, Germany, Sweden). British premiere of *Streetcar* (Sept.) directed by Laurence Olivier, starring wife Vivien Leigh. *One Arm and Other Stories*, a collection of sexually explicit stories, is published. *Summer and Smoke* opens on Broadway.
- 1950 First (and worst according to Williams) film adaptation of *The Glass Menagerie* released by Warner Brothers. The novel *The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone* is published. 1951 *The Rose Tattoo* opens in New York for 306 performances. Warner Brothers releases film of *Streetcar*, also directed by Kazan and designed by Jo Mielziner; produced by Irene Selznick, former wife of David O. Selznick, producer of *Gone with the Wind*.
- 1952 *Streetcar* wins National Film Critics' Circle Award. Williams is elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. Publishes the story "Three Players of a Summer Game", the genesis of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.
- 1953 *Camino Real* opens on Broadway.

- 1954 *Hard Candy* (another collection of explicit fiction) is published. Works on drafts of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Kazan insists on major revisions.
- 1955 *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* premieres on 24 March on Broadway and runs for 649 performances, winning Williams his second Pulitzer Prize and third New York Drama Critics' Circle Award; film of *The Rose Tattoo* released; Reverend Walter Dakin dies, aged ninety-seven.
- 1956 *Baby Doll* screenplay condemned for sexual content by the Catholic Church. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* opens in Paris (16 December); it is banned in Ireland. First book of poetry, *In the Winter of Cities*, is published.
- 1957 *Orpheus Descending* (revision of *Battle of Angels*) closes in New York after 68 performances. Cornelius Coffin Williams dies.
- 1958 Film version of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is released by MGM, directed and co-written by Richard Brooks; it is Williams's biggest box-office hit; *Suddenly Last Summer* opens Off-Broadway. British premiere of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* using Williams's original third act is staged at a private club because of ban by Lord Chamberlain.
- 1959 *Sweet Bird of Youth*, with antagonist Boss Finley, opens for 95 performances on Broadway. Screen version of *Suddenly Last Summer* is released.
- 1960 Williams's comedy, *Period of Adjustment*, opens in New York for 132 performances. Film of *Orpheus Descending*, set in a hellish Delta, opens under the title of *Fugitive Kind*.
- 1961 Williams's last Broadway success, *The Night of the Iguana*, wins the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award and runs for 316 performances. Film versions of *Summer and Smoke* and *The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone* come out.
- 1962 Films of *Sweet Bird of Youth* (starring Paul Newman and Geraldine Page) and *Period of Adjustment* (starring Jane Fonda) are produced.
- 1963 *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* opens on Broadway. Frank Merlo dies of lung cancer.
- 1964 Film of *The Night of the Iguana* is released, starring Richard Burton as a drunken clergyman.
- 1966 *Slapstick Tragedy* (*The Mutilated* and *The Gnadiges Fraulein*) closes after only seven performances.
- 1967 First version of *The Two-Character Play*, about a brother and sister, opens in London.
- 1968 *The Seven Descents of Myrtle* (later entitled *Kingdom of Earth*) opens on Broadway for 27 performances; contains graphic sex scene.
- 1969 *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* premieres 11 May in New York for 23 performances. Williams is committed to psychiatric unit of Barnes Hospital, St Louis, 27–8 June. The Stonewall (named after the gay bar) Riots erupt in New York City, marking the start of the Gay Liberation movement. Williams is baptised a Roman Catholic in Key West.

- 1970 *Dragon Country: A Book of Plays* is published. Williams appears on the *David Frost Show* and for the first time publicly admits his homosexuality.
- 1971 *Out Cry* (rewritten version of *The Two-Character Play*) opens on 2 July in Chicago.
- 1972 *Small Craft Warnings* moves to Broadway for 200 performances; Williams plays the role of Doc, a drunken, disbarred physician, the only time he acts in a professional production of his plays.
- 1974 *Eight Mortal Ladies: A Book of Stories* is published. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* opens at the American Shakespeare Festival Theatre, Stratford, CT, with Williams's final, new third act.
- 1975 Williams given the Medal of Honor for Literature by the National Arts Club. *Memoirs* published, as well as a novel, *Moise and the World of Reason*. *Red Devil Battery Sign*, occasioned by Watergate, is staged in Boston and New York. First Broadway revival of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* with Williams's final script.
- 1976 *Eccentricities of a Nightingale* (revision of *Summer and Smoke*) premieres in New York.
- 1977 *Vieux Carré* closes after only 11 performances. Second book of poetry, *Androgyne, Mon Amour*, published. First televised *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.
- 1978 *A Lovely Sunday for Crève Coeur* opens in New York for 36 performances.
- 1979 Receives Presidential Arts Achievement Award.
- 1980 President Jimmy Carter presents Williams with Medal of Freedom. Edwina Dakin Williams dies at the age of ninety-five. *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*, about Zelda Fitzgerald's madness, opens.
- 1982 *A House Not Meant to Stand* opens in Chicago; the last of Williams's plays to be professionally produced while he was alive.
- 1983 Williams dies on 24 February in New York at the Hotel Elysée (Elysian Fields, the "Land of the Happy Dead" in *Streetcar*) after an overdose of barbiturates. 1984 *Showtime* (cable TV) airs *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, re-shown on PBS TV in 1985.
- 1985 Tennessee Williams's *Collected Stories* is published.
- 1988 British revival of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, directed by Howard Davies, uses Williams's original script (1955), the first production of the play in Britain in thirty years.
- 1990 Davies directs *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* for its Broadway revival.
- 1996 Rose Williams dies on 5 September at the age of eighty-eight.
- 1998 *Not About Nightingales* premieres at London's Royal National Theatre. Written in 1938, the play was rediscovered in the 1980s by Vanessa Redgrave. Corin Redgrave stars as warden Boss Whalen.
- 2004 Williams Revival at the Kennedy Center.
- 2005 *Mister Paradise and Other One-Act Plays*, including thirteen previously unpublished one-acts, is released.
- 2008 Dakin Williams dies on 20 May. *The Traveling Companion and Other Plays* (twelve previously uncollected experimental plays) is published. First professional production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* with a black cast on Broadway (comes to London in 2009).

FOREWORD:

AN INVISIBLE CAT ENTERS, MEWING

Growing up in Corpus Christi, Texas, I used to stare across the Gulf of Mexico in what I thought was the direction of Key West, Florida. I knew that Tennessee Williams lived there and I had decided, in high school, that one day I would live there, too. Some fifty-plus years later I do. The house he lived in is a five-minute bike ride from mine.

And now I sit contemplating some fifteen plays previously unknown to me—seven never before published and the rest not always easy to find—and wondering what I should tell you about them. Perhaps he would not be pleased at their publication. These short plays do not always represent him at his considerable best. As a writer, I get that. A reputation is at stake.

But as a playwright who reveres his work, I am overjoyed at their arrival on my desk. As Mendy says in my play *The Lisbon Traviata* about an unpublished recording of Maria Callas in less than her optimal voice, “I’ll take crumbs when it comes to Maria.” I feel the same way about Tennessee Williams.

Artists, especially esteemed ones like Tennessee Williams, leave behind a more or less official canon of work. There are the universally recognized masterpieces—*The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*—that are produced annually as part of the core repertory of the American Theater, taught in universities and read by people who have never been inside a theater.

There are the plays jockeying for their position in the Williams hierarchy—*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Sweet Bird of Youth*, and *The*

Night of The Iguana—plays still waiting for the definitive production or radical re-interpretation that will reveal them as the equals of *Menagerie* or *Streetcar*.

There are the plays we are always intrigued to see in revival, knowing they may never achieve the popularity of the better-known titles—*Summer and Smoke*, *The Rose Tattoo*, *Camino Real*, and *Orpheus Descending*—plays we are always grateful to see and grow frustrated waiting to see again.

And finally there are the mostly ignored Williams plays that we personally cherish as something rare and precious in the canon and wonder why more people don't—*Vieux Carré* and *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* are my candidates for another look by the right director, cast, and designers.

And now there are these almost completely unknown Williams one-act plays gathered as *The Magic Tower and Other One-Act Plays*.

Written between 1936, when he was a student in St. Louis just beginning to write plays, and 1980, three years before his death, when his fall from critical grace seemed all but complete, these fifteen short plays—some complete and begging for production while others are tantalizing fragments of what might have been or misfires that are *sui-generis*, but all authentic Williams nevertheless—are invaluable. Even if they add nothing to his reputation, they add to our knowledge of this fascinating chameleon of a playwright. Any new glimpse of Williams is one to be grateful for.

It is tempting to say that “It’s all there, the Williams cosmos” in these fifteen plays. It is and it’s not.

It can never be “all there,” of course, when talking about a writer of genius. Good plays are not that neat. But reading these plays of the very young Tennessee, then of the successful Tennessee Williams, and finally of the troubled man of the 1970s he had become, we are offered a panoramic yet detailed view of the themes, the demons, and the wit of this iconic playwright.

For example, we have an embryonic *Glass Menagerie* in *The Pretty Trap*, “a comedy in one-act,” written between 1943 and 1944. The Wingfields and the Gentleman Caller are there and so is the central event of the full-length “memory play” soon to follow. What is most striking about this version of their story (Williams reworked the story of Amanda and her two children, many times, even as a film script) is

the absence of the framing device of the play—Tom’s narratives and his extraordinary language, which opens the doorway to the extraordinary language of the play and the extraordinary language of his mother and of his sister and the Gentleman Caller as well. But in this early version, Tom is the least interesting character in the quartet, easily upstaged by his own family and their visitor. Until he found Tom Wingfield’s voice, Williams seems not to have completely found his own.

There are traces of it, to be sure, in the plays written in the 1930s but for the most part the dialogue is more workmanlike than inspired. *Moony’s Kid Don’t Cry* (1936) is written by a young playwright who clearly knows his O’Neill. And yet, in the stage directions, there are traces of the Williams who would soon stand up and take his place apart from the other Broadway playwrights he often set out to emulate. The Moony’s kitchen is “eloquent of slovenly housekeeping” and his wife is “like a tiny mandarin, enveloped in the ruins of a once gorgeously-flowered Japanese silk kimono.” Felicities like these abound in these plays of the ’30s. Their suddenness amidst the ordinariness of the rest of the text is breathtaking. Just when you’re thinking, “When does he become Tennessee Williams?” he does precisely that—right in front of your eyes. Almost every one of the plays from this period has a moment that is gloriously prescient of the artist to come. Reading these plays you will be present at the creation of a writer.

The familiar themes of Williams’s mature plays are all to be found here: a brutal environment destroying the individual; the desire for respite from battering circumstances; the strong pull of carnality as it trumps resolution time after time; the unbearable loneliness of the individual who cannot find love in a crass, capitalistic world; the sudden moments of a little happiness and even grace that keep a person going.

Reading these plays, I was reminded how much time the young Williams, like Tom Wingfield, spent at the movies. One could write a paper on the influence of Warner Bros. crime and prison melodramas on the aspiring playwright. Fortunately, he grew out of them. The hysterical politics of *Me, Vashya* do not return until *The Red Devil Battery Sign* in 1975. The seeds for political commentary were always there but perhaps wisely Williams left the field to his peer, Arthur Miller.

It is the three plays belonging to the 1940s, and one from 1939, that present the Williams we are most familiar with. Besides the

Menagerie pencil-sketch of *The Pretty Trap*, we can see a very preliminary, very successful character study for Serafina in *The Rose Tattoo* as Mrs. Pociotti in *The Dark Room* (1939). The playwright is clearly in love with his fractured-English-speaking immigrant. She leaps off the page as swiftly and completely as she will in her full-length incarnation eleven years later. Williams enjoyed writing with famous actresses in mind. *The Case of the Crushed Petunias* (1941) is “respectfully dedicated to the talent and charm of Miss Helen Hayes,” and Miss Dorothy Simple is a part a charming and talented actress could have a triumph with. One wonders if Miss Hayes ever read it. In this play, the nameless Young Man is the harbinger of life. Twenty years later the Young Man in *The Milk Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore* (1963) will become the Angel of Death.

In the last play of this 1940s trio, *Interior: Panic* (1946), Blanche Shannon is no one else but Blanche DuBois. The situation is familiar, the cramped quarters in New Orleans with her sister and her husband, and Blanche’s desperation and need for rescue by her own “gentleman caller” are all there, but this time there is hope at the end, faint yet surely there, for Blanche.

The full force of Stanley Kowalski is barely suggested in Jack Kiefaber, who is as much Blanche’s victim as her predator. The full-length play is presaged in Blanche’s reveries but the actual working out is forestalled. But as a playwright’s note, a jotting, a fragment of the masterpiece that is soon to come, *Interior: Panic* is an invaluable addition to the Williams oeuvre. The discovery of a preliminary study for Michelangelo’s David, no matter what its size or medium, would be treasured for itself. It would inform our knowledge and understanding of “the original” we have already come to know.

The last three plays in the collection were written after Williams had been recognized as one of America’s greatest playwrights and his descent into critical indifference had begun. These were surely puzzling, troubled times for him. As he sought to discover new styles to explore his familiar themes, the commercial theater began its inexorable abandonment of him as a moneymaker. They were tired of the “old” Williams and unconvinced by the “new.” *Kingdom of Earth* (1967) is an early sketch for *The Seven Descents of Myrtle* (1968), one of the first of the so-called “disasters” of Williams’s later career. Read thoughtfully, and not expecting another *Streetcar*, it is funny, shocking,

and moving. The full-length *Myrtle* is even better. Clearly, Williams knew he was on to something when he expanded this first, short draft into a full evening.

The poetry-laced *I Never Get Dressed Till After Dark on Sundays* (1973), takes us back to New Orleans and all the familiar Williams themes. What is different this time is a sense of theatrical adventure: he is taking risks with language, style, and structure. This is a bolder Williams striking out in a different direction than his audience had come to expect and demand of him. I think Williams was always drawn to the “experimental” (a dread word to most producers), but also understood the constraints of commercial success once he hit the big time. The time had come to shake them off. It is a play written by a mature playwright who seems to have rediscovered the joy of writing for the theater. You can hear Williams having a good time! A playwright who can ask in a stage direction that “an invisible cat enters, mewing” is a playwright who stills has a lot of tricks up his sleeve. Even if he does fall into the orchestra pit at the end of the play, the Playwright climbs out saying, “Old cats know how to fall.” This is the Williams who wasn’t afraid to fall (or fail) doing something different, even though he was soon to pay the price for it.

Some Problems for The Moose Lodge (1980) is my favorite play in the collection. Written three years before his death, when Williams was virtually forsaken by the theatrical establishment that had nourished him all those salad years ago, it is a play of immense sadness, utter chaos, and infinite compassion. I will be surprised if this collection does not inspire subsequent productions. Just when you may begin to think you’ve lost him in these last, lost works, Tennessee Williams comes roaring back at us in all his manic, disheveled, life-embracing wonderfulness. It would be a hard person who could resist him. This is a man who loved life despite *everything*.

Finishing these plays, I feel a bit like I’ve gone through his wastepaper basket. I wish I could pedal over and ask him if that was okay. I have a pretty strong feeling he would say yes, with a smile and a cackle, and head for the White Street Pier for his legendary daily swim.

Terrence McNally
Key West
December 2010

TENNESSEE
WILLIAMS
ONE-ACT PLAYS

AT LIBERTY

At Liberty was produced by Ellen Stewart at La Mama Experimental Theater Club in New York City where it ran from May 14 through May 24, 1964. It was directed by Danny Gershwin; costumes were designed by Ellen Stewart; and Bob Douglas was the stage manager. The cast, in order of appearance, was as follows:

GLORIA LA GREENE	Mary Engel
HER MOTHER	Mitzi Pazer

Place: Blue Mountain, Mississippi. Time: the present, September. 2:30 a.m. Gloria La Greene is not very proud of her home. It may be seen why when a spotlight reveals a section of stage to represent the corner of an antiquated living room. A middle-aged woman in a dingy wrapper is seated stoically on a red-plush sofa. Beside her is a table supporting a red-globed oil lamp with a fringe of glass pendants. The outside door and a window are in the right wall; inner door to the left. There is an oval mirror, gilt-framed, and a large "glamour photo" of Gloria La Greene. (This is her stage name. Her real name is Bessie.)

The window is streaming with slow September rain. The woman sits rigidly as in a daguerreotype picture. A noise in the hall indicates Gloria's return. The door is pushed slightly open and the mother stiffens still more at the sound of an altercation.

GLORIA [*from offstage*]: No, that's enough, that's enough! Charlie, don't tear me to pieces.

[*Mother clears her throat and sits up very straight.*]

Shhht. [*Closes door from outside. There is a short silence; then a man's laugh.*]

CHARLIE [*offstage*]: Good night, Gloria.

GLORIA: Thanks for a marvelous time!

[*She enters. Gloria is a thin, feverish-looking blond whose stage experience is stated with undue emphasis on her makeup. She wears a soiled white satin evening dress, part of an "excellent wardrobe," and carries a copy of Billboard that she throws on the table.*]

Well. The Reception Committee!

MOTHER: What was the trouble between you?

GLORIA [*going straight to the mirror*]: The usual trouble.

MOTHER: He wasn't a gentleman?

GLORIA [*feverishly inspecting herself in the mirror*] Hmmm?

MOTHER: They never are, these picked-up acquaintances; men you meet in hotels.

GLORIA: I wouldn't expect them to be.

MOTHER: Then why do you go out with them, Bessie?

GLORIA: Hmmm? [*Suddenly turns from mirror.*] Oh, God in the Kingdom of Heaven, I wish you'd— !

MOTHER: *Why* do you go *out* with them?

GLORIA: Because, if I didn't, I'd have to stay in with you! Isn't that a pretty good reason?

MOTHER: Your voice is hoarse.

GLORIA: I know it, it's always hoarse!

MOTHER: Then is it wise to go out?

GLORIA: Yes, yes, it's wise! Infinite wisdom that's me! The Sphinx of Egypt. I've got a job as her stand-in.

MOTHER: You're feverish.

GLORIA [*removing the rabbit-skin cape*]: Am I?

MOTHER: I can tell by the way you're talking. You broke an engagement with Vernon. He was over. He stayed and had a talk with me.

GLORIA [*inspecting her cape*]: This lining is rotten.

MOTHER: He told me that you made yourself a . . .

GLORIA [*furiously*]: A what?

MOTHER: A subject for talk in a hotel barbershop!

GLORIA: Well, that's marvelous. I'm delighted to hear it! Why should I get a press agent?

MOTHER: He said that you pick up with strangers, transients at the Delta Planters Hotel.

GLORIA: Indeed!

MOTHER: Tonight he said you were out with a man that the Vigilantes had warned to stay out of Blue Mountain.

GLORIA: He's lying, he's—out of his mind!

MOTHER: No. You're out of yours.

GLORIA [*rips the torn lining out of the cape*]: I will be, soon—if I don't get out of this stifling atmosphere.

MOTHER: Where would you be otherwise, jobless, in your condition?

GLORIA: Oh—the Miami Biltmore! It's two-thirty.

MOTHER: I know what time it is. I've done nothing but watch the clock.

GLORIA: When I was out on the road all those times, you didn't know where I was, you didn't know who I was out with!

MOTHER: No.

GLORIA: But you slept, didn't you?

MOTHER: No.

GLORIA: Jesus, the way you look, I believe you. Mother, you look like death.

MOTHER: So do you—like death at a masquerade party!

GLORIA [*unconsciously facing the mirror*]: I've had lots of compliments on my appearance lately.

MOTHER: No doubt. [*With a short laugh.*] Sarcastic remarks from people who laugh at you privately?

GLORIA [*with a sudden, imploring desperation*]: Why should anyone laugh?

MOTHER [*relentlessly*]: You give them occasion to, Bessie.

GLORIA: Naturally, after ten months cooped up sick in this jerk-water town, I'm not—the radiant creature I once used to be.

MOTHER: Forget that “radiant creature” and come down to earth.

GLORIA: *Drag me down—if you can.*

MOTHER: I also talked to the doctor. He was shocked when I told him how much you’re running around. [*Gloria looks frightened.*] He mentioned the X-ray pictures. They’re not too good.

GLORIA [*hoarsely*]: What did he say about them?

MOTHER: He said the lung-tissues can heal if you give them a chance.

GLORIA: I’m restless, I have to go out. I can’t stay in all the time.

MOTHER: Your energy’s feverish, Bessie. You feel like doing more than you’re fit for.

[*Gloria sinks upon sofa beside her mother. She sits very rigidly. Neither looks at the other. There are several inches of space between them.*]

GLORIA: I can’t just sit here and wait for something to happen. Polish my nails and curl my hair and wait for Christ’s Second Coming! Is that what you and the doctor would recommend for me?

mother: No, Bessie.

gloria: I’m glad of that!

mother Vernon is—

gloria: Yes! Vernon *is!* And that’s absolutely *all!*

MOTHER: I believe he would still marry you if you came to your senses.

GLORIA: Vernon does not represent the future I plan for myself.

MOTHER: I remember you said the same thing ten years ago.

GLORIA: Well, it’s still true.

MOTHER: There’s quite a difference between the future and the past.

GLORIA: I know that.

MOTHER: The past keeps getting bigger and bigger at the future's expense! [*Pause.*]

GLORIA [*with a desperate effort to shake off despair*]: We drove into Meridian and bought a copy of *Billboard*. It has my ad in it. [*Rises quickly and snatches up magazine.*] Look here, listen to this! [*Reads aloud in a high, excited voice. Trembling and drunkenly, she crouches toward the table lamp for better light.*] "At Liberty." [*She pauses to cough.*]

MOTHER [*ironically*]: Yes—at liberty!

GLORIA [*going on breathlessly*]: "Leads, ingenues—27, blond, attractive—"

MOTHER: Huh!

GLORIA: "5 ft. 2, 114 lbs., singing, dancing, specialties—" [*The mother makes a stiff, fretful gesture. Gloria reads with rising excitement, panting breathlessly.*] "Quick study, versatile—Excellent wardrobe—Write! Wire! —Gloria La Greene—Blue Mountain—" [*Here suddenly the enthusiasm dies out and she looks at her mother with a frightened expression.*] Blue—Mountain—Mississippi. . . . [*Coughs.*] How do you like it?

MOTHER [*grimly*]: It's full of misrepresentations.

GLORIA: Oh, it is not!

MOTHER: It *is*! Can't you even distinguish between a truth and a lie? You're not twenty-seven, Bessie, you're thirty-two.

GLORIA: I don't look it.

MOTHER: You *do*!

GLORIA: Nobody says I do.

MOTHER: Why should they? —Shout it across the street at you?

GLORIA: You want to destroy my confidence! Make me feel utterly hopeless. [*Sobbing a little.*] I've had bad times, no breaks, like

everyone else in show business. But I'm not—*through!* —Do you think? [*The mother stares at her implacably. Then Gloria continues, slowly.*] Oh—so you think I *am*? [*Her voice rises almost to a scream.*] You sit on that old threadbare sofa, night after night, waiting there for me, like Mrs. Doomsday in person! Honest to God, your eyes, they're like a tape measure, taking my size for a coffin! But I'll—I'll cheat you out of it, though!

MOTHER: Bessie!

GLORIA: Don't Bessie me! [*She coughs and shudders.*]

MOTHER: You're drunk and you're sick, your face is burning with fever! Look at your dress, how it's torn!

GLORIA: What if it is? I don't care. [*Pause. She turns to the mirror.*] Where is it torn?

MOTHER: The seam is ripped out at the waist.

GLORIA: That can be mended.

MOTHER: Yes, but other things can't.

GLORIA: Everything can be mended, it's only a matter of time.

MOTHER: Ah! Such sublime optimism.

GLORIA: Sure. When people are starving, they take optimism and stuff it into their stomachs. Like water, like grass! It gives the illusion of having had a big dinner. [*Lifts her head stubbornly.*] I'm not discouraged. I never will be discouraged. Driving home in the rain, I thought to myself—

MOTHER: That tomorrow you'd be laid up!

GLORIA: No!

mother: What *did* you think?

GLORIA: That tomorrow I'd be— [*She suddenly smiles.*] Cast for a marvelous part in a Broadway production! You see, I'm an artist, Mother! I want to cry out, don't stifle the passion in me!

MOTHER: What kind of expression is that?

GLORIA: A cry from the soul! [*She turns to the window abruptly and pulls it open. Pause.*] The weather-bird says—the rain will continue forever.

MOTHER: Put down that window.

GLORIA: No.

MOTHER: You're exposing your chest.

GLORIA: To think I was born in this place, Blue Mountain, Mississippi. How do they get the mountain? It's as flat as a board! But Christ in Chicago, they certainly picked the right color!

MOTHER [*throws her cape over Gloria's shoulders*]: There's actually one other light still burning. Upstairs at the Bassetts'. Mrs. Bassett is dying.

GLORIA: I might have known it. —Death is the only thing they'd leave the lights on for, in this fabulous city. There was only one boy here that I ever liked and that was Red Allison, Mother.

MOTHER: Fell off the back of a freight car and lost both his legs. [*Pause.*]

GLORIA: Better than what I lost.

MOTHER: Yes? What did you lose?

GLORIA: Wings on my dancing shoes.

MOTHER: You're talking absurdly, Bessie.

GLORIA: I lost 'em not all at once, but gradually. They melted away in the sun like that Greek boy's who wanted to fly so badly. Or maybe it was the rains they melted in. I don't remember.

MOTHER: You're running a temperature.

GLORIA: Red and I had a club composed of two members, him an' me. We invented the rebel yell. Yes, and a constitution! The first rule in it was never to stop moving forward. Poor Red! He's broken the rule.

MOTHER: I wouldn't be joking about it, a thing like that. A wild, irresponsible boy, but the end that he came to was tragic!

GLORIA: We used to swim jaybird together at Sikeston's Creek.

MOTHER: Did you indeed!

GLORIA: Oh, nothing was wrong about it, we were just kids. I went to Cheyenne when I heard. He was already dead. I got there ten minutes too late, they'd pulled the sheet over his head. It's wasn't quite long enough, though. His hair stuck out, as loud as the Fourth of July! It was sort of—impertinent looking! Congratulations, I said, you don't need legs any longer.

MOTHER: Who did you say that to?

GLORIA: Nobody. Myself. [*Gets up tiredly.*] I practiced my dance routine this morning at the Elk's Social Hall. My wind's kind of bad but otherwise I'm okay.

MOTHER: You can't expect a complete return to health, Bessie.

GLORIA: Can't I?

MOTHER: No, you've had hemorrhage, Bessie. The tissues can heal but . . .

GLORIA [*wildly*]: STOP IT! [*In her cry there is all the tortured passion for life that a human heart can contain.*] Stop it, Mother! [*Pause.*] There's only one lie contained in this advertisement. At liberty—that's the lie! —I am not at liberty, Mother, I'm caught in a trap!

MOTHER [*closing her eyes*]: So am I.

GLORIA: Oh, but I'm not discouraged! —No, it's just that I haven't had such good luck to brag about lately . . . [*She turns and exits the door, left. The mother stiffly waiting. After a moment, a burst of hysterical sobbing is heard through the door. The mother leans over slowly and turns down the lamp.*]

MOTHER: Yes—and neither have I.

CURTAIN OR BLACKOUT

THE MAGIC TOWER
