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“The Negative”

Tennessee Williams



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The Negative

Despite the unfortunate notoriety that ensued from his involvement in a police raid on a very posh house of male prostitution in Knightsbridge, Lord Amberly remained a peer of the realm and allowed no one to forget it.

He went for cocktails at the fashionable hour at Claridge's, no longer with a sycophantic group but with a slightly faded and consequently frightened young man named Tonio Moresca.

"Aren't you rather young to have a touch of gray at your temples?" he had asked Tonio.

"I'm thirty-three," Tonio had replied, "but premature gray hair runs in the family."

"Well, it won't do. You are going tomorrow to my hairdresser's."

"What will he do with my hair?"

"He will have his instructions."

Lord Amberly's own hair, at the age of seventy, was of a brilliant blond hue and was artfully waved.

"Just lie back in the chair and close your eyes till it's finished," said the hairdresser.

Tonio fell asleep in the chair. Awakened by the hairdresser an hour later, the image of his altered appearance in the mirror was frightful to him. His hair was the color of Lord Amberly's and the same artificial waves had been set in it.

He exclaimed: "But I'm not like that, it's not at all suitable to me. For God's sake change it back to the way it was."

"Lord Amberly would be outraged. Besides, we're closing, so if you're displeased, you'll have to complain to him."

As he rose from the chair, Tonio observed that the hair of the hairdresser corresponded to Lord Amberly's hair and now to his own and the alteration he felt was more than one of outward appearance.

That evening Tonio had scarcely entered Lord Amberly's residence on Eaton Square than he heard the stentorian voice of his Lordship declaiming to a guest that he was planning a pheasant shoot at his country estate in Sussex, that he was making out a guest list that included several members of the royal family.

"Jesus Christ, you got pretty high connections."

"Oh, yes, only the highest. One has to maintain his position, don't you agree?"

"Um-hmm, even a guardsman."

"What are the guardsman's positions?"

"Various."

"In what respects?"

"Some are renters such as me. Hey! Did someone come in downstairs?"

"Probably the hanger on that I don't intend to keep on since he's aging on me and that is intolerable to me since I desire only youth which maintains my own."

"How old is he?"

"Past thirty."

"I'm just past twenty."

"Go down and tell him that we want two brandies, and double quick."

Tonio stood stock still near the door.

The guardsman came down the stairs completely naked.

"The old bugger wants you to bring up two brandies."

More out of long duty than concern, Tonio replied, "Lord Amberly's physician does not permit him to take brandy."

"What's it to you?"

"His physician has confided in me that strong spirits, especially a stimulant such as brandy, could result in a stroke."

"Where is the goddamn brandy?" demanded the guardsman, completing his descent of the stairs.

He stood towering half a foot over Tonio.

"I want no part of this."

"Shit, the old bugger's planning to throw you out, he told me."

"I don't think he will till he has found a suitable replacement. You see, I perform services for his Lordship that I don't think you would, nor anyone but myself. I am not what you think. I am not. Take your hand off me, please. What I do is only for my employer, to keep my employment."

He stepped back from the guardsman, whose hand slid too familiarly down his back.

"You take it from him, but you won't from me?"

"Yes. Precisely."

"All right, fuck off. I see the liquor bottles."

After Tonio had left the parlor, he heard a crash. He stood still a moment. Then he heard the young guardsman giggle and his Lordship shout from above, "Double quick!"

But the guardsman had had enough of everything but the brandy and his renter's fee which he must have received in advance.

Now laughing heartily, he slammed out the front door.

Later, Tonio came back into the parlor to bolt the door for what remained of the night. There was a heavy knock at the door before he'd attached the bolt.

"Who's there?"

The guardsman shoved the door open, striking Tonio in the face with it.

"Get my jacket down here, ain't goin' back up."

Hoping that Lord Amberly might have fallen asleep, Tonio went to his bedroom.

"Who?"

"It's me. The boy wants his jacket."

"Well, throw it down to him and remove your clothes."

"I think you should sleep, Sir."

"After satisfaction," his Lordship replied in a slurred voice.

Grimly Tonio submitted, but before he had completed the oral preliminaries, his Lordship's breathing told Tonio that he had fallen asleep.

Noiselessly he dressed and returned downstairs, stopping in the first floor bath to vomit; then, for the first time since he had fallen into Lord Amberly's possession, he entered a spare room which had been occupied by a servant recently discharged.

"The problem is nowhere to go, nowhere at all except—"

The following morning Lord Amberly could not descend the stairs and had breakfast in bed, brought up to him by Tonio.

"Whash happen, can't get out of bed."

"I'm afraid you over-exerted yourself last night, Sir."

"Whasha doin' with a bald head?"

"Shaved the bleached hair off, Sir."

"Fuggin wop!"

"Will that be all, Sir?"

The response was sufficiently incoherent for Tonio to murmur, "Thank you, Sir. Excuse me" and to duck out of the bedroom, colliding with a pair of portly doctors summoned by the housekeeper.

Late that night, Tonio crept into a small study which always frightened him to enter, the design of the room being severely, ominously Gothic. Thrust among the pages of a large volume were scribbled bits of verse. That the scribblings were mostly illegible even to him, their author, increased his dread nearly to panic. Seldom did a poem progress past the first three or four lines before it lost itself in a wilderness of pen-scratchings of which only a word or two was he able to decipher.

"The Negative" was the title of one on which he had attempted to proceed to some point of cohesion. It was, he knew, intended to make some final statement concerning the abyss into which his life had descended.

There was a magnifying glass on the study-table, but even peering through that glass he could see only what appeared to be the foot-prints of a bird.

"Am I a wingless bird?" he managed to add to the poem that night before a telephone on the desk uttered a faint sound. A phone call at this hour? His instinct was not to answer, but the phone was persistent. He feared that not to answer here in the little study might result in the caller coming to the house, for surely a call after three in the morning must be an urgent call.

He picked up the receiver diffidently as if it might explode in his trembling hand.

"Yes?" he whispered.

His voice was so faint that he scarcely heard it himself and she he said "yes" again more loudly.

"Are you Tonio?"

He couldn't answer at once; his throat was too tight.

"I hope that you are alone."

"Yes."

"Doing what at this hour?"

"May I ask who is calling?"

"I can only tell you that I am Mona and that I was the lady responsible for Lord Amberly's rage two weeks ago Sunday evening at Claridge's. You may remember the incident. I am not sure if I did it accidentally or not but I made a sudden turn by his table, at which you were seated with him, and knocked over his drink. He made a great disturbance about it. Well, he's well known as an eccentric, I hardly need to tell you. You see, I had heard him insulting you in a loud voice for as long as I could bear it. How were you able to bear it? You said nothing audible. Are you always so submissive?"

"You say that you are Mona but that is a first name."

"I cannot give you my married name. It is too chancy. You see, my husband is also a peer of the realm and we are involved at present in divorce proceedings. Do you understand?"

"I don't understand your reason for calling me."

"You are still a young man but you have lived several lives on a descending scale. My reason for calling you, Tonio, is that I may be in a position to offer you a step up. How goes the poetry now?"

The question made him breathless with anxiety.

"What poetry do you mean?"

"The illegible poetry which you struggle to continue, hopelessly in your present situation."

"Yes," he said, "Yes."

"You must consider a change of environment, Tonio, that might even make your hands stop shaking as your voice does. Do it quickly or it will be too late. A silence could fall upon you as complete as death. I don't say this to alarm you but to offer you hope of improved circumstances. I must lower my voice. Can you still hear me?"

"Yes."

"Did you say 'yes'?"

"Yes."

"Then, now, before it's too late, accept a meeting with someone who has something to offer you that can only be better. Can you invent an excuse to have a late supper with me in my totally private apartment at—can you remember addresses or must you write them down? Oh, well, write it down. But hide it in your shoe. It is number 917. Have you got that, 917, have you written that down, have you concealed it in a shoe?"

"I—I am barefooted, Madam. At this hour."

"Read it back to me, see if it's legible to you."

"I think you said nine one nine."

"No, no, I said nine one SEVEN! For God's sake, Tonio, get something right in your life before you're done with it!"

"Nine."

"Go on."

"One—seven?"

"Yes. Precisely. Now write it down at once in large, clear letters regardless of how your hand shakes. Because in one minute I will call back and ask you to read the number to me in order to be quite sure you have written it down legibly for a change. Oh. One more question. Would you accept therapy from a woman who understands you as well as I do, Tonio?"

He thought a moment: then answered: "I think I have nothing to lose."

"Well, quick, write down the number. In exactly one minute you read it back to me and I will then give you the name of the street and will allow you another minute to write that legibly before I call you again. Dear boy, after that, say your prayers, count your beads, and sleep with the street name and the number concealed in the toe of the shoe you will wear tomorrow. And God be with you. Did you know that God is female?"

She uttered a little laugh and hung up.

It was a narrow, inconspicuous house that appeared uninhabited, for there were no lights visible from outside when he arrived there on foot after walking several miles from Lord Amberly's. He stood trembling outside it for several minutes: then an outside lamp came on as if to beckon him and he obeyed its summons. When he arrived at the door, it swung open on near-blackness and once again he stood still.

"Tonio, come in, cold air is entering the door."

He entered slowly.

"Now please close the door."

He complied.

Standing just inside the door, he still did not see the woman.

"Where?" he whispered, "Where are you?"

"Upstairs."

Tonio was startled.

"But your voice is downstairs."

"You're hearing my voice through a speaker by the door. Strike a match and you'll see the stairs and my upstairs bedroom is the first door to the right at the top. Cup the match with your hand so it doesn't go out."

"I didn't bring matches, you see I—"

"Didn't bring matches and probably if you had, they'd fall out of your shaking hand. You see how well I know you, Tonio."

"I don't understand," he whispered, "What is it you—"

She laughed and the sound of the laugh didn't increase his courage.

A white dimness appeared at the top of the stairs and the voice said, "Come. The stairs are directly before you. Come on, come up, or run back to Lord Amberly, take your choice."

"Is it necessary?"

"To run back to—"

"Lift your voice just a little so I can hear you."

"I meant the dark."

"I will explain the dark when you come to my bedroom."

"I do not think the light is sufficient."

"What did you say, what was that you whispered?"

"Another time, in the light."

Abruptly the entrance hall of the town house blazed with light but at the top of the flight of stairs which rose before him there was the sound of a door shutting. He was alone in the blazing hallway.

"Now you are in the light."

"Where are you? I don't see you."

It occurred to Tonio that the entrance to the house might abruptly close, locking him into its mysteries. He'd dreamt often of such things occurring to him, being locked into strange places by persons or creatures of unknown intentions.

And so he stepped backward till he stood facing the outside door which remained open.

He stood there immobile. Inside, there was the sound of pattering bare feet, presumably on the stairs. A cloaked and hooded figure emerged from the door as the lighted hallway went dark.

Then there were hands upon him, clutching and pulling him.

With a wild outcry, he broke away from their clasp and ran across the street.

"All right. Return to his Lordship. Tonight I will call you again in the little study to arrange a different appointment, one that is better lighted since you're so terrified of the dark and of a closed door."

He wandered about all that night before concluding that he had no where to return but to Lord Amberly's house.

Several physicians were there.

When he entered, they called him into the parlor where they were conferring.

"You are employed by Lord Amberly?"

"Yes. I am."

Since the admission was whispered, the physicians exchanged enigmatic glances. There were three of them.

"Will you please speak up?"

"Yes," he said with a force that surprised him.

"Are you aware that Lord Amberly suffered a stroke last night?"

"I did not know what it was."

"His house-keeper has informed us that you were out last night."

"Not all night, not till His Lordship was sleeping."

Tonio sat down in a chair that was not beneath him and floated into a vacuum of dark.

"Why isn't he removed to a nursing-home?" the house-keeper grumbled as she stood over the bed in the servants' quarters where Tonio lay motionless, never opening his eyes when anyone was present.

"Lord Amberly wishes the young man to stay here."

"For what?"

"For whatever his services to his Lordship were in the past."

Inadvertently, Tonio moaned.

"The nature of the attachment must be something I prefer not to consider," said the physician who had dropped in to look at Tonio after attending Lord Amberly.

"However," he went on, "it's apparent that Amberly doesn't wish to discard him. Amberly's stroke's responded amazingly to our care. He sits up now, feeds himself heartily with only a tremor in the left hand and the left side of his body is promisingly responsive, there's even a bit of a knee-jerk."

"Things I could tell ya would turn your hair," said the house-keeper.

"You should remember, Madam, that a good servant knows when not to talk about what."

"I think he's pretending."

"Amberly?"

"Naw, not him but the boy he keeps here in expectation of using him as he has done before."

"What makes you think that the young man's pretending?"

"Nothing in the bed-pan, nothing ever."

"Remarkable," said the physician.

"He moves about, that's for sure, and is very sly about it."

"Well, whatever, his situation is not an enviable one. And now would you permit me to examine him privately?"

The house-keeper went out.

The physician threw the covers off Tonio and the examination to which he subjected the patient was of an erotic nature.

Tonio endured it without spoken protest till the end when he whispered, "Nursing-home, nursing-home."

"What are you saying?"

"Ahhh," moaned Tonio, "Please let me rest again now."

The physician was offended.

"You are more of an object than a living being," he said as he withdrew from the room.

Night fell slowly and as it fell the house became silent. Tonio waited for that. He heard the last shutting of each door and then he stealthily rose from his bed and noiselessly crept into the small Gothic study to attempt once more to scribble lines of a poem with a violently shaking hand.

And late each night the phone in the study would ring softly and persistently until he raised the receiver and whispered, "Yes?"

The woman purred into his ear, "My sources of information give me discouraging reports of your condition, Tonio. Don't you think it is time that we attempted another meeting?"

"Not in the dark," whispered Tonio.

"What a child you are, Tonio, so ridiculously fearful of the dark. I have explained my circumstances to you. Any meeting I have during the divorce proceedings must occur in carefully arranged secrecy."

"Always in the dark?"

"Yes, always, and not only the dark but each time at a different place."

"I see," he whispered, although this secretive caller, this inhabitant of dark places, was more and more beyond sight and comprehension.

"Then take down another address."

"Of another dark place?"

"As a concession to your terror of dark, let's say a place dimly lighted."

She gave him the address of the place that would be dimly lighted but he did not take it down.

"Have you taken it down?"

"Yes."

"Read it back to me then."

He thought for some moments before he replied that it had fallen out of his hand.

"Pick it up, read it back to me, now, at once."

"Excuse me. Someone is coming."

"Who?"

"The, the, the—"

Unable to invent another deception, he placed the receiver of the phone back in its cradle.

It rang again, repeatedly, but he did not pick it up.

That night his hand, trembling as though it were spastic, wrote down a line of the interminable poem called "The Negative."

"Homelessness is long and cooling rain," was the single line which he wrote down with his violently trembling hand.

It would not be legible to him when he looked at it again. But on subsequent nights he would draw from his unconscious lines of a parallel import, lines which alluded to his sense of being an outcast.

Several nights passed without a phone call from the woman known only as Mona. When they resumed he was astonished at her knowledge of his all but futile labors in the study when Lord Amberly's attendants, physicians, servants had all retired from the house, leaving for their own residences or to the servant's quarters behind the patio.

"It is cold, cold," he whispered.

"Yes, it is winter now," replied the woman's voice, and only then did he realize that he had lifted the phone.

His trembling hand dropped the receiver as it had dropped the pen some while before.

The woman's voice continued.

"I heard the phone drop from your nearly paralyzed hand but not the click of a disconnection. Are you able to hear me?"

Slowly he lifted the phone and whispered "Yes."

"The Negative, how does it go?"

"I—"

"Yes, you, Tonio. What does "The Negative" mean to you?"

"You know."

"How much I know surprises you?"

"Yes."

"The Negative, the absolute of it, is death. You know that don't you?"

"My way of being."

"Your approach to non-being, poor boy. I understand now that you will never consent to meet me in a dark place. All right."

"Our next meeting will be in a well-lighted place, one that exposes all that there is to expose: myself as I am. And possibly a preferable alternative to your commitment to death or to commitment to a charity nursing-home from which the negative's true meaning would weave itself about you as a slowly devouring spider. Oh, once you were a different boy, Tonio, tending olive groves and herding sheep. I can't understand the force which drew you down such a long way. Tomorrow in the lighted place where we'll meet for the first time, eye to eye, some understanding will surely be achieved. Of course there's sometimes more danger in light than in dark. That we'll find out about. Now write down in very large letters the name of the lighted place, a restaurant called *Le Bijou*. I will call you back in a little while to spell it out to you. And then a little while after that, I will call you again to find out whether or not your violently shaking hand has been able to put it down in large letters. And then I will call back again to give you the address, also to be taken down in very large, in legibly large print. And I will call back still again and you will read to me both the name of the restaurant and its address. Tonio, if this does not work out, I will never call you again, not at Amberly's house nor at the charity nursing-home where "The Negative" will gradually and mercilessly claim you. It will be tomorrow that you'll be committed to that. I've been told and I know. Now are you or are you not going to answer my final calls?"

"Yes," he whispered, "if I am able to lift the receiver when you call."

A little later she did.

"I have been informed that your hair is growing back in and to its natural color."

Tonio felt his head to verify this report and there was, indeed, a brush of hair on his head.

"Yes, the natural hair is returning."

"No doubt it is still quite short and will give you a military appearance but never mind that. The only alternative would be to wear a toupee. Perhaps that might be best but it would require a fitting. What is your feeling about it?"

He could not think what the woman meant by toupee for several moments.

"Oh, dear," she said, "you're struck dumb."

"No, but you are suggesting that I appear at this place in false hair. Isn't that your suggestion?"

"Only if the prospect of a disguise is comforting. It's by no means a necessary condition. You see, my concern is only to create all possible conditions for the meeting by daylight at *Le Bijou* that will make it, the meeting, less disturbing to you. After all, I am a voice on a phone, the voice of a woman identified to you only as Mona. This confronts you, perhaps, with as anxious a condition as when you enter the study where you are now waiting for the reluctant muse to present you with a new line or two for the everlasting poem. Am I not right? Perhaps she will. May I pretend to be her? Here is a line. 'I am a furtive cat, unowned, unknown.' Write it down at once, in large print, and bring it with you to *Le Bijou* at one tomorrow, together with all the other perversely elusive, rarely if ever legible, output of your anguished will to state your existence in a last poem."

"Last? Poem?"

"The last not meaning the last but the last before your custody passes into hands of true comprehension and longing. Oh. Early tomorrow a complete ensemble, excuse me, I meant to say gentleman's suit of clothes, will be sent to you at Lord Amberly's before the planned removal to the nursing-home called St. Jude. You have heard of St. Jude? St. Jude is the saint of impossible cases. I do not accept this verdict. I reject it *for* you, since you are apparently unable to reject anything but the oblivion that draws you down and down, young as you still are, remorselessly as the tide draws back the Thames."

"Clothes, did you say clothes?"

"Yes, a gentleman's outfit, complete in every respect and tailored to your measurements. It will be in excellent taste but not at all conspicuous. I have no way of knowing whether or not my husband, soon to be discarded in a court of law, has somehow managed to put a tail on me, if you know what I mean. Do you or don't you. I take your silence as ignorance of the term. It means someone who follows you, trails you. Now one thing must be clear. I will know if such a follower enters *Le Bijou* and I will give you a sign. I will raise my voice and say to you, with feigned outrage, 'Who are you? Why do you call me late every night?' This is something that I will remember but that you are apt to forget. It will not matter too much. I'll give you no chance to protest. I am always able as well as you are unable to play a scene which is essential to meet a crisis. You needn't write this down since you would not be able to put it together on paper or in your head, you

poor God-forsaken young man. I will hang up now but remain where you are for my two next calls, one giving you again the name of the restaurant where we are to meet tomorrow and the next giving you its address. You will slip out well before the time of the appointment and walk about till it's time to catch a cab. Just hand the driver the printed name, *Le Bijou*, and its address. Oh, I know what I'll do. I'll dispatch a car for you and the chauffeur will know just where to pick you up and where to deposit you. He will find you standing in front of Claridge's at half past twelve. Now is there anything else? Oh, yes, bathe well and do it at once, very thoroughly. Don't let the shower run loudly or you may not hear my next call. Ciao, caro, my heart is yours."

Tonio slept not at all that night. At one point he heard his name being shouted upstairs. It was Lord Amberly's slurred voice. He did not answer but lay still and trembling.

"St. Jude for you tomorrow, tomorrow for you commitment to St. Jude."

Arrivals began, doors opening and shutting.

"What on earth is this?"

It was the housekeeper's voice as she came into his room.

"It's come addressed to you," she said as she flung it onto his bed.

"Probably stuff you'll require at the charity nursing-home to which an ambulance will remove you in a couple hours, and I say good riddance."

Her name was called outside and she went from the room.

Tonio rose dizzily. He tried not to fall against things as he clothed himself in the complete gentleman's outfit. It included cuff-links but those he could not insert. They dropped from his shaking hands.

Luck was with him to the extent that a loud conference was being held in the front of the house, permitting him to escape by way of the patio, scrambling over its ivied wall like a panicky cat.

Immediately after he had scaled the wall, an icy blast of wind struck Tonio. Ah, God, he had not put on the fur-lined tweed coat from Harrod's which had lain beneath the suit of gentleman's clothes. He turned back to the ivy-teeming wall and he would have scaled it again but voices were now audible on the patio.

"This is how he escaped," the housekeeper was shouting, "Got himself decked out in clothes from Harrod's and made off with all but a fur-lined coat."

"He must be very well paid."

"Balls, excuse me, Sir, balls!" I don't know how he convinced Harrod's to use his Lordship's account there but that he done somehow. A tricky one, quiet as a mouse but full of sly plots and plans."

Her outraged shouting continued but Tonio fled into the icy blast. Had winter ever asserted itself with such ferocity? Not in his memory, never.

He fled from Lord Amberly's town house by a circuitous way; he fled like a snow-blinded bird, this way and that, many times slipping and falling as the snow congealed underfoot.

"Twelve o'clock at Claridge's," he kept repeating aloud to himself. Strangers turned to look after him on the streets, but he went on talking aloud, "Inside or out? Was it to be at twelve or twelve-thirty?"

Best he get there at twelve and stand inconspicuously outside, yes, but if he did that would the chauffeur see him? No, no, stand at the curb and wait if he were early.

From time to time he brushed the whirling snow off his gentleman's clothes. Chauffeured limousines stopped in front of Claridge's at frequent intervals.

"I am Tonio, I am expected by Mona."

Did they hear his hoarse whisper?

He tried to speak more loudly.

At one point a group of people paused a few paces behind him.

One advanced.

"Young man, are you in trouble?"

"Yes," he answered, then, "No."

"Are you sure?"

"Please, yes, I have an appointment."

"Why not wait inside, you must be freezing?"

"No, please leave me alone, a friend is waiting for me at—"

Then one of the ancient green-liveried porters that moved about the ground floor of Claridge's like somnambules came up behind him.

"Young man, you must move away," croaked the porter, "You are attracting attention and discussion."

Desperately Tonio thrust the porter away and began to walk aback and forth, continually brushing snow off his gentleman's clothes.

Suddenly, then, a young man in the uniform of a chauffeur clasped his shoulder.

"Come with me if you are named Tonio Maresca."

Ah God! Was he under arrest?

"I've done nothing, I just forgot my coat."

"Get in the car quick. The lady is already there."

The car was heated, thank God, but the heat of it induced a feeling of somnolent stupefaction.

He swayed back and forth, but remained conscious till he had assured himself that he had in his pockets the fragmentary poems the waiting lady named Mona had insisted that he bring with him.

Then sleep fell on him, irresistibly, and remained till he was shaken awake by the chauffeur.

"Jesus, you look half dead," the chauffeur commented.

"Who? Where?" Tonio gasped between wracking coughs.

"Restaurant where the lady's waiting for you."

The chauffeur then hauled Tonio out of the limousine.

"Is this?"

"Yes, this is. You're on your own from now on and God help you. You'd better wipe the blood off your mouth before you go in the door."

He tried to push Tonio to the revolving door of what appeared to be a restaurant.

"People like you don't belong in the world," the chauffeur said to him gently.

"Can you manage to get through the door?"

"Yes. No. Thank you."

But he stood frozen, immobile, outside.

"Well, I've done my bit. You're completely on your own now. I'll have to move on."

Despite the cold in which he stood abandoned, Tonio remained outside for what seemed an interminable time, the wind whining about him like a chorus of witches. Various things entered his perception and one was a street sign that said "The Strand" and Tonio knew that The Strand was a broad avenue that ran parallel to the river Thames and that the Thames emptied all the waste matter along its banks into a larger body of water. He did not know why this seemed to be of importance to him nor why the river drew him like a magnet to its great giving away of what no longer has purpose to remain.

He would have yielded himself to that magnet if a waiter in formal dress had not appeared suddenly beside him, clutching his arm.

"Are you Tonio Maresca?"

"No, no," he said first: then "Yes, but—"

"If you are Mr. Tonio Maresca, a lady in the restaurant wishes you to join her immediately."

"What is the woman's name?"

"Her Ladyship has instructed me to give you just the name Mona."

"Is she visible through the window?"

"Her Ladyship wishes you to enter immediately and I will show you to her table."

Tonio and the waiter stood staring at each other for a few moments. Then the waiter sneezed and Tonio coughed.

"Shall I tell her that you prefer to remain on the sidewalk?"

"I think I have an appointment somewhere else."

"Well, I am catching a cold in this icy wind. You will either follow me inside or I will inform the lady that you have this other appointment."

"Is the lady known here?"

"She's never been here before. Now I am freezing on the walk and am returning inside and you may follow or stay as you please."

The waiter entered the revolving door to the restaurant interior and Tonio followed with rigid steps as if performing a march to a place of execution.

The waiter conducted him to a table for two. Seated at it was apparently the woman with whose night voice he was only acquainted. Her face was obscured by a black lace veil.

The sight of her was instantly alarming to Tonio. He stood motionless at some distance from the table. Then her voice called out to him, "Tonio, you've kept me waiting long enough, don't you think? Come here, sit down, or it will certainly be St. Jude's for you. I have investigated the place and it is horrible beyond description."

"I will sit down when you have lifted your veil which I can't see through. Otherwise I—"

"There is no otherwise for you but Saint Jude's and Saint Jude is the Saint of Impossible Cases."

He remained standing a few feet from the table to which he had been conducted.

"Sit down at once or dangerous attention will be drawn to us," she said. "I am a patroness of young poets. You have kept calling me at night, imploring me to see you and your poems, or verse, as the case may be. It has been an annoyance but I am indulgent with possibly gifted young poets. Have you brought something to show me?"

"Your veil is too thick to see through," Tonio whispered.

Abruptly with a violence he had never suspected himself of owning, he thrust back the veil which had all but completely obscured her face.

What he saw startled him from the seat he had fallen into.

It was a lacquered face: there was no discernible age. Even the eyes were obscured by dark-lensed glasses.

He snatched them off and what he saw increased his terror of her.

The large eyes, surrounded by blue shadow, were rapacious.

Something flashed. A camera?

Harsh male voices boomed out to each other.

"Got it?"

"Yeh, got it!"

The quiet and decorous atmosphere of the restaurant was violently disrupted. Voices rose in dismay: the place turned into a bedlam.

"Gentlemen, please!"

Then above it all the voice of the woman, Mona, rose in a shrill tirade as the voice of an actress at the climax of a drama.

It was directed at Tonio.

"You impertinent creature, what are you doing here at my table? You must be the impostor who has been following me about, not a poet as you've represented yourself, but obviously someone engaged by my husband to create a public scene: Hired criminal, yes!"

"Madam, please!"

"Why was this permitted? Where is the lady's room? I'll lock myself in until you've had this impostor removed!"

She took flight from the table, stumbling into others, until she was conducted out of Tonio's sight.

“Get out of here at once,” a waiter said to him, “The lady does not wish to have you arrested but evicted, and she says she will take worse measures if you continue to harass her.”

“Who is this woman?”

He received no answer but was forcibly propelled toward the revolving door.

Two or three times he circled helplessly through the revolving door until it stopped revolving and he was again on the street called The Strand.

“Thames for the discarded waste of—”

Uncertainty now was totally gone. He ran toward the great receiver of creatures such as himself or littering objects such as himself, and as he ran toward this hugely tolerant receiver, he scattered from his gentleman’s clothes, from their pockets, the illegibly scribbled poetry of his life.

Tennessee Williams

November, 1982