

A Street Car Named Whatever

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A Streetcar Named Whatever

Tatiana Ryckman

The thing is, all I know about *A Streetcar Named Desire* is that there is a character named Stella, and I know this only because there is a famous line which is just “Stella!” and after some soul searching or brain-wracking, or because Michael just said so, I’ve decided that there is also a character named Stan who was famously played by Marlon Brando—who died one day while I was visiting my grandfather, and I had that feeling you get when a famous person dies, something between, That person was still alive? And the irrational thought that you’ve missed out on something. Like you ever would have met them, the way you ever meet all the other famous people.

In this film, Michael and I agree, Brando is a real ass. I think he slaps his simple southern belle around and she is, I assume, Stella, but it could also be that they’re married or that she’s a prostitute. We never did agree on that.

In college a friend of mine auditioned for the part of Stella in a local production and wept when she wasn’t cast. She was sweet and I wish her well and I assume this is how I’m supposed to feel about Stella. Or that maybe this is what that Vonnegut story was about. The one where the shitty town has an actor who’s not much of a person but fully embodies every role, so when the new girl in town plays Stella to his Stan, she finds a way to keep him in character and marries him. I think I’m supposed to feel that way about Stella and my friend and maybe other people I don’t understand. A feeling of cosmic, or comic, forgiveness. Vonnegut is another famous person I was sad to see go, even though I didn’t know him.

So I believe that Stella and Stan are a legit item of some sort, that they live in the same shitty one bedroom place and Stella’s sister comes by to smoke cigarettes and hear about what a brute Brando can be and how much Stella loves him anyway. The way someone like Stella, which is to say any one

of us, could love someone like Brando. Which is to say, someone like any one of us. And maybe at some point Brando bangs Cornette, too—which is what I've decided Stella's sister's name is, and she wants to protect Stella but she's scared of Stan herself. And maybe even a little wild for him, because he's a little wild, because it's so much easier to be crazy for someone who's crazy. And so these stupid well-meaning middle class girls show up in New Orleans—which is how Michael and I started talking about the movie to begin with, because now that we're in this crazy city we realize we know as little about it as we do about this film we've also never seen—the girls show up in New Orleans and get sucked into Dan's orbit. Or Stan's, or whatever. And ultimately begin to question the trajectory of their lives, which had seemed so promising when they'd rolled into town. They question their pride and worth and the age they are and the age they live in, what they are and are not willing to put up with and what that says about them.

And I'll bet that Stan can be a real softy. That he can come home and pull things together as easily as he can stumble in and smash them to pieces. So when Cornette—who you will remember is Stella's sister in this story—is kicked out of the house, and Stan goes into one too many rages after being out one too many nights, driving the only thing that really drives him, his wild car, Stella fights back. Michael reminds me that a streetcar is not a car, but more of a trolley, and I swear that I am privy to this distinction, but I can't take Brando seriously on a trolley, so I've done away with it altogether.

Most of what I've described above is information I've gleaned from The Simpson's. It's an early episode and Homer is being a real prick and telling Marge her place is in the home and he becomes bitter and hostile at her for joining the local theater (there's that damned local theater again, ruining lives, crushing dreams). Marge seems to be taking this step to find herself interested or interesting. She's a pretty lousy actress, and Stan is played by a comically buff Flanders. One night, when Homer's constant badgering has reached a crescendo, and the director's disappointment in the cast is fully realized, he advises Marge to imagine Stan is someone she hates so she can stand up for herself. Homer's head appears on Flanders' beefcake body and Marge brings her rage to the stage. Not unlike that Vonnegut story, I guess.

I have no idea how close this is to the actual story line, nor if I'm remembering the events of the Simpson's episode in the correct order, as I may have been very high when I watched it. So when Stella finally fights back, I assume that she's realized she's been attached to a monster, that she can't stand it any longer and needs to move on. We've all been there, even if it was a fight over dishes or rent, but sometimes something breaks and we fall out of love like falling out of a building.

As for Stella, you don't take a broken bottle to someone who regularly beats you into submission and expect that you can just work it out. Or maybe you do. But because of the Simpson's, I think Stella, unlike Marge, decides to leave, and she must ride off in a fast car, or maybe she goes to the next neighborhood on the streetcar, maybe that's what the desired streetcar is—a new life six blocks away—and Brando yells "Stella!", his voice trailing after her like a bruise on the wet night air. But I'm still hung up on that

streetcar bit, if only because I can't imagine it going very fast or very far.

I don't actually know anything about the streetcar in New Orleans because Michael and I are horrible at this town. But I won't make fun of the way he pronounced beignets if he won't tell about how I spent an entirely day shuffling around in slippers without going outside until we had to get a bottle of whiskey.

Even though all the evidence points to this as the general plot for *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and even though I'm sure the car named desire is real important, like, he *drives* her crazy with desire, or he drives her away, or she ultimately drives away, the version that plays in my head doesn't really rely on transportation. In my head the only thing really being driven is Stan, and it's to some extreme edge, not by booze or women or fast cars—I think there's a country song that goes, "I've never met a woman too pretty or a car too fast" (just put the trolley out of your mind)—but in the end it is his own vehicle of desire, his own insatiable thirst that kills Stella. Yes, she dies in my version, maybe yours too. Because maybe Stan doesn't realize his own strength, or maybe she ends her life on her own terms, the one strong choice she's ever made. On his knees at her bloody side, Brando yells into the night sky, or popcorn ceiling, or idiot air, "Stella!"

Maybe.



DESIRE ST.

Michael Heald

A few hours ago, I ran by a street named Desire, which, it occurs to me now,

is maybe the most noteworthy thing that's happened to me today that I've actually kept to myself. I have a tendency to narrate when I'm with Tatiana. We both do. It's nonstop with us, this attempt to pin words onto every single thought ranging from the mundane to the wondrous. Of course we always end up failing, the whole project is impossible, there simply isn't enough time to get it all out, so all these streets named Desire can't help but gather around us in an increasingly messy collection of cul de sacs and off-ramps.

Our first two days in this city, there was a question as to whether or not we were ever going to hunt down a proper dish sponge, or if we were just going to settle for using wet paper towels all week. Finally, moments ago, the rain began to let up, and we scurried out together for the first time all day, only to discover far more than a sponge at the relatively innocent-looking corner store next door.

And so, as we try to figure out whether the guy behind the counter thought we were terrible people for what we were buying, or whether he'd lost all desire to judge people decades ago, when he started selling terrible things to people like us, I find myself imagining one of those touristy signposts sprouting up between us in the kitchen. It's one of those iron signposts with arrows flying off in every direction, each one containing hyper-specific information about just how far away each particular Desire Street is that we're never going to get around to talking about.

"I think he chooses not to see what he's selling," Tatiana suggests. "He seemed to have a very strong lack of interest in us."

"Right," I say. "These sorts of shopping trips have been happening for a long, long time around here. Just consider *A Streetcar Named Desire*."

"Oh, Stella," she says. "What happens to Stella, anyway? Does she die?"

"She definitely doesn't die. Don't they end up together?"

"I kind of think she dies."

"And this is why Brando shouts her name?"

"I think?" she says uncertainly. "Or maybe the shouting is the thing that pushes her over the edge?"

Neither one of us, it turns out, has seen the movie.

The only thing I know for sure about it is that Stanley shouts the name "Stella!" in some sort of iconic wake-up-the-neighbors, who-will-stop-the-rain sort of way. I also know that it would take a lot more than what we bought next door to get me to shout like that. 97% of the shouting I've done in my life has been about sports. The only other time I regularly shout is in my car during rush hour. I've never shouted a lover's name. On top of that, although I've dated a number of women whose names are in famous pop songs, I've never sung one of those songs at karaoke. I want to believe that it's okay if you don't make the big gesture. That you don't have to be a brute like Brando to feel, I don't know, *engaged* with one's life. That it's okay to

go small.

“Did we really forget soy sauce?” Tatiana says.

I hold up a bottle of dark liquid.

“That’s vinegar,” she says.

“But it’ll do *something*, right?” I say. When she shrugs, I upend the bottle over our stir-fry. I wonder if I’m getting the Brando of *Streetcar* confused with the Brando of the early seventies, the Brando of *Last Tango in Paris*, which I’ve seen parts of but hated so intensely that I fast-forwarded through all the cold, creepy apartment shit to the butter scene, just to make sure I could say I saw it before quitting the thing entirely. And so I remind myself as I try to keep myself warm in this cold, potentially creepy apartment that I should be thinking of a young, passionate man, not a middle-aged one who no longer cares.

Stanley is a sailor, I now remember, and his white T-shirt is just about the only clean thing about him. And because he’s a sailor, I realize, this means he’s on shore leave when he gets sucked into Stella’s vortex, making her a kind of Circe to his Odysseus. Until all this traumatic stuff he’s been holding down—this dark matter from the navy and his rough-and-tumble childhood—comes frothing up as their relationship hits the skids. Or maybe he’s not a sailor. Or maybe it’s not a tragedy. Maybe I’m thinking of *On the Waterfront*, another Brando film I’ve never seen.

“Enough,” Tatiana says, stopping me before I slosh the entire bottle of vinegar into our food.

I stand aside as she relieves me of seasoning duty, precisely the turn of events I was hoping for. In addition to the more obvious vices we procured next door is a \$1.29 shaker of cayenne pepper, which we bought to spice up our hot toddies. Tatiana shakes some of this surprisingly versatile cayenne over the pot. Her confidence is remarkable. Back home, I cook for myself pretty regularly but whenever I’m sharing a kitchen with someone else, I become this bumbling wreck who never knows where anything is or how much to put on it or for how long. It’s hard to say the intent behind this childish behavior—if I’m doing it for comedic value or if it’s a serious attempt to demonstrate just how much guidance I need.

As we sit down to eat, we agree to watch the movie together at some unspecified future date. There simply isn’t enough time on this trip, and I suspect that the next time we see one another we won’t get around to it, either. For all the movies I feel like I’m watching in this life, it’s actually a pretty rare thing to commit myself to one. Come to think of it, the only Brando movies I’ve definitely seen all the way through are *The Godfather* and *Apocalypse Now*. He’s always been a puffy old creep to me. But what about Stella? Why can’t I picture her? Why don’t we know the name of the actress who gets shouted at?

After dinner, Tatiana sets up her typewriter in the kitchen and I go out

alone to the balcony, which slopes alarmingly towards the street. Sitting on the couch, you almost feel the need to wrap yourself around one of the arms lest you get sucked across the floorboards and somehow, at least in my imagination, under the railing and down onto the sidewalk. It's taken me a couple days to appreciate this perpetually-on-the-verge-of-slipping sensation. The rain has stopped, it seems, for good, but the streets are quiet. The herd of cats which collected in the lot across the street last night is nowhere to be seen. I wonder if they have a different arrangement for bad weather, or if, like us, they sit it out alone. Desire is only seven blocks away, just east of Piety. When I stand on the couch I can almost see it.



Tatiana Ryckman was born in Cleveland, Ohio. She is the author of the chapbook *Twenty-Something* and Assistant Editor at sunnyoutside press. Her work has been published with Tin House, Everyday Genius, and Hobart. More at tatianaryckman.com.



Michael Heald is the author of *Goodbye to the Nervous Apprehension*, a collection of essays. He is a writer at large for *Runner's World* and is the publisher of Perfect Day Publishing. His essays have appeared in *Oregon Humanities*, *the Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Vol 1 Brooklyn*, *Propeller Quarterly*, and elsewhere. He lives in Portland, Oregon.