

Excerpt from “The Coffin Trick” from *The Trip to Echo Spring*

I woke to the sound of horns and lay in the big bed, luxuriating in the warmth. I was getting the train to New Orleans the next day, for the Tennessee Williams Centenary Festival, and so I had thirty hours or so on the loose in New York. I hadn’t made any particular plans. The next few weeks were very full and I wanted a day to orientate myself before plunging south. In the end, I did what I always do: I walked. I got a subway train to East Broadway and worked my way up the flank of the island, through the havoc of Chinatown and the Lower East Side.

The city impressed itself on me by way of a repeating currency of images, a coinage of yellow cabs and fire escapes, brownstones hung with wreaths of conifer and ornamental cabbage tied up with tartan ribbon. Delis stocked with smoked pigs’ legs and wheels of giant cheese. Plums and mangoes stacked in crates. Fish on ice, heaped in delicate, slippery piles of coral, silver, flint and grey. In Chinatown I passed a shop that sold lobsters in tanks brimful of greenish water, the glass murked by deposits of slime and God knows what else. I only looked for a second, enough to catch a queasy glimpse of armoured bodies lurching over one another, striped claws ticking in the insufficient space.

I got a pastrami sandwich at Katz’s and went on up Second Avenue. The city was dirty and beautiful and I was entirely seduced by it. I walked almost all the way to the Queensboro Bridge, where John Cheever once saw two hookers playing hopscotch with a hotel room key. The East River was pleating in little folds of blue and gold and I leaned beside it and watched the boats chug back and forth.

After returning to St. Louis, his hated home, at the end of the European tour, Tennessee Williams didn’t fetch up in New York again until 1939, when a play he wrote for a competition won him the attention of an agent. He’d shucked his born name by then, and loped away from his intolerable family. In a few years he’d get them down on paper for the first time with *The Glass Menagerie*, the play that made his reputation. For now, though, he was travelling: hitching and bicycling across the country, writing in the mornings and swimming and indulging himself in the afternoons, a pattern he’d stick to throughout his roaming life.

That first autumn he stayed mainly at the YMCA on West 63rd Street. ‘New York is terrifying,’ he wrote to an editor in Princeton. ‘Even when motionless the people seem to whistle through the air like bullets.’ In fact, it was he who was speeding. In his first eleven days in Manhattan alone he went through three separate addresses, and over the next year his letters from the city were interspersed with ones sent from Missouri, New Orleans, Provincetown, Key West and Acapulco, where he had an encounter with a group of unpleasant German tourists that would work its way years later into *The Night of the Iguana*.

While living at home he’d got into the habit of treating his almost-constant attacks of anxiety, insomnia and the agitated depression he called ‘the blue devils’ with liberal doses of membral, sodium bromide and sleeping pills. To this dangerous prescription he now added two new items. His experience of New York was ‘constant suspense and nerve-wracking excitement, which I evaded with drink and with sex’. For the rest of his life, these would remain his preferred methods of escaping difficult or stress-inducing situations, from failed love affairs to problems with the production of his plays.

Drink was also his antidote to shyness, something he still suffered from to an almost pathological degree. ‘I was still very shy except when drunk,’ he recalled in *Memoirs*. ‘Oh, I was quite the opposite when I had a couple of drinks under the belt.’ His journal from the time is packed with references to evenings of applejack brandy and beer chasers or too much whiskey, one of which ended dishearteningly when he stumbled into a table and tipped all the liquor to the floor. Still, life in the city was better than those interminable, suffocating nights in St. Louis, when he’d sat up into the small hours writing stories and experiencing such waves of panic he often convinced himself he was on the verge of a heart attack. Sometimes the stillness itself had been unbearable, and he’d got up and rushed from the house, pacing the streets for hours or swimming frantic lengths in the nearest pool.

The disadvantage of alcohol as an antidote to these unpleasant states was that it interfered with his ability to work. By the summer of 1940, he was already reporting a need to curtail his behaviour, noting in a letter to his friend, the dancer Joe Hazan: ‘I have started off on a rather disciplinary regime. Only one or two drinks a day, when very low, and a calm endurance of moods instead of a mad flight into intoxication and social distraction.’ A few paragraphs down, warning Joe against ‘trivial dissipation’, he

added: ‘I am more likely than . . . you to be involved in these things. I have many times in the past – but always turned away in revulsion when it reached a dangerous point.’

And yet, despite all this distracting, dissipating activity, he kept on writing, producing an astonishing flood of poetry, stories and plays, a mass of material he perpetually reassembled into differing combinations. On one of his mad flights, to the resort town of Key West in 1941, he began a ‘beautiful’ short story that would turn by degrees into *The Glass Menagerie*, the most restrained and purely vocal of all his plays. I first read it when I was a teenager, in a pale green edition that also included *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In fact, I’d brought the book with me to America. It was in my room at the Elysée now: battered and full of mortifying marginalia in a hand long since abandoned.

All Williams’s plays are claustrophobic, but this one achieves its effects most simply, without resorting to the melodramatic fireworks of rape, lynch mobs, castration or cannibalism. It’s the story of a young man in an intolerable situation, and as such comes closer to home than any of his other works, never mind the fact that it’s populated with doll’s house versions of his own mother and sister, not to mention a Tom near-identical to the nervous, well-mannered boy he’d tried to leave behind in St. Louis. This Tom – Tom the semblance, the mirror self – is trapped in a small apartment with the two remaining players of the family quartet, Laura and Amanda Wingfield; his father having vanished some time previously. He works in a shoe factory, as did both the real Tom and Cornelius (the one a good deal longer and more diligently than the other), and spends what little free time he has at the movies, despite intense maternal opposition.

One of my favourite moments comes at the beginning of scene four. Tom blunders home late and very drunk, and drops his key on the fire escape. Williams, it should be noted, was obsessed with fire as a metaphor. Many of his plays include or end with conflagration, including the very early *Battle of Angels* and the very late *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*, both of which concern a pyrophobic who is later burned alive. In the latter play, this character is Zelda Fitzgerald, who was in many ways the archetypal Williams heroine, and who did in reality die in 1948 when a fire broke out at the mental hospital where she was incarcerated, killing all thirteen women in the locked ward on the top floor. As to the fire escape of *The*

Glass Menagerie, it is, according to the stage notes, ‘a structure whose name is a touch of accidental poetic truth, for all of these huge buildings are always burning with the slow and implacable fires of human desperation’.

Tom’s sweet, crippled sister Laura opens the door before he wakes his mother. Swaying a little in the cold night air, he raves to her about the movies he’s just seen: a Garbo picture and a Mickey Mouse and at the end a wonderful stage show by a magician who had the happy knack of turning water into wine and thence to Kentucky Straight Bourbon. ‘I knew it was whisky it finally turned into,’ he explains, ‘because he needed somebody to come up out of the audience to help him, and I came up – both shows!’ – a line that always gets a big laugh. ‘But the wonderfulest trick of all,’ he continues, blundering around the stage like a hooked trout, ‘was the coffin trick. We nailed him into a coffin and he got out of the coffin without removing one nail. There is a trick that would come in handy for me – get me out of this 2 by 4 situation!’

As it happens, none of this tomfoolery was in the original manuscript. During the first round of rehearsals in Chicago in the winter of 1944, the director Eddie Dowling, who also played the role of Tom, improvised a much cruder drunk scene. Williams was horrified, but eventually agreed to produce his own sleeker version. Intentional or not, the coffin trick serves as an elegant figure for the play’s larger concerns, its nightmare of genteel poverty and co-dependence. Coffin was also, it might be added, the middle name of Williams’s father Cornelius, from whose oppressive influences he’d only just escaped.

The audience never actually gets to witness the mirror-Tom’s version of the coffin trick. Instead, he tells them about it, in one of those lyrical asides that must have helped, along with Laurette Taylor’s extraordinary performance as Amanda, to seduce the theatregoers of first Chicago and then New York. ‘I didn’t go to the moon,’ he announces from the fire escape, as in a lighted window behind him his mother comforts his distraught sister:

I went much further – for time is the longest distance between two places –

Not long after that I was fined for writing a poem on the lid of a
shoebox.

I left Saint Louis. I descended the steps of this fire escape for a
last time and followed, from then on, in my father's footsteps,
attempting to find in motion what was lost in space – I travelled around
a great deal. The cities swept about me like dead leaves, leaves that
were brightly colored but torn away from the branches.

I would have stopped but I was pursued by something. It always
came upon me unawares, taking me altogether by surprise . . .

From the moment those lines first echoed around the Playhouse in New York, in April 1945, Tennessee
was catapulted into a different kind of world. He became a public figure, with all the opportunity, scrutiny
and pressure fame brings. It wasn't by any means a comfortable shift, though he'd longed for it since he
was a sickly little boy, lying in bed in his grandfather's house in Columbus, Mississippi, acting out the
fall of Troy with no audience or actors except a deck of cards, the black against the red.