

CHAPTER VIII

CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is set in the plantation home of a rich Mississippi Delta family, the estate of Big Daddy Pollitt. It is a twenty-eight-thousand acre estate of "the richest land this side of the Nile Valley," and it belongs to a man who started rough-handed and moved up to become a multi-millionaire. Now he is dying of cancer, a fact known to everyone in the family except himself and his wife, foolish, garrulous Big Mama. Big Daddy, a loud-mouthed, aggressively frank man, is celebrating his sixty-fifth birthday, believing that a recent medical examination has actually proved him free from cancer and suffering only a slight indisposition called a spastic colon. He is a large man of violent emotions; he likes to talk profanely; his lust for riches, for food, for women is enormous even after a long life of rich living.

The leading characters in this play are lonely in their isolation from one another, especially Margaret, or Maggie "the cat." Once a debutante Mardi Gras Queen but as "poor as a church mouse," Maggie sees no romance in poverty. She loves money, and she loves her husband. At first they were the "perfect couple," blessed with all the advantages - youth, beauty, riches, intelligence, health, but their

relationship has gradually gone into a mystifying decline. Two years after their marriage, Brick started falling in love with liquor, and Maggie began to be praised for her patience and loyalty to him.

Maggie is notably unafraid of the truth. She is disgusted with her husband, formerly a star football player and later a sports announcer; Brick has recently broken his ankle in an attempt to go over the hurdles on the Glorious Hill Athletic Field in the early hours of the morning. The marriage break occurred when Maggie insinuated to Brick the nature of his relations with Skipper, a college friend she thought too possessive of the man she married. She and Skipper made love together so that both of them could feel closer to Brick, who, Maggie thinks, expects too much of people. Maggie seems really to love Brick, even though she alternates between cursing him and worshipping him. When Maggie forced Skipper to admit to having homosexual feelings for Brick, Skipper turned first to liquor and drugs and then suicide. Brick, holding his wife responsible for his friend's death, looks at her with loathing and keeps on drinking.

Maggie feels like a cat on a hot tin roof. When accused by her husband's sister-in-law of being catty, especially to Mae and Gooper and their five children, Maggie answers, "Cause I'm a cat!" She pours out her

distress to Brick early in the play:

Oh, Brick! How long does it have t'go on?
This punishment? Haven't I done time enough,
haven't I served my term, can't I apply for
a - pardon?

Brick: Maggie, you're spoiling my liquor.
Lately your voice always sounds like you'd
been running upstairs to warn somebody that
the house was on fire!

Margaret: Well, no wonder, no wonder. Y'know
what I feel like, Brick? . . . I feel all
the time like a cat on a hot tin roof!

Brick: Then jump off the roof, jump off it,
cats can jump off roofs and land on their
four feet uninjured!

Margaret: Oh, yes!

Brick: Do it! - fo'God's sake, do it . . .

Margaret: Do what?

Brick: Take a lover!

Margaret: I can't see a man but you! Even
with my eyes closed, I just see you! Why
don't you get ugly, Brick, why don't you
please get fat or ugly or something so
I could stand it?⁸²

Maggie is determined to fight vigorously to save her
marriage and to get their rightful share of the inheritance
from Big Daddy, which will establish financial security.
She reminds Brick that it takes a lot of money to go on
drinking, and that their chances of getting their share of
the estate rest on their producing a child.

Margaret: . . . I'm facing the facts, It
takes money to take care of a drinker and
that's the office that I've been elected
to lately.

Brick: You don't have to take care of me.

Margaret: Yes, I do. Two people in the
same boat have got to take care of

each other. At least you want more money to buy more Echo Spring when this supply is exhausted, or will you be satisfied with a ten-cent beer?

Mae an' Gooper are planning' to freeze us out of Big Daddy's estate because you drink and I'm childless. But we can defeat that plan.

We're going to defeat that plan!

Brick, y'know, I've been so God damn disgustingly poor all my life! - That's the truth, Brick! . . .

My daddy loved his liquor the way you've fallen in love with Echo Spring! - And my poor Mama, having to maintain some semblance of social position, to keep appearances up, on an income of one hundred and fifty dollars a month on those old government bonds!

When I came out, the year that I made my debut, I had just two evening dresses! One Mother made me from a pattern in Vogue, the other a hand-me-down from a snotty rich cousin I hated! - The dress that I married you in was my grandmother's weddin' gown. . . .

So that's why I'm like a cat on a hot tin roof! . . . You can be young without money but you can't be old without it. You've got to be old with money because to be old without it is just too awful, . . . ⁸⁵

Maggie feels restless and desperate because Brick refuses to sleep with her and she wants a baby to secure her position in the house, but her husband just snarls at her, " - But how in hell on earth do you imagine - that you're going to have a child by a man that can't stand you?"⁸⁴ She answers that it is a problem she will have to work out. She is, despite her restlessness, a strong-willed woman. She knows that her husband is disgusted with her from the way he looks at her. "[She catches sight of him in the mirror, gasps slightly, wheels about to face him. . . .]"

- Why are you looking at me like that?

Brick: . . . Like what, Maggie?

Margaret [intensely, fearfully]: The way y'were lookin' at me just now, befo' I caught your eye in the mirror and you started t' whistle! I don't know how t'describe it but it froze my blood! - I've caught you lookin' at me like that so often lately. What are you thinkin' of when you look at me like that?

Brick: I wasn't conscious of lookin' at you Maggie.

Margaret: Don't you think I know that -? Don't you - ? Think I know that - ?

Brick [coolly]: Know what, Maggie?

Margaret: Well, I was conscious of it! What were you thinkin'?

Brick: I don't remember thinking of anything, Maggie.

Margaret [struggling for expression]: That I've gone through this - hideous! - transformation, become - hard! Frantic! . . . - cruel!!

That's what you've been observing in me lately, How could y'help but observe it? That's all right. I'm not - thin-skinned any more, can't afford t'be thin-skinned any more.⁸⁵

She confesses her loneliness to her husband:

Margaret: I was goin' t' say something: that I get - lonely. Very!

Brick: Everybody gets that . . .

Margaret: Living with someone you love can be lonelier - than living entirely alone! - if the one that y'love doesn't love you. . . .

Brick: Would you like to live alone, Maggie? . . .

Margaret: No! - God - I wouldn't!⁸⁶

Maggie has to tolerate her husband's scorn because she loves him and she does not want to fight for security again. She repeatedly asks for Brick's forgiveness for what she did to his dear friend, Skipper, although she does not feel it was

her fault. She keeps hoping that Brick will one day see her as other men do.

Maggie is determined to make her dream come true. She takes the risk of telling a lie in front of everyone, that she is going to have a baby. When asked by Brick how she is going to conceive a child by a man who is in love with his liquor, she answers that she can "By locking his liquor up and making him satisfy my desire before I unlock it!"⁸⁷

Brick separates himself from his wife, but also from his father. The two men have never been able to communicate. They feel, every time they try to talk to each other, that they must leave something unspoken. Brick feels that he lost everything he cared about when Skipper committed suicide. He turns to alcohol for the oblivion it brings. The greed and jealousy of Mae and Gooper are of no importance to him; he feels indifferent to his father's serious illness and approaching death. He does not care much about either of his parents, although both of them love Brick much more than Gooper, whom they dislike for his greed and interference. Above all, they cannot stand Gooper's wife and their five "no-neck monsters," with the sixth one on the way. Big Mama adores Brick and calls him her "only son," which enrages Gooper and Mae.

Brick has cut himself off because he feels that the world is full of liars and mendacity. When he is asked by his father why he does not sleep with Maggie, why he has quit his job, and why he is so intent on throwing away his life, Brick admits that he drinks to escape his disgust at the rumour about his friend. He does not want to admit that Skipper felt too friendly towards him. He still considers that their relationship was a rare and beautiful thing, but everyone has named it dirty. Brick's father has made repeated efforts to have a man-to-man talk with his son.

Brick: Are you through talkin' to me?

Big Daddy: Why are you so anxious to shut me up?

Brick: Well, sir, ever so often you say to me, Brick, I want to have a talk with you, but when we talk, it never materializes. Nothing is said. You sit in a chair and gas about this and that and I look like I listen. I try to look like I listen, but I don't listen, not much. Communication is - awful hard between people an' - somehow between you and me, mit just don't -88

Big Daddy: WATT! - Brick. . . . Don't let's - leave it like this, like them other talks we've had, we've always - talked around things, we've - just talked around things for some ruten reason. I don't know what, it's always like something was left not spoken, something avoided because neither of us was honest enough with the - other. . . .89

When Brick is asked by his father whether liquor is the only thing to kill disgust, he admits it and says he did not drink when he was young, but became a drinker

when he realized that "A drinking man's someone who wants to forget he isn't still young an' beliving."⁹⁰ After a lot of argument, the two men, for once in their lives, have a real talk.

Brick [ominously]: All right. You're asking for it, Big Daddy. We're finally going to have that real true talk you wanted. It's too late to stop it, now, we got to carry it through and cover every subject.

Brick speaks to his father about Maggie's loneliness.

Y'know, I think Maggie had always felt sort of left out because she and me never got any closer than two people just get in bed, which is not much closer than two cats on a - fence humping. . . . So! She took this time to work on poor dumb Skipper. He was a less than average student at Ole Miss, you know that, don't you? - Poured in his mind the dirty, false idea that what we were, him and me, was a frustrated case of that ole pair of sisters that lived in this room, Jack Straw and Peter Ochello! - He, poor Skipper, went to bed with Maggie to prove it wasn't true, and when it didn't work out, he thought it was true! - Skipper broke in two like a rotten stick - nobody ever turned so fast to a lush - or died of it so quick. . . . - Now are you satisfied?⁹¹

Big Daddy is not satisfied until he gets Brick to admit what he has left out of his story - that Skipper called Brick on the telephone and confessed his love for Brick. And Big Daddy accuses his son:

Anyhow now! - we have tracked down the lie with which you're disgusted and which you are drinking to kill your disgust with, Brick. You been passing the buck. This disgust with mendacity is disgust with yourself.

You! - dug the grave of your friend and kicked him in it! - before you'd face truth with him!⁹²

It is in angry retaliation that Brick informs his father of the old man's incurable cancer.

Between Big Daddy and Big Mama there is a strained relationship. Big Daddy tells Brick how he feels about his wife:

. . . - Think of all the lies I got to put up with! - Pretenses! Ain't that mendacity? Having to pretend stuff you don't think or feel or have any idea of? Having for instance to act like I care for Big Mama! - I haven't been able to stand the sight, sound, or smell of that woman for forty years now! . . . Pretend to love that son of a bitch of a Gooper and his wife Mae and those five same screechers out there like parrots in a jungle? Jesus! Can't stand to look at 'em! . . .

You I do like for some reason, did always have some kind of real feeling for - affection - respect - yes, always. . . . You and being a success as a planter is all I ever had any devotion to in my whole life! . . .⁹³

Big Mama declares her devotion for her husband: " . . . I did love you! - I even loved your hate and your hardness, Big Daddy!"⁹⁴ But Big Daddy is not interested. He is vain

about having risen to wealth and power by his own efforts, and he is unwilling to turn things over to his wife.

. . . I made this place! I was overseer on it! I was the overseer on the old Straw and Ochello plantation. I quit school at ten! I quit school at ten years old went to work like a nigger in the fields. And I rose to be overseer of the Straw and Ochello plantation. And old Straw died and I was Ochello's partner and the place got bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger! I did all that myself with no goddam help from you, and now you think you're just about to take over. Well, I am just about to tell you that you are not just about to take over, you are not just about to take over a God damn thing. . . . 95

In the two versions of Act III, the original script having been rewritten by Williams for the Broadway version at the suggestion of Director Elia Kazan, Maggie and Brick are alone in the bedroom as the play ends. In the Broadway version, Maggie says, "I told a lie to Big Daddy, but we can make that lie come true."⁹⁶ The play ends on the possibility that Maggie and Brick will solve their problem, and end the separation that has been torture to them both. Among the ugly truths that have been spoken on the old man's birthday is his own comment: " - When you are gone from here, boy, you are long gone and no where!"⁹⁷ Maggie is a determined woman in her curtain speech :

Oh, you weak, beautiful people who give up with such grace. What you need is someone to take hold

of you - gently, with love, and hand your life
back to you, like something gold you let go of
- and I can! I'm determined to do it - and
nothing's more determined than a cat on a tin
roof - is there? Is there, Baby?⁹⁸