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Three Players of a Summer Game and Other Stories

Tennessee Williams



THREE PLAYERS OF A SUMMER GAME

and Other Stories

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS



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Three Players of a Summer Game

Croquet is a summer game that seems, in a curious way, to be composed of images the way that a painter's abstraction of summer or one of its games would be built of them. The delicate wire wickets set in a lawn of smooth emerald that flickers fierily at some points and rests under violet shadow in others, the wooden poles gaudily painted as moments that stand out in a season that was a struggle for something of unspeakable importance to someone passing through it, the clean and hard wooden spheres of different colours and the strong rigid shape of the mallets that drive the balls through the wickets, the formal design of those wickets and poles upon the croquet lawn – all of these are like a painter's abstraction of a summer and a game played in it. And I cannot think of croquet without hearing a sound like the far-away boom of a cannon fired to announce a white ship coming into a harbour which had expected it anxiously for a long while. The far-away booming sound is that of a green-and-white striped awning coming down over a gallery of a white frame house. The house is of Victorian design carried to an extreme of improvisation, an almost grotesque pile of galleries and turrets and cupolas and eaves, all freshly painted white, so white and so fresh that it has the blue-white glitter of a block of ice in the sun. The house is like a new resolution not yet tainted by any defection from it. And I associate the summer game with players coming out of this house, out of the mysteries of a walled place, with the buoyant air of persons just released from a suffocating enclosure, as if they had spent the fierce day bound in a closet, were breathing freely at last in fresh atmosphere and able to move without hindrance. Their clothes are as light in weight and colour as the flattering clothes of dancers. There are three players – a woman, a man, and a child.

The voice of the woman player is not at all a loud one; yet it has a pleasantly resonant quality that carries it farther than most voices go and it is interspersed with peals of treble laughter, pitched much higher than the voice itself, which are cool-sounding as particles of ice in a tall shaken glass. This woman player, even more than her male opponent in the game, has the grateful quickness of motion of someone let out of a suffocating enclosure; her motion has the quickness of breath released just after a moment of terror, of fingers unclenched when panic is suddenly past or of a cry that subsides into laughter. She seems unable to speak or move about moderately; she moves in convulsive rushes, whipping her skirts with long strides that quicken to running. The whipped skirts are white ones. They make a faint crackling sound as her pumping thighs whip them open, the sound that comes to you, greatly diminished by distance, when fitful fair-weather gusts belly out and slacken the far-away sails of a yawl. That agreeably cool summer sound is accompanied by another which is even cooler, the ceaseless tiny chatter of beads hung in long loops from her throat. They are not pearls but they have a milky lustre, they are small faintly speckled white ovals, polished bird's eggs turned solid and strung upon glittery filaments of silver. This woman player is never still for a moment; sometimes she exhausts herself and collapses on the grass in the conscious attitudes of a dancer. She is a thin woman with long bones and skin of a silky lustre and her eyes are only a shade or two darker than the blue-tinted bird's-egg beads about her long throat. She is never still, not even when she has fallen in exhaustion on the grass. The neighbours think she's gone mad but they feel no pity for her, and that, of course, is because of her male opponent in the game.

This player is Brick Pollitt, a man so tall with such a fiery thatch of hair on top of him that I never see a flagpole on an expanse of green lawn or even a particularly brilliant cross or weather-vane on a steeple without thinking suddenly of that long-ago summer and Brick Pollitt and begin to assert again the baffling bits and pieces that make his legend. These bits and pieces, these assorted images, they are like the paraphernalia for a game of croquet, gathered up from the lawn when

the game is over and packed carefully into an oblong wooden box which they just exactly fit and fill. There they all are, the bits and pieces, the images, the apparently incongruous paraphernalia of a summer that was the last one of my childhood, and now I take them out of the oblong box and arrange them once more in the formal design on the lawn. It would be absurd to pretend that this is altogether the way it was, and yet it may be closer than a literal history could be to the hidden truth of it. Brick Pollitt is the male player of this summer game, and he is a drinker who has not yet completely fallen beneath the savage axe blows of his liquor. He is not so young any more but he has not yet lost the slim grace of his youth. He is a head taller than the tall woman player of the game. He is such a tall man that, even in those sections of the lawn dimmed under violet shadow, his head continues to catch fiery rays of the descending sun, the way that the heavenward pointing index finger of that huge gilded hand atop a Protestant steeple in Meridian goes on drawing the sun's flame for a good while after the lower surfaces of the town have sunk into lingering dusk.

The third player of the summer game is the daughter of the woman, a plump twelve-year-old child named Mary Louise. This little girl had made herself distinctly unpopular among the children of the neighbourhood by imitating too perfectly the elegant manners and cultivated eastern voice of her mother. She sat in the electric automobile on the sort of a fat silk pillow that expensive lap dogs sit on, uttering treble peals of ladylike laughter, tossing her curls, using grown-up expressions such as, 'Oh, how delightful' and 'Isn't that just lovely.' She would sit in the electric automobile sometimes all afternoon by herself as if she were on display in a glass box, only now and then raising a plaintive voice to call her mother and ask if it was all right for her to come in now or if she could drive the electric around the block, which she was sometimes then permitted to do.

I was her only close friend and she was mine. Sometimes she called me over to play croquet with her but that was only when her mother and Brick Pollitt had disappeared into the house too early to play the game. Mary Louise had a passion for croquet; she played it for herself, without any more shadowy and important connotations.

What the game meant to Brick Pollitt calls for some further account of Brick's life before that summer. He was a young Delta planter who had been a celebrated athlete at Sewanee, who had married a New Orleans debutante who was a Mardi Gras queen and whose father owned a fleet of banana boats. It had seemed a brilliant marriage, with lots of wealth and prestige on both sides, but only two years later Brick had started falling in love with his liquor, and Margaret, his wife, began to be praised for her patience and loyalty to him. Brick seemed to be throwing his life away as if it were something disgusting that he had suddenly found in his hands. This self-disgust came upon him with the abruptness and violence of a crash on a highway. But what had Brick crashed into? Nothing that anybody was able to surmise, for he seemed to have everything that young men like Brick might hope or desire to have. What else is there? There must have been something else that he wanted and lacked, or what reason was there for dropping his life and taking hold of a glass which he never let go of for more than one waking hour? His wife, Margaret, took hold of Brick's ten-thousand-acre plantation as firmly and surely as if she had always existed for that and no other purpose. She had Brick's power of attorney and she managed all of his business affairs with celebrated astuteness. 'He'll come out of it,' she said. 'Brick is passing through something that he'll come out of.' She always said the right thing; she took the conventionally right attitude and expressed it to the world that admired her for it. She had never committed any apostasy from the social faith she was born to and everybody admired her as a remarkably fine and brave little woman who had too much to put up with. Two sections of an hour glass could not drain and fill more evenly than Brick and Margaret changed places after he took to drink. It was as though she had her lips fastened to some invisible wound in his body through which drained out of him and flowed into her the assurance and vitality that he had owned before marriage. Margaret Pollitt lost her pale, feminine prettiness and assumed in its place something more impressive - a firm and rough-textured sort of handsomeness that came out of her indefinite chrysalis as mysteriously as one of those metamorphoses that occur in insect life. Once very

pretty but indistinct, a graceful sketch that was done with a very light pencil, she became vivid as Brick disappeared behind the veil of his liquor. She came out of a mist. She rose into clarity as Brick descended. She abruptly stopped being quiet and dainty. She was now apt to have dirty fingernails which she covered with scarlet enamel. When the enamel chipped off, the grey showed underneath. Her hair was now cut short so that she didn't have to 'mess with it'. It was wind-blown and full of sparkle; she jerked a comb through it to make it crackle. She had white teeth that were a little too large for her thin lips, and when she threw her head back in laughter, strong cords of muscle stood out in her smooth brown throat. She had a booming laugh that she might have stolen from Brick while he was drunk or asleep beside her at night. She had a practice of releasing the clutch on a car and shooting off in high gear at the exact instant that her laughter boomed out, not calling good-bye but thrusting out one bare strong arm, straight out as a piston with fingers clenched into a fist, as the car whipped up and disappeared into a cloud of yellow dust. She didn't drive her own little runabout nowadays so much as she did Brick's Pierce-Arrow touring car, for Brick's driver's licence had been revoked. She frequently broke the speed limit on the highway. The patrolmen would stop her, but she had such an affability, such a disarming way with her, that they would have a good laugh together, she and the highway patrolman, and he would tear up the ticket.

Somebody in her family died in Memphis that spring, and she went there to attend the funeral and collect her inheritance, and while she was gone on that profitable journey, Brick Pollitt slipped out from under her thumb a bit. Another death occurred during her absence. That nice young doctor who took care of Brick when he had to be carried to the hospital, he suddenly took sick in a shocking way. An awful flower grew in his brain like a fierce geranium that shattered its pot. All of a sudden the wrong words came out of his mouth; he seemed to be speaking in an unknown tongue; he couldn't find things with his hands; he made troubled signs over his forehead. His wife led him about the house by one hand, yet he stumbled and fell flat; the breath was knocked out of him, and he had to

be put to bed by his wife and the Negro yardman; and he lay there laughing weakly, incredulously, trying to find his wife's hand with both of his while she looked at him with eyes that she couldn't keep from blazing with terror. He stayed under drugs for a week, and it was during that time that Brick Pollitt came to see her. Brick came and sat with Isabel Grey by her dying husband's bed and she couldn't speak, she could only shake her head, incessantly as a metronome, with no lips visible in her white face, but two pressed narrow bands of a dimmer whiteness that shook as if some white liquid flowed beneath them with an incredible rapidity and violence which made them quiver . . .

God was the only word she was able to say; but Brick Pollitt somehow understood what she meant by that word, as if it were in a language that she and he, alone of all people, could speak and understand; and when the dying man's eyes forcibly opened on something they couldn't bear to look at, it was Brick, his hands suddenly quite sure and steady, who filled the hypodermic needle for her and pumped its contents fiercely into her husband's hard young arm. And it was over. There was another bed at the back of the house and he and Isabel lay beside each other on that bed for a couple of hours before they let the town know that her husband's agony was completed, and the only movement between them was the intermittent, spasmodic digging of their finger-nails into each other's clenched palm while their bodies lay stiffly separate, deliberately not touching at any other points as if they abhorred any other contact with each other, while this intolerable thing was ringing like an iron bell through them.

And so you see what the summer game on the violet-shadowed lawn was – it was a running together out of something unbearably hot and bright into something obscure and cool. . . .

The young widow was left with nothing in the way of material possessions except the house and an electric automobile, but by the time Brick's wife, Margaret, had returned from her profitable journey to Memphis, Brick had taken over the post-catastrophic details of the widow's life. For a week or two, people thought it was very kind of him, and then all at once

public opinion changed and they decided that Brick's reason for kindness was by no means noble. It appeared to observers that the widow was now his mistress, and this was true. It was true in the limited way that most such opinions are true. It is only the outside of each other's world that is visible to others, and all opinions are false ones, especially public opinions of individual cases. She was his mistress, but that was not Brick's reason. His reason had something to do with that chaste interlocking of hands their first time together, after the hypodermic; it had to do with those hours, now receding and fading behind them as all such hours must, but neither of them could have said what it was aside from that. Neither of them was able to think very clearly. But Brick was able to pull himself together for a while and take command of those post-catastrophic details in the young widow's life and her daughter's.

The daughter, Mary Louise, was a plump child of twelve. She was my friend that summer. Mary Louise and I caught lightning bugs and put them in Mason jars to make flickering lanterns, and we played the game of croquet when her mother and Brick Pollitt were not inclined to play it. It was Mary Louise that summer who taught me how to deal with mosquito bites. She was plagued by mosquitoes and so was I. She warned me that scratching the bites would leave scars on my skin, which was as tender as hers. I said that I didn't care. 'Someday you will,' she told me. She carried with her constantly that summer a lump of ice in a handkerchief. Whenever a mosquito bit her, instead of scratching the bite she rubbed it gently with the handkerchief-wrapped lump of ice until the sting was frozen to numbness. Of course, in five minutes it would come back and have to be frozen again, but eventually it would disappear and leave no scar. Mary Louise's skin, where it was not temporarily mutilated by a mosquito bite or a slight rash that sometimes appeared after eating strawberry ice-cream, was ravishingly smooth and tender. The association is not at all a proper one, but how can you recall a summer in childhood without some touches of impropriety? I can't remember Mary Louise's plump bare legs and arms, fragrant with sweet-pea powder, without also thinking of an afternoon drive we took in the electric automobile to the little art museum that had

recently been established in the town. We went there just before the five o'clock closing time, and straight as a bee, Mary Louise led me into a room that was devoted to replicas of famous antique sculptures. There was a reclining male nude (the 'Dying Gaul', I believe) and it was straight to this statue that she led me. I began to blush before we arrived there. It was naked except for a fig leaf, which was of a different-coloured metal from the bronze of the prostrate figure, and to my astonished horror, that afternoon, Mary Louise, after a quick, sly look in all directions, picked the fig leaf up, removed it from what it covered, and then turned her totally unembarrassed and innocent eyes upon mine and inquired smiling very brightly, 'Is yours like that?'

My answer was idiotic; I said, 'I don't know!' and I think I was blushing long after we left the museum. . . .

The Greys' house in the spring when the doctor died of brain cancer was very run down. But soon after Brick Pollitt started coming over to see the young widow, the house was painted; it was painted so white that it was almost a very pale blue; it had the blue-white glitter of a block of ice in the sun. Coolness of appearance seemed to be the most desired of all things that summer. In spite of his red hair, Brick Pollitt had a cool appearance because he was still young and thin, as thin as the widow, and he dressed as she did in clothes of light weight and colour. His white shirts looked faintly pink because of his skin underneath them. Once I saw him through an upstairs window of the widow's house just a moment before he pulled the shade down. I was in an upstairs room of my house and I saw that Brick Pollitt was divided into two colours as distinct as two stripes of a flag, the upper part of him, which had been exposed to the sun, almost crimson and the lower part of him white as this piece of paper.

While the widow's house was being repainted (at Brick Pollitt's expense), she and her daughter lived at the Alcazar Hotel, also at Brick's expense. Brick supervised the renovation of the widow's house. He drove in from his plantation every morning to watch the house painters and gardeners at work. Brick's driving licence had been restored to him, and it was an important step forward in his personal renovation - being

able to drive his own car again. He drove it with elaborate caution and formality, coming to a dead stop at every cross street in the town, sounding the silver trumpet at every corner, inviting pedestrians to precede him, with smiles and bows and great circular gestures of his hands. But observers did not approve of what Brick Pollitt was doing. They sympathized with his wife, Margaret, that brave little woman who had to put up with so much. As for Dr Grey's widow, she had not been very long in the town; the doctor had married her while he was an interne at a big hospital in Baltimore. Nobody had formed a definite opinion of her before the doctor died, so it was no effort, now, to simply condemn her, without any qualification, as a common strumpet.

Brick Pollitt, when he talked to the house painters, shouted to them as if they were deaf, so that all the neighbours could hear what he had to say. He was explaining things to the world, especially the matter of his drinking.

'It's something,' he shouted, 'that you can't cut out completely right away. That's the big mistake that most drinkers make – they try to cut it out completely, and you can't do that. You can do it for maybe a month or two months, but all at once you go back on it worse than before you went off it, and then the discouragement is awful – you lose all faith in yourself and just give up. The thing to do, the way to handle the problem, is like a bullfighter handles a bull in a ring. Wear it down little by little, get control of it gradually. That's how I'm handling this thing! Yep. Now, let's say that you get up wanting a drink in the morning. Say it's ten o'clock, maybe. Well, you say to yourself, "Just wait half an hour, old boy, and then you can have one." Well, at half past ten you still want that drink, and you want it a little bit worse than you did at ten, but you say to yourself, "Boy, you could do without it half an hour ago so you can do without it now." You see, that's how you got to argue about it with yourself, because a drinking man is not one person – a man that drinks is two people, one grabbing the bottle, the other one fighting him off it, not one but two people fighting each other to get control of a bottle. Well, sir, if you can talk yourself out of a drink at ten, you can still talk yourself out of a drink at *half past* ten! But at *eleven*

o'clock the need for the drink is greater. Now *here's* the important thing to remember about this struggle. You got to watch those scales, and when they tip too far against your power to resist, you got to give in a little. That's not weakness. *That's strategy!* Because don't forget what I told you. A drinking man is not one person but two, and it's a battle of wits going on between them. And so I say at eleven, "Well, *have* your drink at that hour, *go on*, and *have* it! One drink at eleven won't hurt you!"

'What time is it, now? Yep! Eleven . . . All right, I'm going to have me that one drink. I could do without it, I don't crave it, but the important thing is . . .'

His voice would trail off as he entered the widow's house. He would stay in there longer than it took to have one drink, and when he came out, there was a change in his voice as definite as a change of weather or season, the strong and vigorous tone would be a bit filmed over.

Then he would usually talk about his wife. 'I don't say my wife Margaret's not an intelligent woman. She is, and both of us know it, but she don't have a good head for property values. Now, you know Dr Grey, who used to live here before that brain thing killed him. Well, he was my physician, he pulled me through some bad times when I had that liquor problem. I felt I owed him a lot. Now, that was a terrible thing the way he went, but it was terrible for his widow, too; she was left with this house and that electric automobile and that's all, and this house was put up for sale to pay off her debts, and - well, I bought it. I bought it, and now I'm giving it back to her. Now, my wife Margaret, she. And a lot of other folks, too. Don't understand about this . . .'

'What time is it? Twelve? High noon! . . . This ice is melted . . .'

He'd drift back into the house and stay there half an hour, and when he came back out, it was rather shyly with a sad and uncertain creaking of the screen door pushed by the hand not holding the tall glass, but after resting a little while on the steps, he would resume his talk to the house painters.

'Yes,' he would say, as if he had only paused a moment before, 'it's the most precious thing that a woman can give