A Small Hotel by Robert Olen Butler

**A NOVEL EXCERPT**

**ON THE AFTERNOON** of the day when she fails to show up in a judge’s chambers in Pensacola to finalize her divorce, Kelly Hays swerves her basic-black Mercedes into the valet spot and thumps hard into the curb and pops the gearshift into park, and then she feels a silence rush through her chest and limbs and mind that should terrify her. But she yields herself to it. She brings her face forward and lays her forehead gently against the steering wheel. She sits in front of the Olivier House on Toulouse Street in the New Orleans French Quarter, a hotel she knows quite well. Like this present silence overcoming the welter in her, before she stepped from her house in Pensacola a little over three hours ago she yanked her hair back into a ponytail and simply stroked a hasty touch of lipstick onto her lips but she then was moved to put on her favorite little black dress, a sleeveless sheath, a prêt-à-porter Chanel she’d had for years, put it on slowly in the muffled silence of her walk-in closet, listening to the Chanel’s faint rustle going over her, letting the silk lick her down the thighs. She turned forty-nine years old two months ago on her deck, alone with a single-malt, looking out at the Bayou Texar going dark in the twilight. She wore makeup that night, for herself, prompted by the Scotch, and she wore her hair in a French twist, and she knew, in spite of everything, that she looked thirty-something, even early-thirty-something. And she knows now that she looks all of forty-nine. All and more as the door to her car opens and she lifts her face to a gaunt, long-jawed, middle-aged man, a man she recognizes.

He recognizes her, too. “Ah,” he says. “Welcome back, Mrs . . .” and he snags on her name, even as she forces her body to turn, forces her feet to the pavement outside, and she rises from the seat.

She sees him duck a little, to check out the passenger side of the car. He is looking for her husband.

“If you can just take care of the car,” she says, wanting only to stop any small talk, wanting only to close the door behind her in her room.

“I’m sorry,” the man says. “I used to be better at names.”

“Beau, isn’t it?”

“Beau. Yes. Thanks for remembering. I used to be better at that.” And he steps to the rear of the car, seeing her small Gucci upright bag lying in the backseat. He reaches for the door handle.

“Beau,” Kelly says, firmly, “I can handle my bag. Just do the car.”

Beau withdraws his hand. “The car,” he says. “Sure.”

“I’m sorry,” Kelly says. “Hays.”

“Mrs. Hays,” Beau says, brightening. “Of course. Glad to have you back.”

And now she stops on the sidewalk before the door to the hotel, and she lets go of the handle of her rolling bag. She can turn and stop Beau, who has only this moment closed the driver door of the car, she can stop him and she can get back into her car and drive away. Ah, but to where. To the house. To hell with the house. She doesn’t want the house. Someone laughs down the street.

She turns to look. It is a small sound from this distance, but she heard it clearly. A young man and a young woman lean into each other at the door of a bar at the corner of Bourbon Street. She knows the bar, too. The young couple in this moment and perhaps the bar twenty-five years ago and half a dozen times since: these are things she can consider. But nothing else for now. The rest is carefully put away. The rest is inside the bag, whose handle she now grasps. She will go in. And she does. She goes up the steps and through the door into the Olivier House, an early-nineteenth-century townhouse with a Federal facade of plastered brick and a labyrinthine Creole inner life with loggias and two courtyards and slave quarters and four floors of galleried rooms.

And she is at the end of the entrance hall, near the parlor door, and she is glad the young man at the desk is a stranger and she has her key and is through the double doors behind him and crossing a small flagstone courtyard rimmed in banana trees and fig trees and she is through a low, curving loggia and into the larger courtyard with the swimming pool, but she turns at once up a staircase and she climbs one floor and another and she is breathless now, not from the climb but from the room before her.

Room 303. Two narrow black doors, each with three stacked panes of glass: fully half the doors are glass, and it surprises her; this is a thing she should remember well but she doesn’t. The doors are hung with white ruffled curtains, and her hand jitters the key against the lock, unable to get it into the hole. She stops. She lowers her hand. She wants in badly, wants into this room that she came to feel was her own place in the Quarter. No. She always felt it was *their* place. But hers now. Entirely hers. And she wants in so badly that she cannot get in, from the very wanting of it. She breathes deeply. She raises her hand again and focuses on keeping it steady, and at last the key slips into the lock and the door is opening and she is inside and the door shuts behind her. She lets go of her bag. She closes her eyes.

The smell of the place is always the same. Old wood and old rugs and fresh sheets and from the open balcony doors the sweet but tainted smell of the Quarter, jasmine and roux and shellfish brine, beer and piss and mildew, and something of the river too, and the swamp, and a hard rain that passed by, and ozone and coffee and sex, Michael’s smells and her smells: can all of this be inside her in this room in this moment? Probably. She is weeping.

**And as Kelly** lets the tears fall without even lifting a hand to them, the man she is still married to is across the Mississippi, driving fast, an hour west of New Orleans along Louisiana 18. On one side is the river, invisible behind the berm of the levee, and on the other side has been a run of tank farms and cane fields and strip malls and swamp, and Creole plantations too—Laura and St. Joseph and, at last, Oak Alley. Michael Hays slows his BMW. He put the top down when they crossed the cantilever bridge into the West Bank and took to the state two-lanes, and he has glanced at the woman beside him half a dozen times since then, watched her hair: she has tied it up tightly in a scarf but some tendrils have gotten free and are flaring behind her, a pallid yellow flame. Michael is fifty-five. The woman beside him, Laurie Pruitt, when she tells anyone of her boyfriend, which she has begun now to do—a few select friends, her mother—she told her mother last week and is determined never to speak of him to her again—Laurie always describes him as “a handsomely ripening fifty-five.” She is twenty-nine. Michael has timed his glances from his periphery so she never sees him. He wishes simply to collect these snapshots of her. He has stifled even the impulse—which is strong in him—to reach out his hand and put it in this flame of her hair. If it could actually burn him, he might. A strong assault of feeling: this he could take. But not the gentle thing, though he knows this weekend at Oak Alley will inevitably bring that too. But waiting for word from Pensacola, he has stayed bound tightly inside himself.

Before them now is the quarter-mile alley of live oaks leading from the highway to the Big House, and Michael slows even more. He and Laurie both turn their heads, as they slide past, to look down the canopied corridor of trees. With the massive frame of the oaks, the Creole pavilion house shows only its wide, double-galleried face, fronted by two-story Tuscan columns, and then it is gone. And momentarily Michael slows almost to a stop and turns in to the plantation grounds, passing a sign that announces: *Antebellum Fashion Festival.*

Before he accelerates again, Laurie says, “I wish we’d begun a year earlier.”

He has had these what-can-you-possibly-be-thinking moments several times already with her. The wreckage he is leaving behind was inconveniently timed? He will not let her remark make him consider the wreckage now. And it is deeply in his nature not to make his inner life visible. So he shows nothing. If she looked at him, Laurie would not be able to tell if he even heard what she said. Not that this occurs to her. After only a moment’s pause, she says, “There are twenty-eight oaks and twenty-eight columns around the house. It would be cool if I were twenty-eight this first time.” He speeds up now on the perimeter road and she has said what she has to say, more for herself than for Michael, and that he makes no indication whatsoever he has heard is of no consequence to her. The Big House emerges fully as they run parallel to the alley of oaks, its dark, hipped roof rising to a widow’s walk.

**And Kelly is** standing in the center of Room 303, at the foot of the four-poster double bed, with the posts and the canopy frame and two birds plucking at an overflowing basket of grapes on the headboard all done in black wrought iron. This and so many other things are as they always have been. The bed wall is exposed brick. The lamp on the night table is a sandalwood palm tree. The lamp on the desk on the opposite wall is a teak monkey in a fez, climbing another palm. He is draped with Mardi Gras beads. The beads may have changed over the years, but there have always been beads. The French windows are open to a trompe l’oeil balcony, a filigreed iron balustrade from one side of the jamb to the other. Nowhere to step outside. Just lean there and look down to the courtyard and out to the hipped and gabled roofs of the Quarter and to the sun, falling toward late afternoon in the western sky before her.

Laughter wafts into the room like a fresh scent from the street. Kelly leaves her bag behind and moves to the balcony. She looks down. In an open doorway to one of the pool-level suites, a young couple laughs and the woman nudges the man’s shoulder with her forehead and he says something else and she lifts her face and laughs harder, though the sound strikes Kelly’s ear only faintly, as faint as distant memory; the laughter has sounded in her enough to have drawn her to look but not enough to dissipate the murk in her head, her chest. She turns away, faces back into the room.

She looks at her bag sitting upright on the floor, its handle extended. She moves to the bag, grasps the handle. The laughter dies. She lifts her eyes to the door of the room. Outside, she herself waits to enter. Kelly at twenty-four. Perhaps the age of the woman in the courtyard. But Kelly in this present moment, holding tight to the handle of her rolling bag, squeezes back the memory, keeps the door shut. She angles the bag toward her, turns, pulls it to the side of the bed. She lowers the handle and bends and lifts the bag and places it gently on the mattress. She is breathing heavily, though the bag was light. She waits. She slows herself down. There is time yet. Perhaps even options of a sort. This whole process is to do one thing and then wait and then do another thing.

For now, open the bag: the zipper tab between her thumb and forefinger, the ripping sound, her hand tracing the bag, down and across and up. And she lifts the lid. Inside is a folded, bulky, white terry-cloth robe. But it is here only for padding. She unfolds the robe, and within are simply a bottle of Macallan cask-strength, single-malt Scotch and a bottle of Percocet.

**Michael steps from** his car onto the driveway next to a pitched-roof cottage with a screened front porch and a wooden back deck. Surrounding the plantation grounds is the ongoing enterprise of the last hundred and seventy years at Oak Alley, sugarcane. The air still smells faintly of smoke and cane, the fall harvest having been completed only a short time ago, the crop cut and gone for processing and the stubble burned to the ground, leaving six hundred acres of dark rutted earth waiting for the new shoots. Michael takes in the smell, a pleasure he had not expected this weekend.

“It’s wonderful,” Laurie says. “More than I’d imagined.”

Michael does not look at her but heads toward the trunk, lifting her Rollaboard from the backseat as he passes. He takes one step beyond the end of the car and puts her rolling bag on the driveway, for her to pull. She’s in the small front yard, her back to him, arms rising as if embracing the scene before her: another cottage on the service road and a maintenance shop farther out and then five hundred yards of naked cane fields to a distant line of trees marking an unseen railroad track. Her arms move on, though, and she clasps her hands at the back of her head. Her shoulders lift and pause and fall in a sweet sigh of contentment.

Michael doesn’t see it. One by one he pulls Laurie’s suitcase and a mate to Kelly’s upright bag and his garment carrier out of the trunk, setting the larger bags beside each other and draping the garment bag over Laurie’s suitcase.

He turns to close the trunk and she is beside him now. “Thanks for letting me choose this place,” she says.

He lowers the trunk and gently clicks it shut. He turns to her and she is kissing him hard on the mouth and he is fine with bodies, fine with using the language of the body, and he presses her close and the kiss goes on and then ends and they break. Laurie looks Michael in the eyes.

She says, “Now that’s way too somber a look after a kiss like that.” She cocks her head slightly. “Don’t you think?”

And he clenches inside. What more does she want from him? He is a man of words in the courtroom, this Michael Hays. But the expectation of words in a circumstance like this always makes him take the Fifth—silently—no matter what those words might be if he were inclined to figure them out. So instead, suddenly clumsy even with his body, he kisses her again, trying for the forehead—given his putoffedness—but his incipient move prompts her to raise her face to him, as she assumes he’s after her lips. Consequently, he ends up kissing her high on the bridge of her nose. Which gives even the usually chilled-out Laurie her own what-can-you-possibly-be-thinking moment.

But now they are pulling their luggage along, and she has taken his garment bag over her arm without his even asking, and they are through the porch door and the cottage door and moving through their living room full of cherrywood Chippendale reproductions, and Laurie leads the way into the dining room and then, to the right, into a hallway that leads back toward the front of the cottage and into the master bedroom. The bed is large, mahogany, the four high, fluted posts with carved rice plants. She stops, leaves the luggage on the floor, moves around the corner of the foot of the bed with one hand on the post like a stripper doing a slow turn on her pole.

He has stopped, blocked by the bags on the floor.

“I love it,” she says. “I love it all.”

She puts her hand now on the floral chintz quilt. But she pauses and straightens and looks at Michael. “Of course,” she says. “Now I get your mood. Duh.”

She does not elaborate, and Michael looks at her and suppresses a bristling at her trying to read his mood. She has cocked her head at him. He waits for more.

“You were here with her,” she says.

He leaves the upright where it sits and collapses the rolling handle of Laurie’s suitcase. He lifts the bag. He finds the heft of the thing a comfort at the moment: the physical focus helps him stop the memories. He steps around the bags on the floor and puts the suitcase on the luggage stand by the dresser.

“Did you come for the festival?” Laurie says.

He turns back to the other bags and she twirls on the bedpost again, once, and heads for him. He stops, straightens, waits.

“Did she dress up?” she says.

“No,” he says.

She is before him now. Smiling very slightly at one corner of her mouth. Smelling of something with patchouli that Kelly used to wear. “So I’ll be your first Scarlett,” Laurie says.

“Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn,” Michael says, sounding harsher than he wants, in spite of this being, prima facie, a joke.

Laurie misses the allusion for the briefest of moments. His tone is flat. This is Michael, after all, whose silences and hard edges she is still trying to figure out, thinking he’s worth it, thinking this is a real man, not another overgrown boy. But the ongoing mystery of him means that in spite of her having introduced the frame of reference, she needs a moment to realize he’s just quoted an actual line from her favorite movie in the whole world of all time. She laughs. “My hard-hearted Rhett,” she says.

He thinks to try but he can’t make himself unloosen his tone, not with his struggle to remain in this moment, with just Laurie. “Let me unpack the bags,” he says. “Not the baggage.”

She studies his face. He’s the trial lawyer who has just sprung a little rhetorical trap and is playing it deadpan. She lifts her hand and extends her forefinger and puts the tip of it on the tip of his nose. She pushes, gently. He lets her do it.

“I’m for that,” she says. She turns away.

With her back to him now, Michael finds himself very conscious of the tip of his nose. He needed to make the point: for Laurie’s sake as well as his own, he can’t let Kelly into this room. But the tip of his nose makes him smile a faint, tender, involuntary smile at Laurie. A smile that she cannot see. And in this moment of Michael’s letting go to a gentle thing, Kelly spins to him in the center of an Oak Alley cottage bedroom, perhaps this very one, spins to him and leaps into his arms, leaps and hooks her legs around him. This was early on, in their first six months or so. Before they’d married. Before they’d even spoken of marrying. She was younger than Laurie is now, younger by five years. Kelly leapt into his arms and they kissed, and the kiss ended, and still she clung to him, and he carried her toward the bed, and she said, “Not yet,” and she began to hum. Michael has lost the tune over the years but he clearly remembers her humming, and he moved back to the center of the floor with her holding fast to him and the song she hummed was a waltz. Yes. That much still clings to this memory. A waltz, and he began to do the steps. He waltzed her around this room, around and around this room to the music she hummed softly in his ear, and he was glad that her head was pressed hard against the side of his because the last thing in the world he wanted was to let this woman he loved see tears in his eyes. It makes no difference that they were happy tears. Tears are tears. And he held her tight even after the music stopped. He pressed her close even when he felt her begin to try to straighten up to look him in the face. He held her closer, and she seemed happy to just settle back in, and he held her like that until his tears dried on their own and she would never know.

**Kelly closes her** bag. Zips it. Pulls it off the bed and steps toward the corner of the room to put the bag out of the way. On the night table sit the bottle of Scotch and the bottle of pills. She has moved the lamp to the far side of the tabletop, next to the clock radio, and she has placed the two bottles carefully side by side in the center of the empty space, their labels facing the bed. She has turned the clock face away, though she has carefully made the radio’s edges parallel with the tabletop. And she moves past all this now without a glance and she stops in the center of the floor at the foot of the bed and she stands very still and she is seeing nothing at all around her and she is feeling that silence again, but this time it has not rushed into her, she just realizes it’s there, filling her up. Her arms hang at her sides and she cannot imagine lifting them.

But she does see the door now. And Kelly does let Kelly into the room. Kelly at twenty-four. The door opens and she steps in. She is wearing black stiletto boots and black leggings and a black mock-turtle tee and black cat ears. Her black mask is gone so she can cry, and her painted cat whiskers are streaked down her cheeks from tears that have only recently stopped. An arm’s length behind her is Michael. Thirty years old in this memory. He is wearing a Tulane Law sweatshirt. Both of them have strands of gold and purple and green beads around their necks. The French windows are closed but the muffled din of Mardi Gras fills the room like the smell of cigarette smoke in the bedding.

Kelly takes only one more step and stops. It’s his room. She is trembling. She feels him come near her, though there is no touching. She senses him as you might sense a live oak in the pitch dark. She waits for him to put his arms around her. She wants that. But he does not touch her. And she wants that too, wants this to be how he is. He rescued her in the midst of Mardi Gras, but having done it, he does not touch her. Not yet. These are, however, not things she is thinking about. These things are simply playing in her body, alongside the trembling.

“I’m sorry,” she says.

“That was scary for you,” Michael says.

She turns to him. His eyes are the color of that oak in the dark. The trembling is bad and it’s time to be held. She knows this and he must too, because all at once she is in his arms and clinging to him, though she is aware how he holds his body back a little, holds her only with his arms and his chest and she likes him even more for this and she clings harder.

Her head is upon his chest and from there she says, “I don’t even know your name to thank you.”

“Michael Hays.”

“I’m. . .” she begins.

But he cuts her off. “Catwoman. I know. I’ve admired your work.”

She pulls away a little to look at him, though they keep their arms around each other. “You mean you don’t favor that little shit in the bat costume?” she says.

“Please,” he says. “I’m a lawyer.”

She wants to laugh but things are still roiling in her. “Sorry. I just can’t stop shaking.”

“I know.”

“It’s not that you’re a lawyer.”

“Good,” Michael says.

She puts her head back on his chest. “Kelly Dillard,” she says.

He does not reply.

“You didn’t know my name either,” she says.

“Kelly Dillard,” he says. “You’re safe now.”

And Kelly twenty-five years later breaks off the memory. The pulse of strength it takes to do this lets her lift an arm, draw her wrist across her forehead, which is moist from the warm, muggy late October that has pushed itself into her room. She thinks to close the French windows, thinks this to stop thinking anything else. Not now, she decides. She’ll keep them open. The courtyard below is silent. But is that someone laughing? Perhaps. Far off this time. Out in the Quarter somewhere. Perhaps. But it’s done now. She is managing her mind now.

She moves to the side of the bed and sits. She turns her face to the night table. The Scotch is a deep amber and she looks closely at the Jacobean manor house on the label, a holly tree next to it, nearly as tall as the top of the pitched roof. This house must exist somewhere, she thinks. Two hundred years ago a woman stood at that third-floor window and looked out on her lawn and thought she could use a drink, could really use a nice old Scotch to burn her tongue. I can use a drink, Kelly thinks. But instead there is laughter again somewhere. And Kelly’s mind resumes managing itself. She needs to go back to the way this all began between her and Michael, from the start, from the time when Michael was nearby but they had no idea each other even existed, when the smallest impulse in her—for a drink, for a pee—would have put her in a slightly different place at a slightly different time and her life would have been profoundly changed forever.

She is standing outside the bar at the corner of Toulouse and Bourbon and there is laughter and shouting and a great gabbling roar of voices and Bourbon Street is tightly thronged and it is that first Mardi Gras and her black mask is still on and her whiskers are still pristine and she does not yet know Michael Hays exists in the world, and her sister Katie, four years older and the prime instigator of this visit, and Theresa, Katie’s lifelong friend—the reassuringly-even-more-messed-up-than-I-am sort of friend—are huddled with her as shirtless frat boy revelers painted gold and purple lurch past, and Katie says in a shout above the din, “My head’s about to explode.”

Theresa says, “Definitely time for a pit stop.”

And now more frat boys. Maybe frat boys. Three of them, young certainly, not painted but drunk. They float by and they make meowing sounds at Kelly and veer too near her and she turns her back to them and they go on. Theresa says to her, “I should have done like you. I need a costume.” Both Theresa and Katie are dressed in jeans and sweatshirts.

“I need a drink,” Katie says.

“Me too,” Theresa says.

Katie does a now-presenting hand-sweep toward the door nearby. “Bar,” she says.

“Bar,” Theresa says.

The sound of the crowd swells down the block. This is all still new to Kelly and she is not drunk and she has no need to get drunk at the moment. She feels surprisingly invisible here and she wonders if that’s one of the allures of Mardi Gras, to feel this way: unseen, unseeable, unknowable in the midst of the tumult of so many others. And the more intense the crowd, the more comfortably bound inside herself she feels. The crowd down Bourbon is chanting something and cheering and Kelly says, “You two go on in. I’ll catch up with you in a few minutes.”

“You going to flash for some real beads?” Theresa says.

“Catwoman’s above all that,” Kelly says, and she moves off toward the hubbub.

People are packed too densely for her to push through in the street itself so she moves to the edge of the sidewalk, just beneath the overhanging balconies, finding the seam between the street crowd and the crowd that has oozed from the doors of bars and clubs. Underfoot is the squinch and slide of the gutter muck and the smells are strong of waste and spillage and spew, smells that will become for Kelly, in the years ahead, just a faint presence in the nose and in the finish of the ongoing scent of New Orleans, a not unpleasant thing in that form, like the smell of a skunk from a great distance out on a farm road can be not unpleasant, but direct here, in her first Mardi Gras, the smell is overwhelming and she struggles to keep her footing in her stilettos. But she makes progress toward the voluble center of the block.

Voluble now with a cry in unison: “Show your tits! Show your tits!” Over and over the cry is sent upward and Kelly is facing this compressed center of the crowd and she is beneath a wide Creole townhouse balcony with the objects of the crowd’s attention clearly located above. All eyes are turned upward, a hundred hands are raised, jiggling strands of beads. And right in front of her is a small cleared arc of space made by the crowd having moved away a bit from two young women. These two are the objects of a quieter entreaty from above. They are each of them a little too corpulent, not quite pretty in the face, one with a weak chin and a crooked nose, the other with close-set eyes and thin lips, not homely but not quite pretty, women who never get looked at twice in the Florida town or the South Carolina town or the Illinois town where they live, but here they wear tank tops and they are the objects of intense and clamorous interest, and these bodies of theirs, which they stand before mirrors and criticize and rue for all the other days of the year, are suddenly desirable, are commodities of great value commanding a currency that everyone around them covets ardently, the beads, the good beads, the thick red and gold and purple and green beads with attachments, with miniature masks or babies or mermaids or devils or rubber duckies or bottles of Jim Beam, cheap shit novelty stuff at any other time of the year but on these few days they are the world’s wealth, they are physical objects of desire, they are the primo Mardi Gras throws, and the two young women can have these things because of their bodies and they can have wild adulation from faces and cameras and whoopings and cheers all around them, but first there is negotiation, there is naked capitalism, supply and demand, hard bargaining. And Kelly takes all this in and her sense of being alone here in the middle of this tumult, alone and untouchable in her own solitude, is very strong now.

And the crowd cheers and the air is full of beads flying up, up and out of sight toward the balcony and caught above: tits have been shown up there just now and the two young women in the street are laughing and they look at each other and Kelly takes a step into the empty space, away from the two women but near them, she stands with those who are gawking and pleading, and she glances up, and all along the balcony is a row of mostly male faces turned downward. But side by side in the center of the row are two young women and they are putting on their new beads, their nipples blinkered again somewhere beneath the dozens of heavy strands of accumulated wealth.

And next to the women who flashed are two men with forearms draped in large-beaded plastic necklaces. Gold ones with the beads alternating three to one with black Darth Vader heads and purple ones with jester faces and another with King cake babies and another with a Big Bird pendant, and the men dangle these now at the two women before Kelly. She looks at them. The women are motioning to the beads they want. The business of this goes forward. They are demanding two strands. Not two for the two of them. Two for each of them. The man above is not giving in. The women gesture: one strand for each tit. He appreciates the argument, but he will not yield. One for each set. And the crowd is now joining in the negotiation. The faces have all turned to the two women from Panama City or from Aiken or from Joliet and they are secretaries in a real estate office or they are elementary school teachers or they are librarians and the crowd is crying out to them “Show your tits! Show your tits!” and the most wonderful beads are quivering above them and they look at each other and they laugh and they know that they are, in this moment, something they always dreamed they might be, and they raise their faces and grasp the bottoms of their tank tops and they lift the tops and their breasts are naked in New Orleans, their nipples wake wide-eyed to the pop of flashbulbs and the loud cheers of hundreds.

And Kelly, fascinated thus far, now recoils inside, once she sees the deal being closed. She never quite identified with the two young women. She is herself pretty, pretty enough and confident enough in her prettiness not to have that particular self-doubt, and the self-doubt she cannot name but that fills her up could never be assuaged by strangers, and she knows the value of the objects in the world and she desires many of them but not if Big Bird or Darth Vader are attached, not even in this sealed, self-defining world of Mardi Gras, because she has felt for a little while here that she is herself sealed and self-defining, but now it’s time to move away, go back to the bar and have a drink with her sister and her friend.

But the crowd is shifting its focus, and Kelly finds that the two young women are sliding away and she has a sudden empty space around her and the way back to the sidewalk has new faces, new bodies, men who are focused on Kelly now and are shoulder-to-shoulder and she doesn’t want to have to push by them and she has a quick sharp-clawed scrabbling in her chest and she can hear a call of “Catwoman” from above and she looks up and one of the young men is dangling a long strand of purple beads with a Batman pendant and he makes a lifting motion for her to show her tits and the man next to him is making the same gesture and the two balcony women are laughing and dipping their heads at Kelly in encouragement and they pantomime the raising of their own tops and Kelly shakes her head no, not me, I won’t, and she turns, looking for a way out, she makes a complete circle, looking for a way out but seeing only the tightly compacted crowd, and all the faces are on her and the cameras are raised and the circle she makes does not look to anyone like panic and the urge to flee, it looks like a show, like an appeal for encouragement, and the crowd takes that up with the cry of “Show your tits! Show your tits!”

Kelly might as well be totally naked, right now, right where she stands, her skin prickles with vulnerability and her limbs are crazy restless and the men blocking the sidewalk are scarier to her, more personal, than the street crowd, and she turns around once more, decided already that she has no choice but to lunge toward these very voices demanding her nakedness, and she raises her hands before her and lowers her face and she throws herself forward and she will pummel and weep and press her way out of this space no matter what.

And the crowd parts at once, swallowing Kelly into its midst, and more women slide into the marketplace behind her and the crowd instantly shifts its attention and forgets why they absorbed this woman in black so readily and she is trapped again, tightly bound in by bodies on all sides in the middle of Bourbon Street, bodies oblivious to her and to the reason she is now among them.

She presses on, tacking through the dense currents, following any little opening in the general direction of the bar for as far as possible and then shifting into the next opening, and in this way she is making progress, and the chanting and cheering is fading into the distance behind her. And for all the intense and indiscriminate jostling of a Mardi Gras middle-of-the-street crowd, it’s rare that anyone there will consciously put a hand on a stranger, so she’s doing better now, she’s even able to convince herself she’s had an adventure at Mardi Gras, she’s got a good story to tell.

And she finds herself seated on the side of the bed in the Olivier House and it’s twenty-five years later and she thinks: I’m telling the story to myself now. And she wonders why. She should have a drink. But instead, here’s this story playing itself out. Michael is about to appear for the first time. That’s the prompt. Meeting him, of course, has ultimately led to this present moment. But her mind has backed her up further than necessary to introduce her future husband, and it occurs to her the reason is this: the bag is Gucci, the dress is Chanel; I’ve shown my tits. But that feels wrong, somehow. Too simple. The two librarians wanted to be desired. But at the moment they lifted their tops to show their naked breasts, weren’t their yearnings running deeper than that? And she stops this thinking. Stops it.

Michael still insists on presenting himself, however. Kelly emerges at last from that Bourbon Street crowd and she goes into the bar on the corner of Toulouse, and there she learns yet another thing about Mardi Gras: you don’t split up and expect to find each other again. Kelly makes a thorough tour of the frat and sorority drunks, and a Yoda drinking with a Ken and Barbie, and the Blues Brothers in a corner table—half a dozen of them—singing the chorus of “Rubber Biscuit,” and the dazed and queasy women in the toilet at the back. But Katie and Theresa are gone.

Kelly doesn’t want to drink alone. She’s had enough close encounters with strangers. The three of them have an arranged meeting place if they get split up anyway, back at their hotel room across Canal Street. She steps out of the bar, and with the tumult on Bourbon and with a Toulouse Street to her right that, by comparison, is only thinly and casually populated, she strolls off toward Rampart.

But almost at once a loud, slurred meowing begins behind her.

She knows not to stop, not even to look. But she takes only a few more steps and on each side of her a body rushes by and the two converge before her to block her way, and she stops. The two young men look faintly familiar in a fleetingly-witnessed-crime-and-now-pick-them-out-of-a-lineup sort of way. She remembers. They are the drunks who meowed at her earlier. Not frat-boyish really. Spiky hair and bad teeth. Townies somewhere. Grease monkeys and 7-Eleven clerks. They are blondish and could be brothers. They are holding drinks in Styrofoam cups and they are draped in beads. The taller, heavier, older of the two shifts his eyes briefly over Kelly’s shoulder. She remembers there was a third and she knows he’s behind her. And there is a clutching in her throat as palpable as if one of them has grabbed her there with his hand.

The taller of the two says, “The cat. The cat’s back.”

The smaller says, “Catwoman. Cat girl.”

Kelly takes a single tentative, sliding step to the left and the two men shift with her.

“Whoa,” the older one says. “You’re all dressed up for us.”

“Looking good,” the other says.

In a low, calm way the older one says, “Show your tits.”

His little brother struggles to take a cheap strand of beads from the tangle on his neck. The older brother looks Kelly steadily in the eyes. “Show your tits,” he says again.

The other one stops struggling with the beads and says, “Tits. Can you show us six? Do cats have six?”

“Two,” the older one says. “It’s Cat*woman.*”

“Two’s better.”

“Show us.” This comes from behind Kelly. The third man.

“Show your tits,” they all three say. And they begin to chant it. “Show your tits. Show your tits.”

The chanting seems less a threat than the older one’s quiet demand and Kelly takes another step to the side and even as she thinks to run, her legs wobble, her knees won’t hold firmly, her ankle turns a little in the stilettos. And the third man appears, a dark-haired one, stocky, and the three shoulder up and the older blondish one, still the leader, says “Tits first” and Kelly makes a little movement to the side again but the three of them together are quick, they shift too, keeping in front of her and she’s having trouble drawing a breath and the three of them don’t chant this time but say in low, intense unison, “Show your tits.”

Then an arm is around her waist and a man’s voice says “The cat’s with me” and the arm is strong and presses her gently but firmly to move. Instantly the leader of the men takes a step toward them saying “Who’s this asshole . . .” and the man holding Kelly blocks the other man with a carefully modulated stiff arm, not quite touching him but firmly placed between them, meaning serious business but not quite aggressive enough to start a fight, not yet at least, and he says in an elaborately friendly tone “Chill out, man” and this is all going very fast for Kelly and she is trying to catch up and she has not even looked at this new man, and she does that now. She sees Michael’s profile for the first time, the sweet hard prominence of chin and brow, and at this moment she doesn’t know who he is or, in fact, if his intentions are any better than the others’. But she can sort that out later. She shifts closer into him and he’s saying to the leader of the three, in that friendly tone, “It’s all just a great party here.”

Michael again gently presses her to move and they do, together, taking a step up Toulouse, but the stocky one lurches in front of them, blocking the way, and the man says, “Hey, this is between us and her.” Michael’s arm slides from around Kelly’s waist and he gently elbows her away from him. She complies. She takes a few steps, goes up onto the sidewalk, but she does not keep going, as Michael perhaps wishes for her to do. She turns and watches.

Michael too has shifted a step away, but not in retreat. He squares up to confront all three at once, not just the dark one who blocked their retreat. “Gentlemen,” he says, “there are plenty of easy tits around the corner. You don’t want to do it the hard way in this town. You’ll spill your beer.”

And now everything comes to a stop. Michael and the three men stare at each other in silence, not moving. The drunks are weighing as best they can the risks and the gains. The only movement is the smaller blond looking briefly down at the cup in his hand, apparently to ponder the spilling of his beer. Michael is wide in the shoulders. Michael has thick upper arms. Michael is utterly motionless and Kelly cannot see his face, but ten years later she will watch him from behind in a courtroom at a murder trial and she will not see his face but he will be staring down a cop he suspects faked some evidence and she will think that his face is the same as it was on the first day they met.

The silence between the four men is persisting. In reality it is probably not more than a few seconds, but it’s a long time, a very long time, for Kelly. As an observer she is free to begin to flush hot and grow limb-restless with fear for herself and for this man trying to help her. And she knows the situation needs some new element, something Michael did not presume to add himself, either from macho simplicity or from deference to her. But she can do this.

“Darling,” she says. “Will you promise never to leave me alone again at Mardi Gras? I don’t care how bad you have to piss.”

The three drunken men glance to her: if the asshole who’s messing with their game isn’t just a stranger trying to be a hero, if in fact he’s really with the bitch, then the situation changes somewhat. Not necessarily a lot—this is a guy thing now, with its own life—but enough that Michael recognizes a brief opportunity. He turns his back on the men and takes a step toward Kelly.

“Just stay where I put you next time,” he says.

She takes a step toward him and there is a rush in her from its being time to try to walk away. And from the man’s face. She is seeing Michael’s face straight on for the first time. His eyes are dark and heavy-lidded and steady on her and the rush in her may be mostly about his face, even the walking away part is about his eyes now. His arm is around her again and they take a step together up Toulouse and another, and now that he’s holding her she finds she’s starting to let go to what’s been happening and the trembling is beginning, she might well tremble already at his touch, but this is mostly about what’s been happening with these other men and she is wobbly in the legs once more.

Michael says, low, “Let’s move a little briskly.”

And they do. They push on faster. No cries or curses follow them. Surely macho-crazed drunks in pursuit would make a loud show of it. And even with the din of Mardi Gras coming from Bourbon Street, she does hear their own feet brisking on the pavement, carrying them away.

Michael brings his face close to hers. “That was smart, what you said.”

Kelly wants to reply, but the farther they get from the danger, the more she realizes this incident is over, the more she trembles, and she can’t quite shape any words. And this man—Michael, the man she will marry a little over a year later—this man seems to her to understand everything.

“Look,” he says. “I’m staying in a hotel up ahead. Would you like to go there and collect yourself? If you prefer, I can just put you in the room and disappear.”

And Kelly finds her voice. “Thanks,” she says. “Yes. But don’t disappear.”

*Excerpted from the novel* A Small Hotel *(Grove, July 2011).*