

Forty Days of This

by Jeffrey Utzinger

She washes her face, dabs it dry with a towel as I watch over her shoulder, attempting to shave, both of us watching the image of how each appears to themselves, the opposite of how we appear to the world, and though she's beautiful there in the mirror, she applies a light base, rubs blush on the cheek bone, the thick black mascara to lashes, a subtle eye shadow that makes me realize I wasn't aware she wore any at all, and though I'm transfixed by her face, I stop to rinse the razor as she steps out of the way, and I miss what I love the most, the pursed lips ready to receive the red waxy lipstick, catching only the tissue floating to the waste basket—a kiss suspended and falling, and then gone. I look up to see that she's smiling over my shoulder, our images reversed, and I turn to kiss, reversing the image again, and as she puts her hands to my face to rub the smooth skin, I touch my lips to the tip of her mask. We're unusually close, sharing this space in the mirror; we've been together long enough that we're more likely to seek our own time in the morning, but we're out of our element, staying at her brother and his wife's apartment in New Orleans. We arrived in the city to rows of young, Black girls bearing down, kicking spandex legs high, adorned in silver sequins, ruffled skirts and bright bows, their leader twirling a baton. We joined the parade in medias res. Stepped into the street on the heels of the glitter girl's last swagger and dance. Trombones and cymbal crash of the marching band swelled, the final note of "Iko, Iko," talkin' bout Hey now (hey now) blended into an unfamiliar tune, with a hint of a Latin beat. I stood in the middle of a blacktop street so narrow cars would have to drive half in the ditch to pass, beneath a canopy of oak tree branches. A tractor with goal posts mounted to the front, painted yellow and blue, rolled lazily by, not at all a threat to the twirling, cheering squad, but enough to keep the parents and sponsors and a few exhausted girls with their pom poms hanging at their sides who were lagging behind, moving at a reasonable pace. I've moved at a reasonable pace through the preceding nights and days. It's been two, maybe three; I've lost track of time. Late nights. Early mornings. Heavy sleep with no dreams. We did our own dance on Friday in Austin, kicking drawers shut, holding paperwork at bay, and spinning out the door early to drive like mad for the Mardi Gras. Christa grew up in Baton Rouge, and this celebration along the Mississippi, fit for such a wild, muddy river, is nothing new for her. I've never been however, and at first, I didn't want to come. I'm loath to spend a weekend away from the country where we live in a small town, on an acre of land, surrounded by trees near the Colorado River. During the week we drive two hours round trip each day to work in the city, so the thought of driving for hours to relax, smacked of madness, along with the sleeping in guest beds, eating what others choose, spending all waking hours talking with people. Travel brings out the beast who usually sleeps, and he's prone to lash out. It gets ugly. I'd also expected scorching heat, projectile vomit, crushing crowds and overwhelming fatigue, but my first glimpse of a parade was two

blocks from a university which we passed after parking along a residential street lined with hundred year old mansions that looked brand new with immaculate lawns and gladiolas in bloom. I hadn't expected to get close enough to the floats to reach out and touch the rider's hands, and in many ways, my first glimpse reminded me of a small town parade. And soon after we arrived, Christa spotted her brother and squeezed my hand, laughed, and pulled me from the path of the yellow and blue tractor, forward to the curb into the shade among spectators yelling and waving their arms. My sister-in-law strung beads over our heads, and her husband handed me a beer. Her family was lounging in a grassy median beneath trees, waving for us to join them like we all lived in the neighborhood and had just walked from our house. I had expected chaos, but found it natural to blend into the crowd, to fall into easy conversation with strangers while men in ludicrous rubber masks or with scarves across their mouths hurled throws, plastic cups, and doubloons. I hung back that first afternoon, believing the trinkets were for children, but each time a float passed, the adults rushed forward, waving their arms, so I inched forward and caught my first strand, lightweight and green. It circled around two fingers and I felt a lightness, an understanding, almost a relief. My brother-in-law handed me another beer as I slipped the beads around Christa's neck. A plastic cup hit me in the back of the head, and I felt better than I'd felt in some time. I didn't know, the first afternoon, how addictive all of this would become, didn't know I'd want the span of time to stretch on for forty days or more, but began to understand when six or seven floats had passed and suddenly, the first parade was over, and I felt the child-like disappointment. We'd arrived too late for this one, but it was only the first of many parades we'd join. And though nobody spoke of plans or emerged from the crowd as a leader, we began to move as one; at first I thought towards the parade's mid-point, so we could revisit the marching bands' tunes or heckle the float-riders with "hey mister," but it was more like movement on a raft in a river, being carried towards an uncertain destination, lulled by the sounds and the sway. A movement I slipped into with ease at that moment, and have followed for the duration of our stay. We came to rest on the steps of an enormous white stucco apartment with a narrow stairwell, lined with a cold iron rail that spiraled to the top. It smelled of mildew but the people ascending and descending, drinks in hand and laughing, made the atmosphere crackle, the hallway sparkle and shine. I don't remember who lived there, or even if the one I'm remembering was the first we visited that day—our sister-in-law has friends and family spread all over the city. The houses and apartments we have visited are all tiny, but we've gladly squeezed inside. A double bed with several lounging people usually sits near the door. Mimosas and fried turkey are crammed on narrow kitchen counters. Love seats pushed next to tables on which sit plates of ham, potato salad, crab dip, and tortilla chips threatening to push small TVs over the edge. A narrow hallway usually leads to other rooms full of more people, more alcohol, more food. An ever-present line for the bathroom whose end is never sure circles the room, but I can fall into conversation with someone at some point, and eventually be granted a turn. At one stop a man told me there was beer in the bathtub, so I waited in line, used the facilities, and grabbed a beer. When I emerged the guy said you'd better get two. And I did. Dionysus has moved through the day into darkness, handing me bottle after beer after bourbon, making me think I can drink like a young man again. And I have.

Tonight we leave for our final parade with the moon so high and full following over our shoulders through the black silhouette of tree branches and street signs as we walk through neighborhoods that rose up beautiful and white. Christa's hand is as warm in mine as I imagine the hot burning stars to be resting in the folds of the sky so clear and midnight blue. The bourbon and water that has replaced my blood reminds me I'm so much in love, makes me fall back on the sentimental phrase, makes me skip and talk too loud. We cross railroad tracks and our group reconvenes to merge in the crowds lining the streets to catch a glimpse of another parade. We catch the parade in preparation, still and churning as though it's been dammed. The source of the stream that will wind its way through the Big Easy, carrying lights and masked men on ornate floats made of flowers, plastic and papier-mâché. Herculean forms, smiling gypsies, mermaids. The men aboard talk, swill beer from silver cans, pulling handfuls of beads—purple, yellow, and green—from boxes and bags they discard in the street, a casual preparation for a full night of work. We move, our pool of relatives and friends through this sea of people; we've arrived too late, lingered too long over cocktails and light conversation, the kind that moves through a day so relaxed you haven't noticed the time, the kind possible only when strangers are mingled with family, and nothing of import needs to be sorted. Too late to really carve out the perfect spot on the curb. A family friend who's a lawyer and collector of cowboy boots, a man who always wears slacks and a sports jacket, pulls cigars from his coat and begins passing them around. I draw the flame in as the smoke fills my mouth. My wife wanders off with her sister-in-laws' parents, back to view the static floats. I watch as they admire, then grow closer, waving to the men in masks. Christa pulls the band from her hair, shakes her long blond ponytail loose, and waves to the men on the top tier. A swirl of large white beads move heavenward and swing down around her outstretched arm. Her movements and laughter, rare revelations of her coy nature, the flirtation with strangers, moves me to the year we met and I began falling asleep at nights with her image in my head. I look back down the alley of the static parade, swarms of people milling in conversation, clinging to keep warm, and the colored lights that have begun to flicker on floats, on street posts, and from glow-in-the-dark charms children are swinging on strings. The first float begins to move. An enormous cheer erupts. I find Christa and we move back to the group. The crowds are like tides swelling, our hands shooting upwards like flecks of foam, lashing out at nothing really—plastic beads, Frisbees, and trinkets. It makes sense to reach out the first afternoon, when the first float passes by and you stand there naked waiting to be adorned; you want the beads to show you belong here, you're a part of this swell, but midway through if it's too hot, and you've had too much beer, and bodies are pressing too close, enough to drown you, it doesn't make sense to roll your arms like a drowning man—it's not lifesavers we're grasping; it's more weight. And midway through your stay, your second or third parade, if beads hang like mill stone around your neck which has turned bright pink from where sweat bled a cheap set into your skin, and hundreds, already procured, lie in a tangled seaweed glut on the back seat, strung around the rear view, draped across the chair and under the bed, or a boxful sits in someone's apartment, removed to ease the burden, and forgotten in a peaceful stupor walking home, then it seems ludicrous to cry out for more. But when the float passes by, and there's a lull, the void seems insufferable. The crowd recedes to catch its breath, the road and curbs like the beach

at low tide littered with beads that miraculously sifted through hands and touched down. Nearly no one stoops to pick up these treasures. There's something magical about snatching it mid-air. It's a tradition that comes from Spain, but its actions seem so American. The thrill of the wide receiver. The hunger for more of the same. This annual apocalyptic celebration—one more sin before the beginning of Lent— somehow seems out of order to me. Forty days of abstinence, and self-denial should be followed by forty days of this. This masquerade seems more of a chance, for an evening, to forget your failures and fears. It's a chance to move through an evening without anyone questioning whether the visage you wear is real, or if you're only holding a mask. It's an evening of levity, weightless illusion, surrounded by beauty with no time constraints. It's a chance for the things, real or imagined, that separate a family to evaporate in brisk coastal air. And if it's just an excuse to eat and drink more, work less for a few days, then well, that seems okay too. Religious ritual and pagan rites aside, it's easy to get lost in a parade. And this one is winding down. The wind feels a bit more brisk, our steps slowed and speech sparse. As the crowd disperses, a discussion ensues about where we should eat, and though I'm suddenly overcome with hunger, I think I'd rather curl up next to Christa and sleep. We cross the street to where a line of men in orange jumpsuits with white, plastic bags slung over their shoulders have emerged from the shadows. A man with a whistle barks a command and the line of convicts move in methodical unison down the sidewalk, picking up trash. Every detail perfectly planned. A siren blares, and as we step out of the street, a paddy wagon big as a city bus bears down, red and blue flashing lights on top, and bright neon lights inside, lighting the faces of those who stepped out of line, faces more weary than afraid at the prospect of a night in jail. My brother-in-law yells go deep, and I trot back into the street, my feet feeling for the curb, my eyes over my shoulder. He rears back, lets the plush football fly. I lose it in a streetlight, catching instead a glimpse of a beautiful woman who's become haloed in the street cleaner's spray. A boy intercepts the pass and runs off. I stand and watch, amazed at the stranger she's become. At the beauty of water and refracted false light. Bells from a fool's cap jingle, and for a moment I pretend we are saved.

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