

The Cabildo

Rob Magnuson Smith

I myself have made love to a corpse. It happened during a hurricane in New Orleans, where stories like mine aren't uncommon. That morning my best friend Mike got married—making me, I was certain, no longer his best friend—and I plunged into depths of self-pity. Mike was not only marrying, he was moving to the other side of the country. I took this hurricane as an omen. After the reception everyone obeyed the warnings to vacate while I roamed the French Quarter, ducking into bars along rain-soaked alleyways and making drunken predictions about the end of the world.

By dawn I landed in Jackson Square facing the Cabildo. I had heard of this building. There, across the trampled grass, the Spanish had built their colonial City Hall. Under its white colonnades and sweeping balustrades, the Louisiana Purchase had been signed. And now, after surviving arson attacks from British spies and serving for decades as a prison for pirates, insurrectionists and murderers, the Cabildo had found genteel retirement as a war museum. At the top of the stone staircase, the lights were on. The double doors stood strangely open. The coming hurricane wasn't supposed to be Katrina-strength, but it still had the potential to be deadly. Standing there drenched in my rented tux, I considered my chances.

I crossed the grass and climbed the steps. Some sort of party was in progress—I could hear people talking and music from the upstairs balcony. A security guard waved me through. As I stepped out of the wind and rain I noticed a sign for a black tie gala to pay for the museum’s refurbishment. He must have assumed I was a late arrival.

The Cabildo was humid and smelled of dying flowers. A circular staircase brought me past an enormous diorama depicting the Battle of New Orleans. Under the glass case, miniature soldiers were squaring off in a swamp. British forces numbering over eleven thousand, the placard said, were repulsed by a gaggle of Americans armed with grapeshot. On the wall loomed various oil paintings of Andrew Jackson in profile, his hawk nose and brushed white hair pointing over the somewhat smaller Napoleon Bonaparte portraits, also in profile, positioned lower down. The next canvas showed the black, storm-swept Gulf of Mexico capsizing a fleet of British Royal Navy gunboats. On the decks, hundreds of sailors were captured in their last moments. I looked at one face after another and tried to sober up.

Finally I reached the top floor, where a string quartet played on a stage. Men in tuxes were smoking cigars in tight clusters. Despite the coming storm couples were dancing—politicians, retired oil executives, war merchants and elderly heiresses with fixed red lips. Only one waiter remained, a dutiful foot soldier in a handlebar moustache and crisp white shirt, carrying plates of canapés. Outside, an open bar stood on the balcony. I had reached the saloon of the Titanic in its final hour. I headed for the bar when a voice shouted, “Don’t you *dare* make love to me, honey!”

I turned. A woman of very advanced age stared at me, tugging compulsively at the white lace sleeves of her dress. An apparition would have carried more flesh. She was skeletal, wide-eyed, with sculpted hair the color of iron. I was immediately attracted to her without knowing why. As the night progressed I *did* know why—it was her smooth acquisitive manner, her apparent seduction of hundreds of men in her lifetime, all more or less duped or willingly vulnerable. I also recognized her. She was the billionaire philanthropist Beverly Stark.

“Lord save us from this great incursion,” said the man accompanying her. He was much younger, perhaps in his sixties. He wore a white linen suit and chewed a cigar. He regarded my soaking tux with that combination of courtesy and audacity particular to the extremely rich.

“My poor Tommy,” Beverly said, as the two approached. She dipped her outstretched hand toward the balcony and the howling wind. “Dead and buried seventy-one years. His spirit will be unleashed in this wretched storm...” She gripped my wrist, leaned in and whispered in my ear. “I respect my vows when he’s likely to be disturbed, honey. He catches us making love, I’ll just never forgive myself.”

I tried to find traces of the sun outside. It was too early. It was too late. The whole city, some believed, was populated by ghosts. Even the skeptics kept quiet for fear of repercussions. And maybe, in this brief interlude as the string quartet played on the stage, Beverly’s claim was technically true. Mike’s wedding venue had been ringed with yellow crime scene tape. As the couple came out of the church to be showered with confetti,

members of staff stood guard beside the more sodden graves. Guests were quietly warned that bodies could start rising.

“He needs a drink,” Beverly’s friend said, patting my shoulder. “What’ll you have, son?”

“Martini?”

He made his way to the balcony. Beverly kept her grip on my wrist, and she wouldn’t let go for some time. Her hands were strong, and she had white pointy nails.

“Tell me—what are you doing here in the Cabildo, honey?”

“I just wanted to get out of the rain.”

“Of course you did. Were you in a ceremony of some sort? A funeral?”

I told her about Mike. So many years we’d spent, laughing, listening to music, going for drinks. I told her about his wedding and the crime scene tape. As I spoke she moved her eyes over me, top to toe. “The Cabildo has long been a refuge, honey. This was where the French gave us Louisiana. Where America has always partied and survived. Dick—my sixth husband, there—he hears me fret each hurricane. We never make love when the cemetery floods. Out of respect for Tommy...’ Her fingers tightened around my wrist. ‘But when I saw *you*, I thought, Lord *God*. What if I want that young thing, there? I’ve just got to warn him.” She leaned in closer. With her other hand she clutched my chin like an ice cream. “He died during consummation. Heart attack, right between my legs.”

I laughed—a dry nervous laugh. Dick returned with my martini. We clinked glasses, and he noticed my living handcuff. He had the guilty smile of a man happy to watch the world end exactly where he stood in life. “The boy’s all wet.”

“A young drowned rat.”

“How old, you figure?”

“Twenty-seven.”

They kept talking about me as if I wasn’t there. I tried sipping my drink slowly to pretend I wasn’t rattled, but half went down at once. Beverly kept staring. “Looks like our rat needs something stronger...”

“That place on Pirate’s Alley.”

“That bar that serves absinthe by the bottle. It should be open, wouldn’t you think, honey?”

“Yes,” he said, his eyes rolling back to a memory. “I do indeed.”

“Dick, honey. Do you mind staying on a spell—while this rat and I go and see?”

“I’d rather stay here...” I stammered, but Beverly waved my words away like a bad odor. She’d paid for the Cabildo’s refurbishment, and I was being cleaned out.

The rain blew straight at our faces. The morning was near, the wind strangely warm.

Across Jackson Square all the power lines whipped on their poles. Behind us, the Cabildo stood high in the storm.

There were sirens in the distance. A young couple in shorts slogged over the wet grass and veered into an alley. Debris lay everywhere—abandoned bicycles, heaps of

clothes, a hot dog cart on its side with buns spilled on the sidewalk. No pigeons had come to eat, no birds of any kind. The only animals I saw that night were cats, huddled in shop doorways and outside boarded-up bars.

“Not many people left in the Quarter,” Beverly said. She had put on a fur coat. She looked like an ancient poisonous blowfish searching for its last meal. This didn’t make me any less attracted—my final dawn had arrived, I had decided, with a cutthroat philanthropist as my companion. While Mike limped along with the evacuees on the highway, I was boldly embracing Thanatos.

“We must find absinthe,” Beverly announced, her heels clicking around a shattered beer bottle. We came down Chartres Street onto Pirate’s Alley. It was a little cobblestoned enclave where Faulkner once lived. The houses were shuttered, the suspended flower pots swinging violently. Up on a balcony, a man wobbled impossibly on a ladder, hammering boards. A woman ran by us with her arms full of leather coats.

Beverly held my wrist and walked on. She was aiming for a bar on the corner with its doors open. Inside, a circular velvet sofa stood around a table made of hammered brass. There were cut-glass mirrors, chandeliers clinking in the wind. By the entrance a parakeet swung in a cage with its eyes squeezed shut. The place was empty, but Beverly rang the bell on the bar. I wondered if Tommy’s body had surfaced yet. I wondered if he’d had any warning, just before his own end had come. A woman in thick makeup appeared. “Closed,” she said. “Get yourself gone.”

Beverly produced a clip of hundreds and fanned them out on the bar. “Just bring us a bottle of absinthe and a fountain, honey. Then get yourself somewhere safe.”

She pulled me over to the circular sofa. As soon as we sat down, she entwined my legs in hers. The owner hurried over with a glass vessel filled with ice along with a bottle of absinthe and two glasses, arranged on a platter with a bowl of sugar cubes and spoons. The ice fountain had tiny gold taps. She poured out large portions of absinthe into our glasses and balanced the spoons on top. The spoons had holes in the bottom where the sugar cubes dissolved. She put our glasses under the taps and opened the spigots to a trickle. “Wait ‘til it turns green, okay?”

There was a gust of wind outside, and something smashed. The owner closed the doors and bolted the wooden shutters. Back at the bar she emptied the cash register into her purse. “The hurricane door’s out back if you need it...” She grabbed the parakeet and was gone.

The absinthe in our glasses slowly turned green. I took a sip and my nose caught fire—it was an icy, headily strong drink, bitter as liquid bark. We finished them, poured a second round, added sugar and trickled the taps. Beverly’s features softened and her coal-black eyes flashed. “I remain in love,” she said, “with a man long gone.”

I thought of Mike on the highway. He was too helpless to be alone. He had moved across a continent to avoid the discomfort of hitting thirty single. I had always taken the other way. By my third absinthe I was thinking of the different ways men die, often in the attempt to preserve their lives, and I noticed that Beverly had taken my trousers down, that her legs had locked me in as she climbed on top. I closed my eyes as the wind shook the doors. One by one, the windows on Pirate’s Alley shattered like bells.

“Forgive me, Tommy...”

Beverly's nails bit into my shoulders. Her lips quivered and she mumbled something I couldn't hear. Later, I would take her back to the Cabildo. The problem was, she'd be dead. And Dick, honey—he would be next to grieve. But that moment, before she collapsed on my chest with her dress hiked up and her fur coat still on, before I rested her gently back on the sofa, I stared into her open mouth and wondered if she'd found Tommy at last. Then her voice died away and I closed my eyes and prayed for everyone under the coming storm, trying in vain to retreat.