

Strange Kindness

KELLY SIELERT

“**W**hoever you are—I have always depended on the kindness of strangers,” Blanche said, before the doctor led her offstage, past my outstretched arms. Those words became burned into my mind each time I heard Blanche—played by a girl only a year older than I—speak them. Onstage she was my sister. Offstage she was an old family friend, offbeat, dramatic, and a bit odd. Yet throughout that last scene of our play, she embodied, without fault, Tennessee Williams’ Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

I sighed in relief each time that last scene began—I, as Stella, had just given birth, which involved a complicated backstage change and an extra-large t-shirt stuffed with what I assumed were the intestines of someone’s old teddy bear. No longer burdened with having to feign the gait of a pregnant woman, I immersed myself in the scene, focusing on packing Blanche’s clothes, folding blouses that cost \$3.99 at the local Goodwill. When Blanche popped her head out of the bathroom door, asking for Shep Huntleigh, I noticed the pained, pleading expression her eyes bore and longed to tell her that her mystery man had called and would soon come to sweep her off her feet. Alas, my reply remained the same as it had always been, and Blanche returned to the bathroom, supposedly bathing or washing her hair or doing whatever women do in the bathroom, but in reality simply standing outside the door, anticipating her next cue.

The scene continued, each line coming to memory as easily as the alphabet or multiplication tables. As Blanche—this girl I had known my entire life—spoke of grapes and death and handsome young men, I recognized the longing shown through her teary, squinting eyes and down-turned lips as more than acting. I looked away, ashamed at the raw emotion and need for human sympathy. The doorbell rang, and a kind of hope sparked in her eyes when she thought the bell might be for her. I grimaced, knowing that her hope would soon be shattered, and that I, Stella, was the one helping shatter it. I had called the doctors to take her away. I was sending her away, pushing

her away, unable to reach out to her and offer her the compassion she needed.

All this happened before the doctor led Blanche away by the hand, spurring her declaration of dependence on strangers. Once offstage, their hands dropped, and the doctor stalked off, leaving Blanche alone in the shadows of the curtains. We took our bows, the curtains closed, we scurried off to the dressing room, and the cast divided into separate people, real people—no characters, no lines, no planned movements, no props. However, I remained shocked by the depth of this girl's performance. She expressed flawlessly the need and desire for compassion and understanding which Blanche embodies. Blanche fails to find this kindness in her life—the people around her continually make it impossible for her to find compassion and understanding through them—her young lover kills himself, her numerous sexual partners in Laurel provide only momentary relaxation, Stanley insists on digging up her horrid past, and Mitch eventually believes Blanche is not clean enough for him. Each one of her acquaintances finds a reason for pushing Blanche away, disregarding her urgent need for compassion. Through the intensity of her performance, I knew that this girl, this high school actress, understood Blanche's feeling of longing, this yearning for human emotion, because she felt it herself. Yet both the girl and her on-stage persona failed to elicit from their respective worlds this compassion—the people surrounding them could not, or would not reciprocate these feelings. Understanding refused to come easily.

* * *

I remember sitting in my room one afternoon listening to Conor Oberst's voice ring through my stereo speakers: "We have a problem with no solution but to love, and to be loved." Shafts of light streamed through my windows, illuminating the dust in the air, and the words, like those of my onstage sister, stuck in my mind. I almost immediately recognized them as a universal truth. Just like Blanche, just like this young actress, Oberst recognized this basic need for human interaction and compassion as the answer to the dilemmas we face throughout our lives. Each person holds an innate longing for human understanding, for some sort of friendship or love, to the point that if this need is not satisfied, this "problem" will devastate his or her life, as it did Blanche's. By the end of the play, she can no longer distinguish her miserable reality from the imagined reality in her mind, where she believes that Shep Huntleigh will come to take her away from everything. Just as the

girl in my cast needed compassion, Oberst longed for the love of others, the only thing that makes life worthwhile, until, ultimately, each of us dies.

Yet connecting with others is a daunting task: we must overcome our own inhibitions and fears, allowing us to let others in, and to share in our misery or contentment. As I walk along the streets of New York, the difficulty of this mission is exposed; I pass perhaps hundreds of people while sauntering down Fifth Avenue on any given morning—businessmen striding off to work, suitcases in hand and coattails flapping in the wind; young children strolling off to school, adorned with colorful backpacks sporting their initials and carrying Hello Kitty lunch boxes; students ambling down the street on their way to class, eyes still watery from waking up and hair disheveled from the night's few hours of sleep. A few travel in pairs, but the majority briskly keep up their own pace, absorbed in their own thoughts and actions. These streets represent a new land to me, where smiles are considered creepy and saying "Hello!" is strictly forbidden. As on a roller coaster, where arms and legs must remain inside the vehicle at all times, on the streets of New York eyes must remain lowered, and each person must keep as close to him or herself as possible. This defense mechanism, meant to filter out weirdoes and to prevent ill-meaning old men from mistaking one as inviting, acts as a means of self-preservation. Yet our own self-preservation prevents our interaction with some of the most important people in our lives—the people who live around us. We actually prevent our own interaction, and lessen our chances of connecting with others and finding that compassion, that understanding we all long for. We are in an eternal game of hide-and-seek with ourselves: we seek kindness and friendship behind corners but crawl into the closet and hide ourselves from those around us, closing the only door to what we most want. We want compassion and affection, but the need to protect ourselves often outweighs what we want.

The first time I saw Dalí's *The Great Masturbator*, I sat at a dust-colored desk, jiggling one foot while I watched snowflakes silently flutter to the ground outside the window, each flake sinking elegantly to blend into the already covered landscape, yet floating distinct from the others. My Spanish teacher lectured on Dalí's work, but most of her words escaped my ears, each word as fleeting as the snowflakes outside. As I noticed the replica, in the form of a postcard, on my desk, one detail caught my eye amidst the vibrant colors, the crawling bugs, the rocks and shells, and the shadows. A man stood, underneath a great grasshopper, leaning against and holding close to his chest a statue of a woman. In my mind, the man was reaching out for compassion, some emotion, something; nevertheless, only stone met his grasp.

I see people all around me like this statue, turning into stone at the prospect of interaction with others. Not only in the world of fiction, not only in Tennessee Williams' New Orleans or Dalí's surreal landscape, but in real life, right here, right now. A person can come into contact with many people each day and still feel alone, as though surrounded by stone figures, statues standing in for actual people. Even a kindhearted embrace, like that of the man in the painting, may be countered with icy rigidity.

I recall one particularly scorching afternoon in the city, when my friend and I took refuge from the sun in a cool, bright subway train—the 6 train uptown. Across from us sat a stuffy businesswoman examining a lengthy magazine article, a scruffy man in tattered clothes staring at the ads on the train's walls, and a young man nodding to the music pumping into his headphones. My friend leaned against the subway window, lost in her own thoughts.

A few stops later, when the doors opened and a few people scattered in, I noticed three Hispanic men, two carrying guitars. The men gently whispered amongst themselves, riverbeds of wrinkles exploding around their dark eyes, and rubbed their worn hands together. When the doors shut and the train began its journey to the next stop, the men began to play. The Spanish words sounded beautiful against the harsh sounds of the train, and the plucked notes created a waterfall of sounds. But as the third man offered his hat to collect change, the passengers of the train denied his request. The woman sneered, annoyed at the interruption. The shabby man never took his eyes off the advertisements. The young man smiled condescendingly then averted his glance, his foot still bouncing up and down with the beat of his own tunes. Yet the men did not falter, keeping with the rhythm and picking notes as easily as flowers.

These men searched for some understanding, some sympathy, some compassion—and money was not the only way to give these things. But the passengers did not treat these men as human beings; they could not look them in the eye. Like Blanche, who tried to find compassion through Mitch by opening up to him about her dead lover, these minstrels opened themselves up to the people on the train and asked for some response. So I did what I felt was right—gave the men both a dollar and a smile, letting them know that I did not pity them, I admired them. The men smiled back before turning and heading into the next car.

Herein lie the complications of real life: dealing with real people outside any play or fantasy world. The people on the train engaged in that same stone-like self-preservation that each of us reverts to at times. The singers infringed upon the subway riders' need for isolation while on the train, as I did when I encouraged the singers to continue. Just as I subconsciously went against the needs of others by acting on my own desires, we often contradict our own needs, desiring and yearning for social interaction and yet pushing it away at every turn—offering ourselves to others, as the men on the train did, but at the same time becoming stiff, like the statue in Dalí's painting, like the other passengers. We are needy yet isolated, social yet self-protective, selfless yet selfish, and the balance between fulfilling one's needs and not violating the personal space of others is often too difficult to achieve. We are flesh-and-blood paradoxes, simultaneously grasping for compassion and safety, seeing what we want just beyond our noses then fencing ourselves from it.

Nevertheless, the self-preservation that drives us to stare at the sidewalk and walk a little faster serves a purpose, especially on the streets of New York, where acting friendly with every person is impractical and perhaps dangerous. Excessive kindness can expose one to potential harm. No one wants to befriend the strung-out drug-dealer in Washington Square Park or the greasy salesman with his hair slicked back on Broadway, yelling about some new and amazing offer. Shunning human compassion and interaction as a means of self-protection is a learned reflex for many of us, myself included. We are like turtles recoiling into shells. Yet too much self-preservation, too much caution, leads to solitude and isolation, a life void of compassion and kindness, a life of stone.

The key to this dilemma lies in our determining the ever-elusive equilibrium between fear-induced isolation and our desire for compassion, in finding a balance between these two fundamental impulses. In real life, without scripts or characters or blocked movements, it is not so easy to reconcile the internal contradiction between our need for human compassion and our protective instinct. In our need to prevent ourselves from being hurt, we suppress our need for unadorned kindness—and unlike Blanche, we cannot admit that we, too, depend on the kindness of strangers.

WORKS CITED

Dalí, Salvador. *The Great Masturbator*. 1929. 20 Oct. 1996. 7 Sept. 2006
<<http://dali.Urvas.lt/page01.html>>.

Oberst, Conor. "Method Acting." Perf. Bright Eyes. *Lifted or the Story is in
the Soil, Keep Your Ear to the Ground*. Saddle Creek, 2002.

Williams, Tennessee. *A Streetcar Named Desire*. New York: Signet, 1947.