



## Garland of Summer

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I fell in love with him the first time I saw him. We all did. He had silky, sugared sweet molasses skin and amber eyes with black specks like the smooth, translucent jewels my wife Amelia and I collected from the beach at the Baltic. He could look into us, through us, past us, with his eyes. He sampled a few of us, even the shy and illiberal of us. We all loved him that summer. In the fall, someone killed him.

My brother Keenan's sloop rounded the corner of the point, taking peaked waves wholeheartedly, speeding towards our group lounging on the knoll above our weathered dock. Some pretended June's afternoon ennui, slapping shuttlecock back and forth over tree limbs or listening with eyes closed as my wife, her body lying across a thick blanket, read aloud from D. H. Lawrence's newest. I shielded my eyes staring at the *Mistress*' bow pointed at our little group like an arrow shot and rushing towards us just as fast. Piloting a boat to such precision required mariner's skills which Keenan didn't possess so I wondered whom my elder brother had found this time on his trip to the continent.

The *Mistress* slid expertly next to our bruised wooden dock like a sparrow alighting a thorny rose bush. Keenan jumped off and wound the line around the mooring affixing his bobbing hobby, albeit not too securely as she bumped into the dock with each wave crescendo. We saw him then, Keenan's new friend. We watched his sable, muscular form moving like a professional yachtsman, flitting hummingbird-like, from rigging to mast, lowering then entrapping the sail. He wore loose ecru pants, knit short-sleeve shirt with one button unbuttoned. A mirror image of Keenan excepting for skin color. His hair smoothed back in a slight wave I believe he fought to control and his face, even from this distance, was chiseled as finely as Apollo pulling his chariot. When he finished — of course none of us offered aid — he placed one foot on the sloop's port side and stood there, hand on hip like a medaled Great War soldier returning home to accept his accolades. He waved once, then panther-like jumped onto the dock.

We gathered round our picnicking area, the six or seven or eight of us, waiting for introductions. Casting out propriety, Keenan eagerly obliged, "Garland Penn."

I wanted to be the first to touch him, to shake his hand, to feel how his dark skin felt against my pasty white. Until we expressed our character, Keenan and I looked familiarly similar with our brown eye color, brown hair, and respectable height. I, being the more decorous in public society.

Garland clasped my hand, firm yet smooth, his baby pink palm warm and soothing and I knew instantly he was a writer from the slight roughness of thumb and forefinger that he skimmed against me. I would know his honeyed skin well over that summer, coveting, loving his satin caresses. Learning, envying his intellect as much as his body.

Garland lapsed into a deep-voiced London drawl, occasionally correcting his pronunciation to dropping r's and broadening a's. By summer's end, Garland nearly sounded like one of us highbrow English. I loved this metamorphosis as much as I scorned my own compliance, but he marked this to me that summer.

"Amelia," Keenan announced my wife.

She smiled sweetly but did not offer her hand. Garland did not seem surprised. Instead, he gave an acquiescing nod, his smile small but pleasant. I thought he should be accustomed to stares of strangers such that which he received from our group, and the stand-offishness of such as Amelia. Her Saxon blue eyes and blonde hair so contrasting with his obviously African ebony ancestry.

This banter transcended our revolving guests. I didn't know most of their names. They came and went, staying a few days, eating our food, drinking our liquor, enjoying our affability. They left for a few weeks, but sometimes one, two returned. They called each other darling and thought that was so like F. Scott Fitzgerald. When the police questioned us later I could only provide descriptions that matched nearly all the It girls and boys who stayed with us. Bobbed hair, medium height, fair face, ever smiling.

We played at playing. Our games enabled us to interact with each other without actually engaging in meaningful conversation. June unraveled into a heated July full of frolicking lawn tennis and lake swimming amongst our frequent but nameless guests. Garland remained our constant, either cheering on or blistering the miscreants. One moment he deadpanned at a bad foul line call, the next he applauded his opponent's win with an apropos quote from Shakespeare or Descartes, often in French, which the girls swooned over. He could do that, make the girls, and boys, swoon with a smile from his eyes. I loved him for his chameleonness.

Mother was, of course, composed, yet I could see she was quite surprised to behold a person so markedly different from our set. She returned from visiting Aunt Someone recuperating from Something Dreadful and positioned herself in our Great Hall. Mother stood ramrod straight, chin lifting a bit higher, her brows arched in a "*Who Are You?*" query, her eyes scrutinizing Garland top to bottom. He spoke his perfect French to her, a mistake. I thought Mother might banish him. In the end, he saved himself.

Garland clasped his hand to his heart, then inclined his head slightly. “I met Keenan at University where I lecture. Thank you so much for opening your home to this mendicant professor.”

“Your lecture?” Mother tried piercing his esteem, directing a stab at his profession.

“Literature.” Garland kept his eyes level at Mother’s. “I graduated *de l’Universite de Paris*. My dissertation . . . “ Garland flowered his literary and academic accomplishments at her, speaking as if he were applying for a position, which in fact, he was.

Mother admitted Garland with a nod. Not due to his educational status, which she would send our solicitor to investigate and confirm, but because he did not engage in typical groveling offerings to help Mother with her bags, put away her coat, bring her a cup of tea, or some other such accommodation undertaken by coarse Americans towards us established Brits.

“Mrs. Smithhouse.” Garland inclined his head again slightly towards Mother, twirled about, exited. I cheered for him, silently.

Murmurs began amongst servants weeks before Mother mentioned, off chance, that her day brooch was missing and did any of us perhaps see the blasted thing. It was a small ornament, gold filigree embedded with tiny multi-colored semi-precious stones, certainly not an artifact Mother wore to social luncheons that meant anything. It played the dutiful role of accessory to her day attire whilst at home. Mother couldn’t dress without an appropriate bauble. Only our servants and Keenan, that summer the eldest male in our household and therefore overseer of all events within and around our estate, worried at Mother’s errant brooch.

Keenan ordered a search.

Maids and houseboys scurried throughout rooms, heads bowed glaring into corners and peeping under rugs, thoroughly convinced that one of them or — horrors! — a guest absconded with the thing.

Someone suggested contacting the town police. Keenan dialed and our dutiful lawmen, one dressed out in blue uniform with brass buttons and one in very plain mismatched jacket and trousers, arrived within an hour. The police scribbled notes in little pocket pads, barely glancing up at me as they asked questions. I knew they thought I was a spoiled, rich, titled wastrel. I didn’t care, because I was, indeed, a spoiled, rich, titled wastrel. The police wanted to search the servants’ quarters and our private rooms.

“I have nothing to hide. You may search my belongings, if you wish.” Garland looked Detective Mooring straight in his eyes. If the police should find Mother’s brooch in Garland’s room, the item was surely secreted there by the true culprit since Garland so surely proclaimed his innocence through obliging the police. A brilliant move. I told him so later in bed.

“Do you think I took your Mother’s brooch?” Garland’s face was indistinguishable in the shadows formed by overhanging folds of bed canopy.

“No,” I replied. “If you wanted money, you needed only to ask.”

He threw his head back and laughed, a deep chest resonating laugh sending shivers through my body that culminated, titillatingly, in my loins.

“You don’t know anything do ya?” He finally told me, his *lingua* momentarily escaping.

My face must have shown my affront because he caressed my cheek with his soft palm.

“I did not mean to hurt you, *mon cherie*. You are an innocent. Would a pilot fish swimming at the mouth of a toothéd shark ask for cast-off morsels? No. A Touchstone takes, not asks.”

I searched my mind and found Garland’s Shakespeare’s fool reference. I countered with, “Perhaps one of the servants . . . “ My imagination dove into hidden crannies of our maids’ drawers.

“No.” Garland shook his head. “You and your servants are cut from the same cloth, albeit one silk, the other flax.”

I stiffened at this comparison and sat up straight in bed. Garland lay down, clasping his hands behind his head, fully stretched out, caramel flesh contrasting starkly against pure white sheets.

“You are the silk, *mon amour*, but both silk and flax carve the pattern. Neither can forsake status quo.”

My mind tried and failed to picture a line of faceless servants dressed in my tailored Saville Row suits. “Who then?”

Garland hesitated enough to make me squirm. His deductive reasoning, apparently much better than members of our town police force whom I suspect were slopping hogs or threshing wheat mere weeks ago, impressed me as much as his prowess between pressed cotton sheets.

Finally, he responded. Whimsical musings strung together that might seem nonsensical in daylight, but at midnight under canopied four-poster bed resonated cogent enough to demand attention. “Maybe the brooch was merely misplaced.”

We did not speak after that sentence. Garland kissed me full on my mouth and drew me down to him as surely as a Lorelei’s call submerges innocent sailors.

Much later, as much as I disdained, I knew I had to leave Garland’s warm bed.

“I should return to my bedroom.”

“Why?”

“It’s not proper to leave Amelia alone all night.”

Garland chuckled. “*Bête enfant*. She’s with Keenan.”

Such a truism I could not deny. Amelia and Keenan had, after all, frolicked together before I proposed marriage and have been thereafter quite close, skirting off to private lunches and laughing at private jokes. This did not upset me. Amelia was, after all, my wife, we of course loved each other and neither would break our legal matrimonial bonds.

I realized then that Keenan had brought Garland Penn here as an excuse for himself, not for me.

I lay my head on Garland’s chest as he wrapped his arms around me. That is how I fell to peaceful sleep that night. And many over that summer.

If ever croquet became an Olympic sport, Amelia Smithouse and Garland Penn would rank as the world’s fiercest players in their struggle for domination of the mallet. Metal hoops staked meters apart in geometric precision extended rhombus-like throughout our lawn, a testament to the skill of our servants who prepared our playing field with stratagem due Field Marshall Haig’s military campaign.

“My team against your team, Raymond! What say you?” Keenan challenged me. I accepted even though he usually won. I usually let him. Keenan’s bullying athleticism was surpassed only by his Zeus-like competitiveness. The energy to win was more than I usually cared to muster.

“A competition! How wonderful!” One of the It girls said.

“I want to be on your team!” Another fawned at my brother, others likewise.

“Amelia!” Keenan pointed his mallet at my wife. She feigned surprise and glanced at me, blinking her blue eyes, a half smile, apologizing, asking my permission which she knew I would grant.

Dutiful husband as always, I yelled at Keenan, “You chose the best player of all. Unfair.”

Amelia giggled, sidled next to Keenan, their bodies touching. We continued choosing our mates until the last two guests remained, Garland and some trivial.

“Harold!” Keenan yelled.

Garland sprouted a smile and jogged eagerly to my line of players. He seemed none the deleterious for being defaulted last, a lucky occurrence as Garland and I played well together.

Us dozen, mallets in hand, dressed in summer cotton whites, praised our own skills of striking colored wooden balls with wooden mallets to forcing them through staked wire arches. More than once, an opponent's ball was whacked hard enough to roll past the playing field threatening a downhill spiral into our lake. Clearly a breach of rules, but who would confront a host?

"Your ball was in my way." Amelia twirled her mallet at Garland. "Match point."

His eyes sparked, his jaw clenched, his sensuous lips pressed together in a harsh line, his whole body tensed in anger ready to erupt like Mount Vesuvius, ready to bury those near in acrid castigation. What happened next was a demonstration of absolute self-will I shall never forget. His body shook as if an electric current pierced his heart. He blinked several times, smiled broadly, spread his arms out, firmly planted his feet in ground, looked at all of us with those beautiful amber eyes, then touched his forehead and twirled his arm in an Arabic salutation, and bowed from his waist to Amelia.

"I know not where in the blades of grass these mortal objects of men's games lay, for you dear Amelia transcend all blooms in the garden such that I was bedazzled by your beauty. I saw naught else but you."

Someone began clapping, others joined in, me also, rejoicing in Garland's *homage* to my wife. I knew his concurrence was wrong.

Keenan jogged to our losing team, grinning like a maniacal despot, "The losers must serve tea to the winners," then jogged back to shake hands with his comrades.

My teammates were dejected, mouths pulled down, shoulders slumped, as if their eternal fates rested on the outcome of this game.

"Why did you give in?" I asked Garland. "Amelia was clearly in the wrong."

He looked me straight in my eyes and I felt an electric surge of desire.

"Some battles are worth fighting. Not this one." He slapped Jerald, one of our teammates, on the back almost sending him to the ground. "A little humility is good for the soul. What say you?" Jerald's reply was a sour look at Garland's back.

"You fought, and won, a battle with Mother," I countered.

"*Ich sie korrigiert.* You Brits think Shakespeare and Dickens wrote everything."

My German is worse than my French and I told him so.

"I corrected her." Garland restated.

"You couldn't let Mother win that battle?"

"No, not in literature, not in my domain. Your mother was an important battle."

“And Amelia wasn’t?”

“Not at this moment,” Garland said. “Here, look, she comes to claim her prize.”

Amelia wrapped her arm around mine, entwined her fingers in mine, pressed her body against mine, but she looked directly at Garland. “Come, Raymond, it’s time for tea.”

“An exhilarating match,” Garland said. “I congratulate you on your win.”

“There was no other outcome.” Amelia pulled me away from him. She could do that, not because she was my wife and I her husband, but because I was her clay to mold as she wished, unlike Keenan who had his own head and sailed to all ports British and beyond.

I was slightly dejected that Garland had not thought me worth winning. An image came to my mind of our heated bodies flailing about, moaning, heart pumping, blood cresting. I wondered if I could translate such ardor into words.

Many years after, after penning my own plentiful volumes of essays, I ordered a set of Garland’s books, translated French to English, from a London bookseller. Garland wrote of brave men battling courageously in abhorrent environs against powerful enemies and of the love they found upon their heroic return. Floridly written with just enough battlefield grit to endear reader to the masculine hero. I imagined Garland as hero, although I realized then I knew next to nothing of the man who entrenched himself so dearly in my heart.

Amelia had discovered us once, sitting on cane chairs in our garden terrace, hunched over my papers. “Raymond, I need your assistance with something.”

I obeyed. Henceforth, Garland’s tutelage of my writing, like our lovemaking, was done in secret. A niche in our library. A stroll to our lake. An exchange of papers, mine crisply written, his returned with circles, notes, corrections.

One evening, after dinner, when our guests were deciding the degree of their boredom and whether their malaise attained the level of requiring a long drive into town, or the complexity of organizing a game of bridge, or merely going to bed, Garland and I retreated outside to our terrace. The moon was absent but stars shone, brightly spattered in the opaque night. I heard distant tree leaves lashing against each other.

“Well done.” Garland returned my newest essay to me, neatly folded, which I slipped into my jacket pocket.

“Perhaps I might be brave enough to write another letter-to-the-editor,” I said.

“I would hope you write something better than that. You challenge my best students.”

“I should like to visit Paris.” The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them.

Three heartbeats passed before Garland replied. “That is not possible.”

I ignored him. “A trip overland through Paris, to spend winter in the south of France. Nice.”

“Nice is beautiful in January, but Paris is too cold.” Garland turned his back to me, not allowing me a word. We spoke no further of Paris, ever. We continued our rendezvous, suspending our trysts only when Amelia abjectly pouted my absence from our bed. Keenan trysting elsewhere.

August languished in us like a belle refusing to leave a waning ball. Fall crept in with colored leaves. Soon we would travel to our London house to begin the holiday whirl of soirees, balls, and nonsensical teas mandatory to our set. Summer was ending.

One night I lay at midnight, heart and body spent, our matrimonial duty to each performed, Amelia sleeping, our house absent of sound. I sloughed off covers then tiptoed, robed and slipped, to stand before Garland’s closed door. I heard down the hall Keenan’s chortled laugh and waited, my breath held. I exhaled as Garland’s door opened, and there *au naturel* he stood.

“I hoped you would come.” He took my hand, pulling me into his bedroom. We embraced, walking, kissing, never leaving each other, to his bed. Afterward, I wanted to sleep but Garland urged my return to Amelia’s bed.

“She takes as many liberties as I.” I countered Garland’s reasoning, trying to entwine myself in his arms.

“Hers are frivolous, meaningless, *sans amour, sans esprit*.” He pulled back to the far edge of the bed, head nestled into the canopy folds, face distant. We remained at an impasse for several minutes, each unwilling to move. I had many arguments in mind, first being that this was my homestead and I should certainly have rights to all beds. Garland stopped me.

“You are my *belle enfant*, Raymond, *un belle fleur* at dawn before full bloom. I cannot let you be mortified by vindictive hands.”

I returned to my sleeping wife.

Detective Mooring questioned inhabitants of our home, servants and guests, with the same dutiful, futile energy he had shown investigating Mother’s lost brooch. No one admitted knowledge of Garland’s murder. The servants were standardly fearful and cheerfully willing in providing detailed information of their whereabouts thereby bragging to Mother of their dutifulness in attendance to their proper stations at all hours — day or night. Our guests and my family, were, of course, not involved, and stated as much.

Unable to press further, Detective Mooring concluded his investigation determining that a passing itinerant vagrant broke into our manse and was surprised by Garland, who was perhaps on his way to fetch a glass of water from the kitchen, rather than drinking from the ready glass of water at his bedside. This vagrant, being of the violent sort that vagrants usually are, stabbed Garland in the back straight through his heart with one of our sterling silver dinner knives. Of course, how this already condemned vagrant ascertained the location of keys to our ornate sterling silver service remained unanswered. Nevertheless, the book was closed on the investigation to the satisfaction of all, excepting Garland's ghost. Should he have one.

Nearing September, I sat in my rattan chair, outside on our terrace, smartly dressed in suit and tie, Agatha Christie bestseller open on my lap, watching crimson death pushing green life from oak leaves, my notebook recording bits of imaginary dialogue between antagonist and protagonist which I hoped to fashion into a short story. I considered that Garland had been correct about me. I was a catering sycophant.

"Raymond, I'd like to go into the village." Amelia made her announcement behind me. I heard her settle cloche hat and pull on silk gloves. She assumed I would take her.

"I'm busy at the moment." I did not turn around to face her, and for some reason, felt twittery displaying my back to my wife.

"Busy?"

"I am nearing finding out whodunit in Christie's new book." I couldn't be wholly honest with Amelia.

"The book will wait." She had an edge to her voice.

"Ask Pattison, or our driver, we have one just for this purpose." I picked up my book and held it inches away from my face. I also held my breath.

Amelia hrmphed, an annoying sound, then click-clacked heels inside.

I smiled in winning this small battle. I hunched over my notebook continuing my imaginary dialogue that seemed not so imaginary after all now. Decades later I set the turning point of my life to this moment. In the end, I won.

A piccolo finally revealed Garland's murderer. The only person more surprised at the culprit than I was Mother, who expressed disbelief that someone with blue blood shed someone else's red. I had a near insatiable urge to apologize to Amelia, my former wife by that time, for years of suspicion, and I momentarily wondered if we could have remained married if I hadn't secretly loathed her. I decided that Garland had been correct when he ironically proclaimed *c'est la vie* of Amelia's obvious character faults, and that I had my own list of foibles. I forgave Amelia, secretly.

My once youthful brunette hair faded to a shade of greige, not unlike the flaccid oatmeal our cook serves for breakfast, and my once lively foxtrot slowed to a meandering constitutional. However, my brothers Keenan and Clendon and I still joy

at cresting waves and hoisting sails aboard Keenan's *Mistress*, especially Clendon who often crests his own mistresses aboard Keenan's sloop.

"We should get Keenan a surprise for his birthday." The surprise would be if Keenan celebrated another birthday. He recovered in a sanitarium, this time in Switzerland, from an aqua vitae related ailment. "We'll refurbish the *Mistress*. Scrape the hull, replace some teak, paint and polish." Clendon's smile out shined the *Mistress'* current vapid condition so I agreed to his expensive plan. If only I had known the true cost at the time.

Clendon arranged the work to be done by a swarthy-toned elderly but energetic little man whose words tended to end in a vowel and who proceeded to vigorously deconstruct the *Mistress'* interior cabin. He gutted her.

"Youa gotta comma downa here, Mr. Smit-house." My elder brother scoffed at being summoned, but scurried away nevertheless. From the hushed voice tone or audacity of the command, I am not sure.

Clendon and I met Mr. Piccolo at the dock. He held a small bundle wrapped in an extraordinarily fine weave cotton napkin that I immediately recognized as belonging to Mother's linen dining set she received as a birthday gift from some relative with even more money than us. The napkin had mysteriously disappeared, along with the sterling silver knife, the night someone murdered Garland.

"Itta was tucked into onea da boards-a." Mr. Piccolo held out the bundle, not needing to unwrap it for us.

The *Mistress'* restoration proceeded splendidly. Clendon was generous to the extreme, even allowing and paying for Mr. Piccolo's extended stay in his home town in Italy where Mr. Piccolo purchased some rare posh wooden carved thingamabob for the *Mistress*. After the completed work, Mr. Piccolo retired to that same sunny Amalfi coast town.

Keenan when confronted at the discovery, his face pasty and gaunt, shrugged. "It was an accident. I thought he was a robber. Fruit of the vine clouded my vision."

In the end, Mother and Clendon believed him. They reasoned that a drunk Keenan, a common state for him, accidentally found the key to Mother's silver service, then accidentally retrieved a serrated steak knife. Perhaps Keenan tripped into Garland, hence the stab through the heart. Who could fault Keenan for an accident? Excepting me.

Knowing my brother's fierce competitiveness, his narcissism, his self-absorption, I surmised that Keenan killed Garland from jealousy. Garland was, after all, the most popular guest we had that summer, accepting attentions from the boys and the girls, from Mother, and mostly from me. In the end, Garland's aspirations killed him.

Three years later, during the logistical changing of woven Persian rugs — so as to ameliorate foot wear — in nearly every room of our manse, Mother's lost brooch was discovered, covered by dust woolies, behind the foot of her highboy chest of drawers.

No one apologized. After all, Garland was dead and no one had been formally or informally accused but I thought it astonishing that only Garland had the insight to put forth the theory of accidentalness while we, lord and servant, had assumed the baseness of human character. Mother's brooch had been, actually, indeed, accidentally, misplaced.