

A Streetcar Named Despair

a story told in two parts

By Kerri Conrad

PART 1

GHOST WRITER

Stella sat in the courtyard of her building, a pen and notebook in her lap. Although she hadn't felt much like writing, it made the time pass more quickly than staring into the dark windows of the apartment that lay beyond.

Stella looked up at the sky. It was clear and hot like it was more often than not in New Orleans this time of year. August was just an oven you broiled in, waiting for the days to pass. She hadn't listened to the news or turned on the radio in days. Her own life roared like a hurricane in the tunnels of her ears. The rest of the world was muted and she was trying to live in it the best she could.

Stella flipped through the crossed out lines and the wide, white, blank, empty spaces that dominated her notebook. These days, she could spill her own life like blood across the pages, but her stories stuck. They stalled. She knew what it was, but there was no cure for this.

Love. It sucked like a black hole in her chest. Jesus, would she ever be rid of it? Would she bleed forever? Would it always, always be this hard? The world kept on going, even now. Stella felt herself falling behind, losing track of the frenetic pace everyone else insisted on keeping. She felt like a ghost of herself, a shell over that hollow, sucking truth right in the middle of her.

Stella's eyes strayed again to the dark apartment, where shadows of living room furniture sat like discarded pieces of a set to a play that had ended. Or was it an intermission? Would they even use this set anymore, or would the last act tragically unfold somewhere else? Or would life, like a play can, just keep on going in circles around the same truth?

The world around her began to lose focus, night stripping details from the world, flattening it out, insisting on its own harsh truth, born from darkness. She put her pen down, losing the light.

What the fuck was she supposed to do now? Anything, anything not to stop and think about that dark window over there, those dark rooms, those places where he was not sitting at the table or reading by the window or, no, no, she would not, could not, think of his smile.

Stella packed away her notebook. There was a new weight that lived inside her now. She had to pull against it just to stand. To step forward. To move in the world felt like dragging this terrible fucking weight behind her all the time. Jesus, could she never again put it down?

She turned for the gate that separated the courtyard from the Lower Garden District beyond, stumbling over uneven bricks as she went. On the sidewalk Stella slowed, peering inside the beautiful double-parlor bedroom that opened into the dark cavern of the apartment beyond.

For a moment, Stella thought of yellow warmth cast by crystal chandeliers, of the gossamer threads of their lives strung from twelve-foot ceilings, and all those, all those dreams that died and meant nothing now. She winced, thinking how she had hung her wedding dress there in the window, like one of those shops, as if love was something people could see and that meant something.

She stared at the dark plane the window was becoming, shutting her out. It became a mirror of the night, and there was the city, beyond her. She walked away, First Street a block she crushed beneath her heels. The next streetcar was coming and soon, she would be moving away.

The door to the streetcar opened and it was Jerome, as she figured it would be. He looked behind her, as if someone else should have been standing there. He stared at that place for a moment, then looked forward at St. Charles rounding a curve ahead of him towards Uptown. Stella stepped on and thought he might not say anything. She didn't bother flashing her pass as he already knew she had it.

"Just you, then?" Jerome said, when Stella was right next to him. There was a space in his eyes that was looking for something.

Stella paused, her reply some strange token he was asking of her. "I guess it's just you and me, then. Another Friday night."

Stella sat down in her usual seat in the streetcar. It lurched forward, and her past clattered onto the tracks behind her. Her ghosts sat in the empty seats around her, riding the line along with her. They watched the houses speed past the open windows, big dreams cobbled together by wood and paint. The seat next to her was empty. She wondered where he could be.

The streetcar came to the next stop. A man stepped on, fumbling with quarters, his entire being suffused with question. Oh great, Stella thought. Another tourist. Another person who thinks he's here to look at this place. He'll see whatever he came looking for. He'll let himself get in the way.

"Why, sit yourself down next to this lady, son. This here's Ms. Stella. She can tell you anything you ever wanted to know about these houses, if you let her." There was something in Jerome's smile, a piece of Stella that lived there, but inside her it had died. Stella tried to smile. She wished it were true.

The man sat down in the seat next to her, a crumpled map falling across her lap onto the floor. He awkwardly grabbed for it, reaching over her, filling the space up with himself. Stella's ghosts turned to look at him. They shook their heads. What did he think he was doing, sitting in that seat?

"Hi, I'm Alex," the man said, extending his hand. Stella did not take it and it hung there, waiting. "The driver told me you knew a lot about the houses here. This is my first time to New Orleans. Do you live in the Garden District?"

"What are you doing here?" Stella asked.

She looked at the place he should have been, and all she could see was this tourist with his map and his outstretched hand. The man let his hand fall to his lap, and he rubbed it nervously along

the length of his thigh. He glanced uncertainly at the driver, who narrowed his eyes at Stella in the large mirror above his controls.

“Don’t you give that man a hard time now, ya hear?” Jerome said, watching over her only when the car stalled and the people had gotten on and off. “Why don’t you go on and tell him a little about some of the houses? You love them, you know you do.”

Stella turned to look at the houses as the streetcar took off again. Small architectural details gave way to the rush of St Charles moving along either side of them.

Love. Stupid, blind, bottomless love. What the fuck did that word even mean? Everything Stella had ever loved seemed hollow to her now. Love had eaten out the center of her. It sucked like a black hole inside her, a star dying and collapsing in on itself. Love. He said it and the word was like a harpoon in her chest he reeled back, tearing chunks from her, whole pieces that now had to die or bleed forever.

“Love,” she said, the word a heavy case she finally sat down. “I do love these houses. I love the colors and the gingerbread and the columns and the windows and the doors. I love the history behind them. I love how they keep on standing year after year, holding a little more life inside of them. I love them. And what for? One day they’ll just fall down, and what will it all mean then?”

The man was only half-listening. He smiled and leaned across her, trying to see past her out the window.

Stella wondered what he was doing right now, at this very moment instead of sitting in the seat next to her. Where could he be? She thought that learning the answer to the question might be like swallowing an anchor that would drag her to the bottom of herself.

The man looked at Stella without really seeing her. “What about the history?” he asked. “Tell me something about that. What about that house, the purple one right there.”

A round stained glass window spiraled towards some stubborn truth against purple fish scales on a hulking Victorian.

“Yeah, what about that one, Ms. Stella?” the driver prompted as he paused at the next stop to let on new passengers. “You surely know a story or two about this pretty purple one here that you can share with this fine young man, don’t you?”

“Oh, I’ve got plenty of stories I could tell,” Stella said.

The weight of her stories hung like ghosts in the air. The man sat listening for a moment, truly believing she was going to tell him what he wanted to hear.

Balconies came and went in wood and wrought iron. They passed the pale pink house with the white tower that looked like a ship. They passed the castle the Cotton King built. A cool breeze generated by the streetcar moving through space blew across them. Stella smiled, even though it hurt it to do it.

“It just seems sunnier here in the Garden District,” the man said. “More cheerful. Happy.”

Stella stopped smiling. “Yeah? For whole blocks St. Charles can make you feel that way.” The car shuddered to a stop. “Get off here,” she told him. “Walk five minutes that way. See how you like it.”

The man leaned across Stella, trying to peer in the direction she had indicated. “What’s there? Is it more houses? A cemetery maybe? I love exploring.”

“Alex, you come sit up here by me. I’ll show you around,” Jerome said, a smile in his voice but not in his eyes as he glared at Stella in the mirror above his controls.

Stella looked at the yellow and blue Tudor with the orange roof, unconcerned. The man slid out of the seat next to her and she shifted into some of the open space he had been taking up next to her. One of Stella’s ghosts got off at the next stop. It was headed back to the place where it had

started. It stood waving farewell from the neutral ground as they took off again, and she felt her past reeling like a line from her chest.

Darkness fell on swift wings. Color leached from the world, bleeding into a gray that would somewhere soon become black. Spotlights switched on, illuminating some of the houses. In those islands of light, color returned and the houses shone like stars flashing past outside the streetcar as it rocked along its old familiar rails.

Bare bulbs hung every foot or so on the ceiling. They flashed on, powered by the car, powered by those wires stretched across the city and that bright, loud grinding place where they sparked as they came together. The interior of the streetcar became separated from the night, a warm, bright center hurtling through space. The light bulbs flickered on and off, yellow uncertainties in a moving world.

Stella stared out the window. She wondered where he could be.

PART 2
THE CALM BEFORE

Stanley stood on the roof of his office building, looking down. The past and future of New Orleans rose against the sky. He took a deep, hungry drag off his cigarette, in a hurry to take one step closer to the edge.

Far below, one streetcar clattered past another. The cars were like two red fates hurtling in opposite directions down Canal Street. Stanley wondered if Stella was in one of them, looking up at his building right at that moment. She would be wondering where he was, what he was doing. She would want to know why he hadn't come home for dinner.

Or else she was ambling down St. Charles, lost in the motion of her words, her pen skipping wildly across the page as the old green streetcar rocked back and forth along its rails. Her notebook would be fluttering in the hot breeze coming in the open window like it had paper wings.

How had he come to know these things about her? It troubled Stanley that parts of Stella seemed to live inside him. What's more, he was certain these parts of her would burn, fade, or else turn black like ink. It was all water vapor and ozone inside him, hot winds and a coming storm.

Stanley wasn't like most people. Sometimes, a shadow fell over his face. The wind picked up and the air around him began to crackle with a storm brewing into a swirling black cloud that hung over his head. Stella was the first girl who didn't mind seeing Stanley when that cloud of his gathered above him. Lightning flashed and thunder broke against her. She held his hand. She stood in the rain.

You couldn't see Stanley's storm cloud at first on account of his smile. Stanley's smile was a light he shone in your eyes when he first met you. He blinded you with a beautiful lie, his sparkling blue eyes not windows into his soul as he might like you to believe, but something more like a cobra deep in his hypnotic sway.

There was something dark there in the middle of him. It hid behind his smile. But the truth was, Stanley didn't feel like smiling much. It made his face hurt. What's more, he was afraid it would give him wrinkles one day and people would stop giving him what he wanted all the time.

Stanley always did seem to get what he wanted. The trouble was, Stanley wanted all the wrong things. That darkness ate and ate at the very center of him until Stanley was certain there was a black hole sucking deep inside of him. It was Stella, he knew it. That bitch. She was the one who did this to him.

Was this love? It felt like a stain, or a wound. He felt poisoned by the dizzying weight of being loved by her. She pulled and sucked at the marrow of his bones. She would be the drought to his flood. Stanley longed to be rid of the dull ache in his chest that was Stella inside him.

The way they met seemed perfectly ordinary to Stanley. Girls sat down next to him and suddenly they were his, if he wanted. He had met he didn't know how many girls on the streetcar. It was Stella that thought there was some kind of magic in it. What was it she said?

'Our lives are like lines laid across time and space, and we are all speeding along them like runaway trains.' The magic, she said, was when we collide. That's what she was doing out there, chasing moments. She was riding the streetcar lines, trying to write truth in motion, to put all those places on the page. Jesus, was there no end to the things he knew about her? He felt Stella thick and hot inside him, and he wondered if he could ever wash himself clean of her.

Her writing had started to take on a darkness Stanley had never noticed before. He knew it was him inside her. His storm cloud hung over her, too. Stanley couldn't help it. Stella forgave him, but what was it doing to her? Why did she stay? Would his life always be like this, him hurting her and she would just keep on loving him?

Stanley wished he could burn her love in a fire, but he knew it would only smolder and her need of him would rise again, a phoenix in a stormy sky. She was doomed. It seemed like nothing either of them did could kill her love for him. It was a black hole that had opened up inside her.

When they resurrected the Canal streetcar line, Stanley watched the shiny new red and yellow cars slide smoothly down the tracks with a creeping dread. Was nothing sacred? Now Stella could take the St. Charles line and ride around Lee's Circle, rolling right into the Central Business District, and then down Canal.

Canal Street was a wide, ambling avenue lined with palm trees that kept dying and being planted again. It ushered Stanley onto Bourbon Street, and all those women who came from all over to wander in the middle of the street with a drink in their hand, to go from place to place, bar to bar, inebriation on the move. New Orleans infected people with a reckless disregard for the ordered lives they led somewhere else. People wanted to feel that way, and Stanley did, too. He moved among them and could do things they probably wouldn't even remember in the morning.

He didn't need Stella riding the streetcar down here at any moment. She could even take those new cars down the river, too, to the French Quarter. There would be no end to her now. She might be anywhere.

The storm cloud above Stanley's head darkened and flashed with lightning in turn. A light mist fell but the heat of the day crowded into evening, and it evaporated before it could reach him. Stanley lit another cigarette. He felt like setting fire to something, just then.

The door to the staircase opened and Stanley's storm cloud extinguished with a start. He turned his smile on whoever was coming. His friend, Mitch, had loosened the noose of the day and it hung freely about his neck. Stanley let his smile fall a little, but not all the way. It cast a yellow glow across Mitch's face. A streetcar clattered past below them. Stanley grimaced and looked away, trying not to let Mitch see.

"I thought you told Stella you quit smoking."

"I did."

"You think she's out there riding the streetcar somewhere?"

“Isn’t she always? It’s like she can’t stand to be in the apartment alone, waiting for me.”

“What do you think she does out there? I mean, she isn’t even going anywhere, right?”

“Sometimes she is and sometimes she isn’t. It’s the houses. She’s obsessed with those goddamn houses. She’s trying to write them in motion. She thinks each one tells a story. But now she can’t write. She says that’s my fault, too. Like I stoppered her words somehow, like nothing can ever be true again. Fuck, the weight of the way she feels about me.”

“Jesus, Stanley. Why does that girl stay with you?”

“Love. Stupid, blind, bottomless love. Sometimes man....., sometimes I think she’s not riding the lines to write at all. Sometimes, I think she’s looking for me. Maybe she thinks I’m down there right now, running all over the city with someone else. She’s crazy, dude. I’m telling you.”

“So how’d she find out? Did she run into you two with your hands all over her or what? You should know by now to keep it off the street, especially with Stella riding all over town in those streetcars.”

“No. No it wasn’t like that at all.”

Stanley thought of running his hand down the smooth, tan length of Camilla’s thigh. He thought of the warm, brown pools her eyes made when Stanley complained to her about Stella. She stroked his chest, and his words spilled into those pools. He stretched the truth, sometimes making Stella into things she wasn’t at all, but that still got him what he wanted all the same.

He told Camilla how he hated the starched white linen of the tablecloths at Brennan’s every Sunday where Stella made Stanley eat brunch with her pretentious friends from college. He told her how Stella insisted on dragging him onto the streetcar at night to look at the houses when the lights switched on. He told her how they stood in line to get daiquiris at the corner of Carrollton and St. Charles as night fell every Friday.

That was the trouble. Stella had taught Stanley all stories are rooted in place. To start a story, you plant it in the ground where it happens, and it grows from there. Stanley shouldn't have told Camilla about all those places.

She started showing up while he was out with Stella, getting on the streetcar a few stops down from their apartment. She kept turning in her seat looking at them, her face twisted into a dark smile Stanley had never seen before. Once, she even got off at the daiquiri shop and stood in line behind them. Stella was too caught up in the story she was telling him to notice.

One Sunday at brunch, Camilla appeared at the table next to them at Brennan's. Stella, being her, offered to let her sit with them because she was all by herself. Like Stella didn't ride all over the city on her own. It was sexist, really, her presumption that Camilla needed saving.

"Oh Stanley, it's you," Camilla had said, reaching across the table to touch his hand in a way that said more than her words. "I didn't see you there. Imagine running into you like this. Funny how things work out sometimes, isn't it dear?"

She pulled her chair up right next to Stella, patting her on the middle of her thigh. There was a look on Stella's face that reminded him of the starched white tablecloth. She looked at Stanley and the truth brewed into a storm between them.

Stanley shook his head.

"Fuck that bitch. Are we going out tonight or what?"

"You might have to be extra careful not to snag yourself another townie, Stanley."

"Come on, man. It'll be fun. I'm heading down there in five. Meet you there?"

"Sure, Stanley. The usual spot. I'll see you."

Mitch walked away and the sun of Stanley's smile became a triangle of light a door was closing on. He could never go home, if he wanted. He could walk away from Stella right then. All the

guilt and the shame weren't even his at all. They were hers. Without her, all of that would just go away. All of life was dizzy with choices, and there Stanley was, wanting all the wrong things again. He took one step closer to the edge.

Stanley thought about diving into the traffic below. He imagined the initial thrill of the leap, watching the skyline recede rapidly in a graphic stream of color and light. For a few brief moments, he might just forget how it was going to end. Stanley closed his eyes and sighed deeply as he saw his body crash violently against the pavement.

Stanley walked to the other side of the building, contemplating descent from another angle. There, the mighty Mississippi flowed thick and brown like the curve of a smile. What if he could overflow those banks and the river came coursing down Canal Street? What if all the world were water and wind? His storm cloud gathered strength, churning above him.

Stanley looked out on New Orleans. The sun began to set and lavender and orange swirled across the face of the buildings like an oil slick. The river became a flat stone filled with light. His past and his future reeled away from him into a stormy sky. There was time and space in all directions, but he couldn't have any of it.

The music and voices from Bourbon Street rode the sultry summer air up to him, and he knew what he would do. The sun sank low in the sky, and darkness ate at the edges of the city.