

2nd Place Winner – Tennessee Williams Short Story Contest 2021

My Final Ride to Peace by Allana Ensley

I've been looking under this car hood for hours. I still can't figure out why it's not getting any fire to the engine. My forehead is covered with sweat, and I gave up my undershirt for a grease rag awhile ago. These summers are killing me slowly, and I swear sometimes, if I didn't love a saint, I would move back north.

I stood there, and just looked at the engine, like my mind would make it start. I'm frustrated because it's hot. I really thought being home from the war would be different. Honestly, the worst war is inside me, and that's something I can never get away from.

'This damn piece of junk.' I threw the pliers down, and wiped my arms beading with perspiration.

I don't know how to work on cars. I was raised playing cards and swindling people out of money. It was what I was taught. It's what I knew. I mean, when your dad's a mobster you see things most kids don't. Growing up in New Jersey was not the dream life, but hey, I think I made it out okay. I knew when I was smoking by ten and cleaning guns, I wasn't the average kid on the block. I was raised tough. I was a little mean, and my mother said, I had the face of a grown man by thirteen. I knew then I had to get out, before I was in too deep. The only way I knew out was the military.

Luckily, the transition went smoothly. I guess at the time my dad knew it was for the best. I watched him come home many nights drunk with blood on his hands. I knew it wasn't his blood, but when you're younger, it's sometimes best you don't try to reason things out. I didn't want to disgrace the family, but I had witnessed some things, and I had to get out of town. Dad knew I would be safe. The last place you're gonna' find the mobbers is around the military bases. Something about the government and the mafia just don't mix well. At least that's what they want you to think.

"Merlo! Hey, Merlo you need some help with that car again? It's been sitting here for awhile again."

I look up and see old Johnny Tate. He looked like he had just stuck his hand in the engine well, and ran his fingers through his hair. I served in the Navy with him, and somehow, I feel like when I moved to the island, he followed me.

Really, what he followed was the shore girls who loved good looking sailors. He caught quite a few of them, but they were so crazy, he threw them right back. I hated when people called me 'Merlo', but it was just something I got used to hearing while wearing the uniform.

'No Johnny, I'm good. I'm sure it's something simple.' I could see him out of the corner of my eye getting closer.

"Hell Frankie, stop your lying. You couldn't figure out half tha' shit while we were in the Navy."

By this time I stepped back because I knew he was going to make his way under the hood. I could smell his cheap cologne a mile away. His skin was dark leather from the sun, and he always had his shirt unbuttoned, as if I wanted to see his lack of chest hair. He continued to ramble on, and the only thing I could think about is he was still wearing the gold chain with the locket his mother gave him before we went to war.

“Now Frankie, you gotta’ take this right here, and hook it back up to the battery.” I watched him as he fiddled with the wires, and continued to show me as if I was really paying attention.

“So, Frankie, uh, how is your friend? Is he doing okay?” I glanced back to the house, and could see the warm sun hitting the porch.

‘He’s good.’ I left it simple. No need for details, as though I could tell that John was looking for them. I was aware of the consensus around town, but Tom and I were friends to the outside world. It was better left that way. I was just his assistant.

John slammed the hood. “Well, Frankie, it should start now. Give it a try!” I opened the door. The chrome handle burned my hand. I could still smell the smoke where Tom would sit in the car at night and light cigarette after cigarette. I just laughed. It’s all I could do.

John tapped on the hood. “Come on Frankie, fire it up.” I turned the key in the ignition and it grumbled for a second, and then started right up.

“Thank you so much Johnny! What do I owe you?” He kicked the tire and walked by the window and leaned in.

“How about you buy me a drink one night at Captains.” I nodded my head.

‘Yeah, I can do that. Thanks Johnny.’ I watched him in the rear view mirror as he continued on his daily journey down to the harbor.

I continued to sit in the car and let it run. Truth was, I hadn’t seen Tom in a few days. I hit the steering wheel with my fist. ‘Damn him.’ It was always on his terms. I knew when he left it would be a few days or weeks before I saw him again. He couldn’t sit still for long. I watched the pills go down faster than the waves hit the shore. I turned the car off and sat there looking at the white fence around the house. It reminded me of the fence Tom put up around his life. I was the only one he let open the gate.

Day after day of him reading out loud. His thoughts ran across paper, and I would watch him type continuously throughout the night. He would go without sleeping, but I knew he had a purpose. Sometimes, I would think he was speaking to me, or someone had stopped by to chat, because I could hear him carrying on conversations. He was actually talking to himself. Some would think that was nonsense and crazy, but it was beautiful. He was in character. I watched him as he talked his way through a scene of a play. He wanted the most realistic approach. I knew he would only do this

in the comforts of closed doors. The outside world could not know the internal struggle of a masterpiece. It was sincere because there was truth behind every emotion and character flaw.

A part of me wanted to save Tom. I gave myself to him in every way. I put a jacket of metal on the outside, but with him I was bare. He would grab my arms and say “look at those muscles.” He made me feel good. I knew my body was something he lusted for. His eyes never lied and I would watch his cheeks blush. I missed his witty remarks. I missed his glasses propped on his head, when he couldn’t find them. I missed watching him curse at his typewriter when he misspelled a word, or had a better ending, than all the other one hundred and fifty endings, he had already typed.

I sat there looking out of the windshield of the car as if I were going somewhere. I reached up to fix the visor and noticed a letter behind it. I could tell from the writing it was from his sister. He had read it numerous times by the uneven folds across the center. She would always address the letter to “Mr. Tennessee Williams”. Her penmanship was declining, and I saw the return address being from the hospital. There was so much hurt he held in with her current state, and everytime he would see a letter from her, I could tell he wanted to return to his innocence. She would give him every detail of her day, and the only thing I could think of was her simplicity is what everyone dreams of, but it was all her mind would let her have. His tears over the letters were disguised as gritty comments towards his parents. The distance he had with her was necessary. Being so close to the ocean made ignorance bliss from the true reality. The reality that Rose would never be the same as he once knew.

I placed the letter back behind the visor. I needed to drive. I needed to feel the wind. I needed to feel something. I grabbed my grease stained undershirt from the floorboard and put it back on. I wasn’t trying to impress anyone. I just needed to drive away from him. From my thoughts. From our house. I started the car and pulled away. He said we needed a car here, but we never used it. Bicycles were our transportation, but I needed this car now more than ever.

The sun was tired, and the sky was silently orange. The colors mending together made me think of all the afternoons I spent on the boat dock with Tom. I continued to drive around looking for a glimpse of him. Maybe he was drinking. Maybe he was sailing across the ocean. I knew that his free spirit was healing. Running from everything he knows. I just worried that at some point he would run for the last time. I parked on the side of the road, and watched the sun slowly setting in the distance. I had no place to be, but watching the breeze blow across the sand made me remember the times that Tom and I would fool around on the beach. It was a dangerous game we’d play. Smoking and drinking, laying there, as the waves rolled in. I watched the light from the sky narrow. It was his favorite time of the day, knowing that the dark was about to conquer everything in its path.

Everyone knew Tennessee Williams, but no one knew Tom like I did. I would tell him, ‘You think that you can hide by changing your name.’ He would give me a sly smirk and say, “It was convincing enough to win you over.” He was right. I was intrigued by his charm. He was so full of himself and I guess he had every right to be. One of our close friends on the island once told me that I was holding myself back by staying with him, that I had more potential than a “behind the scenes slave”. Maybe they were right, but he was an addiction that I wasn’t ready to give up.

I had been sitting on the hood of the car for awhile, watching the waves crash against the rocks. It was dark, and the only lights I could see were glaring from Duval Street. As I got back in the car, I noticed a shirt wadded up in the back seat. I knew it wasn't mine. As if it were evidence, I didn't want to touch it. I glared at it also knowing it wasn't Tom's either. My stomach hurt. There was an empty place knowing that it probably belonged to one of Tom's one nighters. His deepest desire for youth always lead him down the path to sex. Even if it cost him everything. He painted a picture of control, but his vices were leading him out of control.

I wanted to know who the shirt belonged to, but it wouldn't change anything. I cranked the car and began to drive again. I was drawn to the lights, and maybe I would find the answers I needed. I passed the art gallery and saw the paintings hanging so lonely on the wall. The prices would never indicate their true worth, but only to the artist. It reminded me of the silly obscure paintings that Tom would work on. He thought he was some Picasso. He would proudly hang his writings up in an art gallery any day, but his paintings were a different story. He was insecure about them. He was insecure about the truth of them.

I felt a tear roll down my face. I couldn't even wipe it away. A man should not feel this way for another man. My fear of war never compared to the fear of this. I looked down at my hands as I drove. These hands have dealt cards, held guns, and have lifted weights that seemed impossible on ships that should have sank. These hands have touched a man the way society tells me is wrong. Only with Tom would it feel right.

I stopped at Sloppy Joe's for a drink. I needed something strong. I didn't want to talk to anyone. I had nothing to say. I looked down at my undershirt as I got out of the car knowing that Tom would have never let me go out looking this rough. I didn't care. It was late and only a few locals were still rearing their heads. I sat down and looked at the wall full of glasses and bottles.

"Hey Frankie, what are you having tonight?" Slip had been the bartender as long as I could remember. He had Silcilian blood under those gray hairs, and reminded me of my uncle, back in Jersey.

'Give me something strong Slip.' I looked down to the end of the bar and saw a few younger guys and wondered if one of them could be who Tom spent the night with. Slip handed me my drink. I lit a cigarette and watched the smoke float into the air. I could hear thunder in the distance and could feel the breeze pick up and blow through the open windows. Slip wasn't one to talk much, and only would listen if you wanted him to. I continued to drink feeling it burn slowly going down. I watched him pour drink after drink. He finally stopped, and stood near the door, watching the storm roll in.

He walked back behind the bar and picked up something from under the counter. He walked towards me and laid it down on the counter.

"Tom left this a few nights ago." I looked down to see a blue neck tie. Slip had rolled it up neatly and waiting for the right time to hand it over. I didn't ask any questions. I honestly didn't want to

know the answers. I placed a five down under the glass, and walked out of the bar with the tie in my hand.

It had started to slowly rain and the lighting was creeping closer. In some ways, I wished it would strike me dead, right there in the middle of the street. I got in the car and rolled the windows up. I watched the rain roll down the glass, and sat there holding his tie. It gave me hope that he was still around, but it hurt me more to know he chose not to be at home. I'm still not really sure what led him to leave this time. He knew that I would stay. I felt like the life we had was merely on paper at times. I did everything. I made the bed, I cooked the food, I made the vacation arrangements. My thought was to let him be the famous 'Tennessee Williams' and write continuously. I made the mistake of letting him live out his dreams while mine sat on the shelf. I kept things at bay for him. I smiled and made peace with those around us when everything inside him was falling apart.

The rain was falling harder, and in the dark, all I could see was the image of a cross in the sky. I drove closer to St. Mary's church. The palm trees were swaying in the wind and the thunder rattled the earth. Tom loved the beauty of the church and even said "I would go for the Lord, but the sinners inside will drive you away."

I got out and stood in the rain and looked up towards the sky. The cross was above me, and the image of the Virgin Mary on the stained glass with her hands open welcoming me. I remember one night we were going home from the bar and Tom stopped in front of the church. He had his share of drinking too much brandy and could hardly stand. He staggered over to a park bench in front of the church and began to spill his mind to me. I sat beside him as he told me stories of his grandfather, Reverend Walter Dakin, and how he grew up in the rectory of the St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Mississippi. Sometimes, I would often wonder if what he told me was true because he was such a good story teller, but that night every part of me believed him. I knew that the presence of the church brought him pain, but much appreciation. He told me about his absent drunkard father, and his mother that would scold him if anything was mentioned that was sexual in nature. It clearly made sense to me why Tom struggled with his past. His writings took him to a place where he didn't have to face his reality, but clearly the presence of the church made him repent.

I must have looked crazy just standing in the rain in front of the church. A nice gentleman walked by with his wife and offered me an umbrella, and I declined the nice gesture. My clothes were soaked and I was tired. I took one more glance back at the Virgin Mary and thanked her for offering me a bit of peace on this stormy night.

I got back in the car and tried to start it but it wouldn't start. I continued to turn the key in the ignition and got absolutely nothing in return. 'Are you kidding me?' I hit the steering wheel at least three times. I was just exhausted. I was literally a stone's throw from home. I got out and slammed the door and began walking. The rain never let up for one second. I just left the car there at the church. There was nothing I could do.

I finally made it to the house and opened the gate. I stood on the front porch and took off my soaked clothes. I laid them across the railing, to hopefully dry out at some point. The house was

dark and empty. As I walked in, I knew that nothing had changed and Tom was still not home. I sat on the edge of the bed and looked at his typewriter on the desk. Cigarette ashes covered the loose papers that laid there, and I imagined him sitting there typing away. I finally laid down and looked at the ceiling. As tired as my body was, my mind could not rest. It had nothing to do with needing someone or feeling lonely. It had everything to do with the one thing that made me feel complete was gone. Tom was gone.

Days went by. Weeks slipped away. I lost track of time. I had not heard from him nor had I seen him. In the mornings, I would sit on the porch and drink my coffee and smoke looking for him to walk up and open the gate. I placed his typewriter in the closet because I could not stand to look at it anymore. The loose papers I filed away in the cabinet. By the afternoon, I would make my way down to the harbor to find Johnny Tate. I finally bought him that drink that I owed him, and he didn't mind at all that I would tag along on his sailboat. He loved to fish, and I would swim along the side of the boat exploring the crystal clear waters and the creatures below. I had no intentions of anything other than getting my mind off Tom, but it didn't work.

The seasons were changing. My walks down to the harbor had become sporadic. I had noticed that I would become short of breath quickly with daily tasks, but had pawned it off to be seasonal allergies. I was outside pruning the rose bush and began to cough. My body ached and I felt my chest harden. I continued to cough and reached up to cover my mouth with my handkerchief. I finally sat down on the porch, and realized blood on my handkerchief, as I put it back in my pocket. I thought I had cut myself while pruning, but quickly realized that I had coughed up blood. I was scared, but I'm sure there was a reasonable explanation.

I finally went back in the house and poured myself a glass of water. I sat at the kitchen table to rest. I hadn't been to the doctor since being in the Navy and the only reason I went then was it was required. One of Tom's friends on the island was a doctor, and I figured I would stop by one day and see what he could give me for my cough. As days went on, my condition worsened. Dr. Roberts finally sat me down and explained that my cough could not be treated. I remember his mouth moving, but I tuned him out. I didn't want to hear what he continued to repeat. I didn't know much about cancer but I knew that inevitably it was a death sentence.

I don't know if you would call it love. I don't know if it was business or pleasure, but my normal that had been brutally changed. My companion of conversations was gone. I needed to have one of the most important conversations of my life with him, and he was nowhere to be found. I wanted to write him a letter to tell him the news, but where would I send it? If I could find him for just five minutes, I promise I would not take much of his time. 'Was this a punishment for my lifestyle?'. 'Was this a way to put me out of my misery?'. 'Why me?'. I didn't want to face the truth of why I was dying so young.

I had been in and out of the hospital several times, but this was the longest stay yet. My body was exhausted. My mind was withered, and I watched out the window everyday at the birds that would nest in the window sill. They were free. I wanted to be free again. I laid there and watched the IV needle that was inserted into my vein. Dr. Roberts opened the door slowly and let me know that I

had a visitor. I slowly opened my eyes to see Tennessee Williams standing there. It wasn't Tom anymore. His beard was full. He had aged immensely. His eyes glazed over as if he wasn't truly there. His shirt was unbuttoned and I could see the rolled cigarettes hanging out of his shirt pocket. The smell of alcohol was strong and I knew he was intoxicated. 'Why did he come now?' 'Was it guilt?' 'Was it the right thing to do, after almost fourteen years?' I closed my eyes, and made myself believe it was a dream or maybe it was the moment I had truly died.

In the end, I found my peace, and I prayed Tennessee Williams would find his as well.