

# 1<sup>st</sup> Place Winner – Tennessee Williams Short Story Contest 2021

## *Dear Mr. Williams* by Alyson Osborn

Dear Mr. Williams,

I've been wanting to write you for ages, but kept putting it off for various and complicated reasons. You are on my mind and in my heart everyday. This is no exaggeration. You are always here: lodged, or perched, or merely hovering, but always present. Always welcome, of course, as I am so grateful to you, but I also have a deep abiding sadness when it comes to you, in the form of guilt, which I've never quite figured out how to shake free of, but am going to try to do so now through this letter.

Long ago I played Laura. In several ways it would be considered type casting. The director told me that he knew I was his Laura the moment I walked into the room to audition, unless my audition ended up changing his mind. That's how much of your Laura I was, and still am to some degree.

I have always collected glass animals. I have never married. I prefer solitude over almost anything else and am most content in a world of my own making. I collect unicorns, and their horns always break off. I keep in a special box the opening night gifts I received for that show; they are among my most precious belongings: A one inch cubed crystal with the image of a unicorn reared up on its hind legs etched into it. A carnation pink cardigan with an applique over the heart: a bouquet of three dark pink flowers outlined in shimmery gold thread, with a small white bead at their centers. Pearl-like buttons. It doesn't fit anymore. I can't remember ever being as delicate as Laura. Now I've become bosomy in a matronly way, but am still slender everywhere else. My body resembles a sad, bedraggled letter P.

There's an anecdote from our production of *Glass Menagerie* that I want to share before it floats away. Sometimes a thought is clearly in my head, and then something else drifts in and the first thought has morphed into a spider web strand in the breeze before I remember to get back to it. I can just barely make it out, and there's no way to move toward it without making it float further away. Spider web thread is already barely there; it's completely not there before you know it. Oh! Why am I telling you about memory??? Here it is:

As part of getting ready for the gentleman caller's visit, Amanda would stuff Laura's bra. She'd swoop in like a tornado holding small flattish puffs, about four inches in diameter. They were pink satin, trimmed in white lace, with a tuck of tatting in the center. The director had us directly facing the audience, as if looking at a full-length mirror. That may have been in your stage directions. No actual mirror of course, as it would have blocked the audience's view. (It's a little unnerving to act right up against the fourth wall, but also exhilarating to be so close to only a pretend barrier between your imagined world of the play, and the real one just beyond reach.) We were a foot away from the edge of the stage, and the audience just a few feet beyond that. When finished, she'd step back and lean me into her arms to admire the results. It was an interesting moment between awkward and bittersweet: Amanda proud, Laura mortified, but compliant.

One night a woman up near the front whispered “They look like English muffins!” (It was a 230 seat house; she had an enviable stage whisper. And they did look like English muffins once stuffed into my bra. Outside my bra they looked like petite fours. I wonder if the audience ever thought they were actual pastries and wondered what was about to happen.)

Anyway, the audience broke. You will be pleased to know that Amanda and I kept it together, although I could not risk looking at her for a few minutes. If there had been even a speck of a glimmer in her eye, or the tiniest movement of her mouth to contain a smile, that would have been the end. If her shoulders jiggled and hunched forward like when you start to chuckle, or if her lips would have looked extra pursed, trying to stifle a laugh – anything like that and Laura would’ve disappeared and left me standing there. Our costumer brought less frilly falsies the next night.

It’s a sickening feeling to break character on stage. It really is. I can almost make myself throw up right now thinking about the one time I did it. (It wasn’t in one of your plays.)

I’m straying away from my original intent – to apologize and ask for your forgiveness.

You wrote Laura perfectly, but I was not perfect in portraying her. I made huge mistakes and I need you to know how sorry I am. Here’s what I did wrong – maybe more, but these two stand out.

I sometimes ate with too much gusto in the opening scene. In real life I was coming to the theatre straight from work and was often hungry. Once this was pointed out to me, I dialed it down, but still... how embarrassing. Laura eats like a bird. It’s not that she’s picky in a fussy way, she’s not engaged with the gung-ho-ness of life. She’s not vigorous, not competitive. She’s happy to let others take the spotlight. How could she be any other way with a mother like Amanda? I don’t think you faulted Amanda, though. She couldn’t help it, could she? You wrote her like a big strong tree whose towering blocked the sunlight the flowers beneath her needed to thrive. And Laura could maybe blossom in a world completely of her own making; it’s only in comparison to others that she seems less than. This is my opinion of course.

I’m stalling. That’s not the egregious mistake... it’s this:

Over time, I began to flinch when Amanda berated me about missing work. I can’t even say if it was intentional, but I remember thinking it probably looked “dramatic.” Instead it looked ridiculous, as if I were being physically abused, which was not even remotely true for Amanda and Laura, and certainly not our director’s vision. Forgive me, both of you, please.

This is the one that shames me, Mr. Williams. I cannot think of it without tearing up, and I think about it all the time. I am tired of this suffering; I need to be free of it. I tried to contact the director, John Zagone (long “o,” long “e”) to ask for his forgiveness these four decades later. No luck in finding him and then I dropped the ball because I’m afraid he may have passed, and thinking I may still have a chance to apologize to him is better than knowing for certain that I can’t. I am left for now telling you how sorry I am, Mr. Williams.

When I feel the shame this sharply, as I do now, writing this, it feels exactly as you described in one of your short stories or one acts. I can't find it now, but of course you know who I mean. I think it's the same woman who imagines she's being violated at night, and the story ends with her being taken away to some sort of institution. Gawd! That poor woman! She's older and is panicked – frenzied! - at being trapped outside on a sweltering day. She's about to pass her handsome young neighbor, and her disgust at her blubbery, lobstery redness in the sun is so vividly written that it's hard to read. That's how I feel - like I wish the earth would open up and swallow me so great is my disgrace at my mistakes in portraying Laura. (And even literally I can relate to the ghastly situation that woman experienced on the sidewalk. On the hottest days here I have been grateful that we now wear masks, as I have lost my looks, and am embarrassed by my perspiration and floridness.)

I feel that I ruined the most important opportunity of my life. It's excruciating. Not just the disappointment in myself, but in letting you down, and the character, the play, the audience, the director. Just all of it. That I couldn't fully do justice to this beautiful, unique young woman. You can understand, right? I have never been able to let go of this blunder, never been able to forgive myself. I can't tell if my sincerity comes across here, but I think on my deathbed, this is one of the moments of my life that I will look back on with the most regret. It's shocking to find myself unable to wrestle my way out from under this yoke. My best hope is that this grief will at least make clear to you my adoration for your work. I have to believe the anguish serves some purpose.

I need to change the subject. If only I could tap into Maxine's fierceness, or the resilience of plucky little Willie.

Willie. I cannot walk down a train track without balancing on the rail. I can't even look at a train track without seeing her there, on the right rail (always the right), from behind in a too-big dress of her sister's, one strap slipping off her shoulder, arms out like a sweet scarecrow for balance, teetering, a slight breeze gently blowing her straight, brown hair about. How did you write character and setting so strong that even the wind is felt, Mr. Williams?

I never got to play Maggie the cat, but I would have liked to. Never even got to audition for the role, but I found a slip once that reminded me of her, and I bought it just in case. It was satiny and clingy and so taut against my hips that it bunched itself into subtle ruching where the fabric strained across my thighs. It was a gorgeous pale celadon, like celery where it starts to lighten into white. And it had tan lace that scrolled along the edge at the swell of my breasts. It was quite the slip, Mr. Williams.

I want to thank you for Blanche, who I won't have a chance to play now, but with whose monologue I always got whatever part I auditioned for. Three years worth of shows. So firmly imbedded are her words into me, as natural as my own speech, that once, drunk after a long night full of booze and dancing, outside the club to cool off, I had gathered around me a small circle of bystanders by performing – like a busker – Blanche's scene six monologue. And with the line "I ran! All did!" so clear in my mind's eye was the horror of the impending imagery that several in the crowd turned to follow my gaze as I looked out. And when I finished "...never for one moment since has there been any light that's stronger than this kitchen candle." they applauded. And we all stood there in a bit of daze, because it was magical.

How did you achieve such perfect pitch and pith with your writing? The beautifully constructed language, economically used, so that there's room for the actor to act. (And I just now realized there's that candle imagery again! I have something to tell you later about the candle in *Glass Menagerie*.)

I say "big as life and twice as unnatural" whenever I can. I love that line. Who wouldn't? I'm sure Shannon must have said it, but I hear Maxine say it of herself. If someone tried to get her to stand down or take a back seat to anything, she'd look at them almost with sympathy, chuckle a bit, and shake her head. The person who got in Maxine's way would get the look and then she'd gently say, "Aw, Honey, 'I'm bigger than life and twice as unnatural'" which would translate as "You're way out of your league and best move on now before you get hurt." I could see Maxine as the owner of a steak house. She'd welcome her guests with a hearty, "C'mon in! This place is bigger than life and twice as unnatural! Enjoy yourselves!" What I wouldn't give for that kind of vitality.

Am thinking just now, how astonishing that you wrote both a Laura and a Maxine so convincingly. How I love your women! Your lines! I don't know if I'll ever get to say any of them on a stage again. I like thinking about it, though. I have wickered severe clinical depression, Mr. Williams, and it often it takes all my energy to keep myself going. There are such strong thoughts in my head to let go and be done with being on the planet that keeping them at bay sometimes takes all my energy, and I'm left depleted for the rest of the day.

I almost don't know how I was ever able to be an actor, except that having your roles to look forward to was often all that kept me going, Mr. Williams, so you can understand my indebtedness.

Do you see? It's always you. It always comes back to these women you created, that resonate so profoundly with me, and whenever I think about how grateful I am to you, the switch flips back to the shame I feel at letting Laura turn into milquetoast for those few weeks. I know that's not who she is! There's strength in her vulnerability. I think Laura was fine with who she was, but her mother's disappointment in her, and her brother's concern, were what most troubled her... burdened her... that she had to worry about them worrying about her. I know this is a delicate subject so I'll stop.

I want to tell you one more thing. On the last night of the show, when I went to blow out the candles as I sat next to my menagerie, I didn't get the candle out. Can you imagine? It was right in front of my face, and it took three tries. I wonder if part of me thought that by not blowing out the candle, the run didn't have to end. I don't know. I light candles every evening now, and as I blow them out, I think of that moment, that show, acting in your plays, and so you can see how it is that I think of you literally every day, and have done so for the past four decades, in case you didn't believe me when I said that at the start.

I guess that was the penultimate thing; here's the last: my own secret with you. My mother was a difficult person to be around. She didn't like me, or maybe it's just that she found me too challenging. Now I'm considered neurodiverse, but back then I just seemed odd, and I was her first child, so what hope was there for a good outcome? And she was a beauty queen, and would have

done better with a daughter a little more perfect than what I could manage. She sometimes signs cards to me with “Mom” written like that, in quotation marks. It’s her way of saying she doesn’t think she was much of a mother to me, but it’s because I wouldn’t let her. Both are true.

Anyway, once after a particularly nasty family fight, she became rueful and said, “Well, you’ve always gotten along better with strangers than with us.” I could barely contain my delight – *Street Car* right there in the living room. Like Blanche, I have always depended on you-know-what, Mr. Williams.

I guess I’ll close now. I hope you understand the depth of my love and appreciation for you. You write women so well that I’m certain you must. And I will just have to trust that someday this guilt will lose its power over me, and you forgive my early ineptitude.

Thank you, again, Mr. Williams, for all the glorious moments you’ve given us.

Sincerely,

One of your Lauras