

## Once a Kappa

By Margaret S. Hamilton

I spent three months last winter writing and revising a four-thousand-word short story, “Dressed to Kill,” set at the annual New Orleans Red Dress Run. The story had it all: a compelling setting, a repugnant villain, sympathetic heroine, and intrepid amateur sleuth, Lizzie Christopher, who unravels a dastardly plot.

Not only was it not accepted for the Sisters in Crime *Fish out of Water* anthology, it received scathing critiques and low scores from the judges. I was crushed.

A month later, I read a submission call for the annual *Southern Writers Magazine* Short Story Contest, for stories with a maximum word count of fifteen hundred words. I pulled out the manuscript of “Red Dress Run” and slashed it to ribbons, eliminating characters and subplots. I kept the heroine, Maria Savoie; her former teacher and mentor, Charlotte Breaux; the evil villain, “Big Daddy”; and his inept son, Forest. I simplified the plot, focusing on Big Daddy’s attempt to gain control of a valuable tract of New Orleans land left to Maria by her parents.

I tinkered with “what if” scenarios, finding a way to make Big Daddy truly despicable, while enabling Charlotte to call on her Newcomb-Tulane Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority sisters for assistance.

“Once a Kappa” keeps the essence of my original story, distilled to fifteen hundred words. *Southern Writers Magazine* accepted it as one of the ten finalists in their short story contest, and published it in their Summer 2016 issue.

First page of the original story, “Dressed to Kill”:

Lizzie squinted in the brilliant New Orleans sunshine. She grabbed her sunglasses and straw hat from the van before stepping into the crowd of men and women, all wearing red dresses and running shoes. Skimpy dresses on top of hairy chests and legs. Sequins, satins, polka dots and tulle tutus. Everyone wore a race number and blue plastic food bracelet.

“Welcome to the Red Dress Run,” her friend Charlotte said, clad in a red striped cotton sundress. “You’re not in Ohio anymore, and you can’t click the heels of your ruby slippers, either.”

Lizzie jogged in place, wearing red running shoes trimmed with sequins.

She looked at Charlotte’s physician husband Bobby standing with his sons. “You look a treat in your red dress.”

Bobby tugged his red baseball hat. “The boys wanted us to run the race as a family, but wearing a dress in public is pushing it. I hope none of my patients sees me.” He yanked his red shift down over his running shorts. “We’ll see you ladies after the race. Come on, guys, let’s go find us a beer.”

Lizzie spotted a young woman waving at Charlotte. “One of your students? Long dark hair, the young woman wearing a red cami with a chiffon skirt? She’s drop dead gorgeous.”

“That’s Maria Savoie.” Charlotte said. “She went up North for college, but she’s back in New Orleans to do an internship semester at my school. I’d like you to meet her.”

They pushed through the milling crowd, everyone drinking Abita beer in plastic cups while posing for endless selfies. Music blared from speakers mounted throughout the park, the air redolent with the aroma of smoking barbeque.

And the shortened, published version, “Once a Kappa”:



Maria Savoie stepped into a crowd of men and women, all wearing red dresses and running shoes. Skimpy dresses on top of hairy chests and legs. Sequins, satins, polka dots and tulle tutus. Everyone wore a race number and blue plastic food bracelet for the annual New Orleans Red Dress Run.

Maria took a deep breath and smoothed her scarlet chiffon skirt over her hips. Where were her friends? They'd promised to meet her near the Armstrong Park entrance. Her phone chimed an incoming text: *won't make race, c u after*. She gazed at the crowd. Alone, as she'd been since her parents' death.

Charlotte Breaux enveloped her in a hug. "Maria, happy belated twenty-first. I didn't think we'd see you until tonight. We've missed you so much."

Maria smiled. Miss Charlotte had not only been her teacher and mentor at St. Catherine's School, but had given her a home when she needed one.

Charlotte smoothed a stray brunette curl off Maria's face. "Do you still plan to be a teacher? St. Catherine's would love to have you join the faculty."

"It's my first choice, if I move back to New Orleans after graduation."

“Wonderful! Sugar, what brought you back now? We haven’t seen you for three years.”

Maria’s voice quavered. “I flew down to take care of that Uptown land parcel my parents left me. I’ve decided to turn it into a community park in their memory, with mulched paths under the live oaks and a small playground.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Charlotte said. “You’re a credit to your parents.” She pulled a tissue out of the pocket of her red seersucker sundress and handed it to Maria.

END



In addition to *Southern Writers Magazine*, Margaret S. Hamilton has published stories in *Kings River Life*, the *Darkhouse Destination: Mystery!* Anthology, and *Mysterical-E*. She sets her stories in a small college town in Ohio and New Orleans.

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