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In **THE** Bag

Who is Yolanda Williams?

**AND WHY IS HER NAME
STAMPED ON THE BOTTOM OF SO MANY BAGS?**

[One writer's obsession]

Cover Design: Kendra Power

Who is Yolanda Williams?

And why is her name stamped on the bottom of so many paper bags? Although these questions hardly play in the same existential league as "Who am I and what am I doing here?" they're nonetheless thought-provoking. After all, a plain brown paper wrapper is as anonymous as it gets. So when you find some one willing — even daring — to claim it as her own, that's a discovery worthy of the hard, heart-felt questions. Or maybe I just need to get out more. Whatever the underlying motive, my personal quest to divine the true meaning of Yolanda Williams started on a business-as-usual Wednesday. My friend Michele and I had plans to meet at Bruegger's for take-out. We placed our orders: She opted for the vegetarian special, no onions, no olives; I went for the tuna salad sandwich on pumpernickel.

With our selections unceremoniously packed into a paper bag, we returned to Michele's office to enjoy our noon-time nosh. That's when it happened.



Call it fate. Call it kismet. Call it a Doris Day song, but something inspired us to turn that seemingly nondescript bag upside down. And there printed in bold type for all to see was the name "Yolanda Williams." Surely, we concluded, this was no ordinary bag.

"What an exotic-sounding name," Michele said. "Who is this woman?"

"I don't know," I said, "but I sure hope she's

MIRTHA ALZATE

not locked away in a sweat shop somewhere and this is a desperate cry for help."

"No," Michele answered with surprising authority. "She's here, not necessarily in Pittsburgh, but here in the States. And she's more than a line worker, she's the inspector — the big inspector, the one who makes sure all the bags are good and strong.

"But Yolanda's a loner," Michele continued, "maybe even a little mysterious. I see her with dark hair and seriously red lipstick."

I was going to ask Michele what secret ingredient was making her vegetarian special so special, but instead took a bite out of my sandwich. Chewing on both the food and the thought, I slowly began to see the light. "You're right," I said. "She's a woman on a mission. She's out to make the world a safer place. You have to respect that."

Of course, the paper-bag industry doesn't face the same strident safety regulations as, say, the airlines. But that doesn't mean Yolanda Williams doesn't have her own set of high standards. Just think about the responsibility implicit in her job. When you or I go to the store we want to know — we need to know — that our canned goods will not bottom out when we least expect it, leaving us holding the bag, so to speak.

And because of Yolanda Williams, we pretty much take that sense of security for granted. When you get right down to it, she's a hero — a champion of truth, justice and the American way. But does it stop with this one woman? Or are there others equally proud to raise the paper-bag banner?

From that day on, no bag — brown or white, large or small — was safe from our scrutiny. I soon uncovered the collective handiwork of D. Knight, R. Rowland and G. Winter. Three people per bag? That seemed a little excessive. And then there was Sheila 09116 B, not to be confused with Sheila 06147 B. I have to admit I detected a tinge of insincerity in the Sheilas' efforts. Unlike Yolanda (we were on a first-name basis now), these inspectors were unwilling to put their true selves on the line. Hey, if you can't put it out there, what's the point? I know Yolanda would back me up on this.

I talked to Michele. She was having her own close encounters with Marie L. Lubintus and Theresa Zimmerman. "I could swear I went to school with a Theresa Zimmerman," Michele said. "She was one of those back-to-nature kind of girls. I can see her now, standing there in her Birkenstock sandals watching the bags roll by."

"Are you eating another vegetarian special?" I asked.

Michele followed her logic to its ultimate conclusion. "Do you think there's a bag inspectors club?" she wondered. "Where Yolanda and Theresa get together once a month to compare paper cuts?"

As intriguing as Michele's version of reality was, I decided it was time to go directly to the source — to Yolanda Williams herself. I called Bruegger's

corporate, and was quickly referred to S&G Packaging, one of our nation's largest paper bag manufacturers.

"I'm looking for some information about the names on your bags?" I asked S&G's Jill Peterson.

"Those are real people," she said. "Every machine operator has his or her own name plate. We believe it increases the quality of our products and enhances and the morale of our workers."

"Actually," I confessed, "I'm looking for one name in particular ... Yolanda Williams?"

There was a pause. "Well," she continued, "we have about 600 machine operators in six different facilities throughout the country. I'll have to let you know."

True to her word, Peterson called me back. "Yolanda's at our Elizabeth, New Jersey plant. She's been with us since 1976. The plant manager has approached her about talking to you, and she'd like a couple days to think it over."

Even though I was feeling this kindred-spirit thing, I

remain a mystery, when Peterson phoned with the verdict. "It's a go," she confirmed. "Yolanda and her supervisor will be expecting your call."

SHEILA 06147 B

It was 4 p.m. one Thursday afternoon, and I was just a dial tone away from talking to Yolanda. After placing the call, I was immediately connected to S&G production manager Russ Talmadge. "Yolanda is one of our best operators," he explained. "You have to have the right balance between quality and production. Yolanda pays attention to detail, and still produces more than 200,000 bags a day."

Finally, it was Yolanda's turn. She told me she started stacking bundles, and slowly worked her way up. These days, she's an automatic machine tender (that's an AMT, for those in the biz), in charge of threading the paper and checking the bags for open slats, cuts or other imperfections.

"What's it like working in a paper bag factory?" I

asked.

"It's a busy place," Yolanda said, "lots of people, lots of noise. You have to wear ear plugs and safety glasses. But the boss is OK, and I get along with everybody."

"Is it exciting to see your name on all those bags?"

"To be honest," she answered, "when they started this about 10 years ago, I didn't think it was such a good idea. But now it does make me feel good to see my name, and my co-workers' names.

"I have to tell you," Yolanda continued, "I wasn't so sure having this conversation was a good idea either. With all the millions of bags and all the different names, I wondered, 'Why me?'"

"What changed your mind?" I asked.


"It was my daughter," Yolanda said. "She talked me into it. She's proud of me."

My crusade to find Yolanda Williams was over. And yet, in a way I knew it was just beginning. You see, I envision a world where the names are worth more than the paper they're printed on.

If we can put a premium on cards featuring over-paid, over-egoed professional athletes, why not place a greater value on paper bag names?

Just imagine the possibilities: "I'll trade you two 'Made With Pride By M. Salas' for a mint-condition 1997 'Yolanda Williams.'"

"Make it four and you've got a deal."

You say I'm a dreamer? Well, I'm willing to take the first step. As far as I'm concerned, it's no longer about paper or plastic. It's a Yolanda bag, or nothing! 

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J. GRISWELL
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RAFAEL SANABIA

A plain brown paper wrapper is as anonymous as it gets. So when you find someone willing — even daring — to claim it as her own, that's a discovery worthy of the hard, heart-felt questions.

could certainly understand Yolanda's misgivings. From her perspective, I was a

stranger. But more than that, I was a stranger from Pittsburgh who wanted to interview her.

More than a week went by, and I was trying to come to terms with the fact that Yolanda might forever

YOLANDA WILLIAMS