

Clover Grill: A Short Story

by Collin Kelley

I'm somewhere on I-10 in Mississippi, barreling westbound at 80 miles an hour through a rainstorm on a late Wednesday afternoon. The last road sign I remember was for Beauvoir, some Confederate general's antebellum plantation. The sky is full of ominous, dark clouds rolling in from the Gulf. Wouldn't it be just my luck if a hurricane were churning out there? I didn't check the weather before I left Cottonwood this morning. Yes, that would be fitting — eluding one storm and running smack into the middle of another.

My mind keeps wandering, hydroplaning from one thought to another like the wheels of my car on the wet concrete. Up ahead, I see a billboard for a casino in Biloxi and a mileage sign for my final destination: New Orleans — 100 miles.

I should be in Charleston on a second honeymoon with Mike. We're not expected back until late Sunday night. Is New Orleans far enough away? If I keep driving, I could be on the other side of the country before anyone realizes there was a sudden change of plans.

As I cross Lake Pontchartrain, the clouds break and I see sunlight dappling on the swells of water. The bridge seems endless, punching a hole in the horizon.

“Never burn your bridges, Catherine,” I hear my mother's voice say. “You never know when you might need to come back.”

Mentally, I strike a match.

I plan to lose myself in New Orleans. Wander the streets and gardens I've read so much about. My mind indexes the catalog of descriptions, courtesy of Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, John Kennedy Toole, Ellen Gilchrist and Anne Rice. According to all the literature, it sounds as if time has stood still in New Orleans. I want to steal in silently and disappear into the past.

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I-10 rises like a wave and at the crest, I see the city. I've never seen a city from this vantage point before. It, too, seems to stretch forever — the rooftops of shotgun houses, skyscrapers reflecting weak sunlight and the bubble of the Super Dome all wrapped in a ribbon of sparkling water.

I see familiar names of strange places: Faubourg Marigny, Elysian Fields, Vieux Carre. I cross three lanes of traffic and the exit ramp plunges straight down. I smile as I drop off the face of the earth.

Along Orleans Avenue, there are brick tenements, row upon row. Black youths slouch on street corners. Old women fan themselves on disintegrating porches. It is incredibly warm for late October.

I cross Basin Street and find myself on a one-way lane called Rue Toulouse, heading deep into the heart of the French Quarter. I drive slowly past the colorful houses with their brightly painted doors and filigreed wrought iron balconies. The homes give way to bars with tall doors open to the street, the mingling aromas of gumbo and seafood wafting from hole-in-the-wall restaurants, the sound of jazz music and garish souvenir shops. I feel like I've slipped into a parallel world; this can't possibly be America. There's water on my face and for a moment I think I'm overcome with emotion, but it's only the rain gently blowing through my open window.

At Bourbon Street, tourists walk down the middle of the road carrying tall plastic cups brimming with liquor. The party goes on despite the weather. No one is carrying an umbrella. I park the car next to the Jax Brewery, never mind the cost. Today I'm a rich tourist. I don't even have a hotel room, but I'm pushing that out of my mind. Instead, I climb to the top of the levee that holds back the Mississippi River. It's dusk and the city is spread before me, the downtown lights fluttering on. I will stand on this rampart and defend it with my life.

I have plenty of time and nothing left to lose.

Bourbon Street is just like I imagined it would be, full of neon lights, bars, beggars and too many souvenir shops. Hawkers beckon me toward the strip joints. Posters outside the establishments graphically display the erotic delights offered inside.

You can belly up to the bar right on the sidewalk. Everyone is served. Water and trash stagnate in the gutters and there is a palpable odor of rotting meat and paper mills. Visitors hold their noses and hurry by bags of decaying refuse. They consult their guidebooks while a 10-year-old picks their pockets. Policemen patrol on horseback with their mounts defecating at every block; people are so busy looking up, they don't notice when they step in it. Three black boys with bottle cap tap shoes perform on the corner of Rue St. Ann. An old shoebox holds their meager earnings. Later, they'll snatch a purse to buy dinner.

I'm standing in front of a greasy spoon called the Clover Grill — open 24 hours for my convenience — that has been at this corner since 1939. Natalie Wood comes tearing by this place at the end of *This Property Is Condemned*. In the movie, Natalie runs away from her horrible life to lose herself in the Big Easy, and this irony is not lost on me as I stand in front of the “world famous” Clover Grill.

It's a narrow diner, grimy windows and a lunch counter well polished by decades of elbows. A waiter, 19 at the most, sets a glass of water before me.

“Where you from?” he asks.

“Nowhere,” I say, and this elicits a smile.

I should be having a bowl of gumbo and some crawdads, but I order a hamburger and a Coke.

“Are you finding your way around okay?” he asks, drawing the cola from a fountain. “I got some free maps.”

“I'm doing okay.”

He calls in the order for the hamburger, which is slapped on the grill and covered with a hubcap, and brings my Coke, then leans on the counter watching me. I smile.

"I saw this place in that movie *This Property is Condemned*," I say, making conversation. "You know, the one with Natalie Wood."

"Who?"

"Natalie Wood."

"Never heard of her. That's an actress?"

"Yeah. She drowned ten or twelve years ago."

"Oh," he says, looking puzzled. "What movie was it?"

"*This Property Is Condemned*."

He looks perplexed.

"Tennessee Williams wrote it," I offer.

"The guy who wrote *Streetcar Named Desire*," he exclaims.

"Yes!"

"Never read it. How did you want that burger cooked?"

I get a room at the St. Charles Inn in the Garden District. When the woman behind the counter asks how long I'll be staying, I tell her until my money runs out. She gives me the key.

In my room, I stand at the window and watch the streetcars rumble by. A huge oak tree blooms with old Mardi Gras beads dangling from its limbs. I open the window, retrieve a strand and put it around my neck. I sit on the bed and finger the cheap plastic beads for God knows how long. I left my suitcase in the car. I fall asleep in my clothes, never bothering to turn back the bed covers.

I dream about Mike. His yelling, his upraised hand ready to strike, his irrevocable, damaging words. I dream of a world where he does not exist and, when I wake up, I realize I am there.

It's raining. I feel disoriented and ill at ease, as I always do when sleeping in a strange bed. I get soaked while retrieving my suitcase from the car. I shower and force myself to move.

I catch the streetcar and head downtown, my forehead against the window. It's late morning and the car is empty. I move

from seat to seat to see all the sights. The Garden District slides by in a blur of droplets, imposing mansions and Spanish moss. The driver is watching me but he does not speak. No fares are waiting at the stops along St. Charles, so we proceed in silence toward the Central Business District on a rainy Thursday.

I get off at Canal Street and make my way down the wide boulevard of department stores, restaurants and hotels. I turn down Decatur Street, dodging the tourists and their umbrellas at Café du Monde. Across Jackson Square, I see the spires of St. Louis Cathedral. Maybe a little prayer might do me some good. Almost by force of will, I find myself in the doorway of the cathedral. I'm soaking wet, water heavy on my skin, rain dripping from my clothes and hair. The sanctuary is empty. I kneel at the altar and place my palms on the cold stone floor. Distantly, there is the sound of thunder. Kneeling in a little drowning pool, I recall Mike's face, his eyes, other places I have drowned. I remember when we would dance, our bodies locked together. The smell of his hair, the taste of his lips. God, I loved you more than I could ever say, but it's all gone.

Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. This is my first confession in....well, let's see...well, this is my first confession ever. Soaking wet, I am absolved of you.

I go to the top of the World Trade Center and wonder if anyone has ever jumped. I think about jumping, for a split second, like anyone does when they lean over the railing of a tall building. What would it feel like to hit the ground? Would you feel it at all? Or would you die of a heart attack on the way down? But jumping would be a hollow victory, and I wouldn't even be around to enjoy it.

I watch the ferry leave the slip at the foot of Canal Street and sail across the Mississippi to Algiers. A man and woman stand near me, taking in the panorama. He's got his arm around her waist, talking too loudly, telling her about the history of the city. He's a know-it-all type, points out every building visible on the horizon and has a story about each one. The woman looks rapturously at him

rather than the sights. I resist the urge to tell him to shut up and her to run. There's something about the way he holds her too tightly, cuts her off when she starts to speak, the almost imperceptible edge in his voice that the woman cannot hear. Yet.

"Does it ever stop raining?" she asks when he finally pauses.

He laughs and chucks her under the chin, which makes her giggle, but she doesn't realize how it reduces her, turns her into a child or a simpleton.

"It's always the rainy season in New Orleans, honey," he says, then glances my way and smiles, as if he's apologizing for her stupidity. Then he winks at me.

In St. Louis Cemetery, a place tourist books advise people not to go alone because of muggers, I find the grave of Marie Laveau, New Orleans' famous voodoo queen. Her grave is above ground and covered in red X's. Pennies litter the ground and every ledge of the tomb. Thousands have asked this woman for guidance, so I make an X with my lipstick and put a penny on the ledge. What's one more wish after so many?

I wish for a place of safety, a life without fear, of getting away with what I've done back in Cottonwood. Things Marie Laveau has, no doubt, heard a million times.

Walking back through the Quarter, I pass a voodoo shop and, since it's still raining, I duck inside to dry off and explore. There are all sorts of strange candles, totems, necklaces, odd pieces of old furniture, some kitschy tourist souvenirs. The smell of incense is ingrained in the wood. A woman sits behind the counter and watches me move about the shop. She has dark features, but the blouse and head wrap she wears are startling white, even in the dimness of the shop. I pick up a bracelet with tiny hematite stones and approach the counter. The woman stares at me, an almost imperceptible smile on her face. She takes the bracelet and puts it under the counter.

"That's not what you need," the woman says in a husky voice.

I'm momentarily taken aback. "Oh, really. What do I need?"

The woman turns and pulls a candle from a shelf. It's a tall pillar inside a black holder with a cross etched into the glass. From under the counter, she pulls a small vial of liquid.

"Imagine yourself at the center of the candle," she says. "Then take the oil and rub it from the top down, pushing it away from you. Think about the thing you want to make go away. After you're done, light the candle and let it burn until it's gone."

As if in a trance, I hand over the money, then murmur a thank you as I walk out of the shop into the rain with the candle feeling heavy inside a paper bag.

In my hotel room, I pour the oil over the candle and rub it down the sides of the glass holder, imagine Mike under my fingertips being pushed away into the darkness. I light the candle and watch the flame dance until I fall asleep. When I wake the next morning, the candle has completely melted, leaving nothing behind but a black wick. For an hour, I sob away the guilt until a sense of relief washes over me. For the first time in years, I feel free.

I pack my things, pay my hotel bill and make my way back to the French Quarter. I park on a side street and jog up to the Clover Grill. The guy is still working behind the counter. Maybe he never leaves.

"Hey," he greets me as I step inside, shaking off my raincoat.

"Coffee?"

"Yeah. Black."

He brings a chipped mug and pours the brew.

"You know, I rented that movie you told me about."

"Really," I say, surprised that he even owns a VCR. "What did you think?"

"It was sad. Wasn't Natalie Wood's sister in the movie the same kid who played Scout in *To Kill A Mockingbird*?"

"Mary Badham. You've seen *To Kill A Mockingbird*?"

"Yeah, in high school," he says.

"Well, I'm glad you liked it."

"I thought about you the whole time I was watching it," he says.

It was my turn to be perplexed. "Why?"

He wipes down the counter for a moment, then looks at me.

"It's just that you said you were from nowhere," he says.

"Everybody's from somewhere. I just thought...well, maybe you were gonna kill yourself or something."

What could I say? This complete stranger was worried I might be in town to off myself.

"What's your name?" I ask.

"Charlie."

"I'm Cathy," I say as we shake hands. "Charlie, I'm not going to kill myself. Thought about it. Decided against it."

"Cool."

"As a matter of fact, I'm looking for a job and an apartment."

Charlie smiles. "You ever waited tables?"

"Not since college," I say. "Are you hiring?"

Tonight there's another rainstorm outside the Clover Grill. I watch the water trickle down the glass and then turn back to the burgers frying on the grill. At the end of the midnight shift, I walk down Bourbon Street and cross Elysian Fields Avenue to my studio apartment in the Marigny. I take a shower, slide into bed next to Charlie and fall asleep watching a candle shimmer in the darkness.

It's been more than a year since Charlie helped me push my car off the causeway and into the Gulf. The search for my body was called off after six months. I am assumed dead; my body was washed away or eaten by alligators. The authorities think I committed suicide after I killed Mike. I made sure he would never raise his

hand to me, or anyone else, ever again the day I left Cottonwood. The image of him on the bathroom floor with the knife I drove through his chest is beginning to recede. I don't wake up anymore in the middle of the night in a cold sweat. When the cops stop by the diner, I no longer avert my gaze or hide in the back.

I am someone else now, unrecognizable to myself in the mirror. I've cut and dyed my hair, lost weight. It's a small price to pay for peace of mind. This is my new nowhere.

