

# The Grand Marshall of Mardi Gras

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It was getting late ,and evening's promulgators were stretching their wings gliding silently over the pavement first under and then reaching ahead of my feet. Of no tangible essence ,shadows aren't anything if not but light stolen ,this time by the dwellings that were between my backside and the setting sun. Even still the air chilled in acknowledgment of their arrival. Victims of their own success ,evening's shadows die just as they reach their peak ,their efforts ending without gain. Feeling cool air on the back of my neck ,I quickened my pace. It was the end of February 2006 ,and I was stationed in New Orleans. My job was to help expedite the on going storm relief effort. Hurricane Katrina ,an apocalyptical bearer of cataclysmic hell on earth had ravaged the city in it's prime , just that last August. The resulting failures of the levees were exacerbated further by the arrival of Hurricane Rita just weeks later. Alone and together they were a catastrophic calamity beyond the adjectives of the English language ,making Bourbon Street the heart and soul of all that is New Orleans , more cardinal than ever to the vitality of her mistress. Located in one of the city's more '*elevated*' zones the famed venue was one of the least flooded of all. Although it's infrastructure below ground level had been compromised ,it's boundaries from street level to the sky remained above water and by doing so free of observable damage. Now ,left as but a ghost of her former glory ,what remained of that crucial port city was now primarily inhabited by men working to get the gateway to America's heartland back on her feet. All in all it was a perpetual "Boys Town".

On this one mildly cool evening ,the calendar was closing in on , "Black Tuesday" ,the official end of Mardi Gras. The annual religious debauchery that had been building steadily

for more than a week was now nearing its anticipated fever pitch. Thankfully, though fore shortened, the popular annual observance was drawing members of the opposite sex, at least temporarily, back into town. Though far too few in number, they were still a much welcomed candy for some lonesome old eyes as mine that were tired of looking at nothing but hard tails. Each day these fresh happy often decorated faces adored our streets mostly between the hours of 5, and 10 pm. or during the daytime parades where they could be heard shouting, "throw me something mister!" a Mardi Gras tradition. Earlier on this particular evening, I had taken an ill conceived detour during my nightly stroll. Rounding a strange corner I could now see the entire city's skyline spread out before me like Oz mocking me in the distance. Woefully, I had managed to wander a long way from where I had desired to be. Worse still, because of all the excessive walking, my foot was throbbing from the result of an old injury. It was as if a pebble had been slipped into my shoe. I was now finding torment with my every step. Chastising myself for my own blatant stupidity in allowing myself to become so misdirected, I extracted a prescription codeine pain tablet out of my little travel cache that I carried with me. I held it up in the fading light, and examined the oblong pill closely while rolling it slowly between my thumb and forefingers. Each one of these little jewels was precious. I reminded myself that I would soon run out of my current holdings, ugh, and then unceremoniously popped it down the back of my dehydrated throat, swallowing it down dry with several hard painful gulps. Afterwards sighing miserably, I could but only tell myself to suck up the pain, and trek my way back into the controlled riot I knew was besieging the city still distant. After what seemed forever, I re-joined the on going indulgence, entering the city from the outer end of Bourbon Street. There becoming

as any one of it's numerous revelers ,although somewhat worse for wear.

For weeks ,I had been a regular partaker of the nightly festivities to be found there. I ,at 55 a light weight drinker , typically consumed only two beverages in anyone night. Even so ,donned in my black leather jacket ,and cowboy hat attire ,I had always enjoyed the pleasure of mixing in ,and just being one of the local color. But this soon to be bizarre night was to prove itself to be an exception to any such rule. Like a classic episode out of the 'Twilight Zone' ,the natural laws of the universe by which we know our world were about to become momentarily eclipsed ; reality tested ,and found short. Any possible purpose of which ,I'll leave up to you the reader.

As I painfully meandered my way down that cobblestoned way ,I arrived near or about the halfway party point of said famous venue. Now nearly exhausted ,from my long trek out from and then back into this raging Zoo of excess ,I was in need of some much called for respite. My foot throbbing ,my knees aching ,my legs weak ,I hobbled over to and propped myself up against one of those black iron posts raising up from the sidewalk's edge. This one was holding up one of the many black wrought iron balconies that protruded out over to the edge of the street. Normally during Mardi Gras ,people would be partying up there on that balcony above me ,however in this truncated post Katrina season ,many as this one were vacant.

The club on the corner behind me had regularly featured a Rock band ,but tonight things were different. Like a throwback to the age of Disco ,there was a recorded dance arrangement being broadcasted thunderously out over the streets by gigantic outdoor speakers. And just as I curled my backbone into a comfortable position against my new found shoring ,one selection was ending while another was starting up.

This new number was basically just a loop of a one bar bass drum track. It repeated the same pattern over and over. No other instrument accompanied it. It went bum-pi-de bump , bump ,bump with a loud ,deep ,and almost primeval reverberation. I could feel the sonic modulation being resonated out over the cool crisp night air ,casting a broad net of influence that echoed up ,back ,and all around the streets and canyons of the city ,actually shaking the ground I was standing on. And then it began. What ever it was ,it began right then and there as I was leaning up against my new found friend ,proud I was to have the support. It began.

Every Tom ,Dick ,and Mary besides my own semi-numbed , exhausted and weak legged self ,within sight as far as my eyes could see ,and I'm tall ,were surrendering completely to the invocation of what I had first thought to be just a mono simplistic sonification. All of them began moving their heads with a quick thrust forward ,arcing upward with every beat. Like a dysfunctional Congo line that had no leader ,no direction ,but unbridled ambition just the same. Above us all , the lights were casting grotesque monstrous shadows of this witchery high up onto the upper faces of the buildings. Strange wavy smoky dark figures ,distorted by the smoky haze from the fireworks and out door barbecues were dancing like spirits in demonic black fire ,producing an inferno of anti-light flames licking upwards on the walls of the artificial canyons above our heads. It felt timeless ,was beyond surreal ,and about to get even stranger still. For just then the dancers before me began systematically spreading out. Creating a clearing all about me that was a near perfect circle of vacant space more than thirty five feet across. It's diameter extended beyond the width Bourbon street from building to building ,and there was not a soul to be found within it except for myself ,all alone protruding in from one edge. Taking all this in ,I pressed

defensively back against my iron post positioned at say 6 o'clock with 5 feet of vacant balcony shaded sidewalk behind me. I really didn't even have to look behind me to know that it was vacant ,my senses were operating at such an extremely high level that I could feel it.

Bum-pi-de bump ,bump ,bump ,like a command ,that sound kept modulating over and over without any abate. Uncannily , it was as if some ancient sorcery was being skillfully woven within ,about and all around us. From my position Canal street ,the center of the city ,was off on my left at 9 o'clock nearly 3 blocks away ,and so the third intersection out from Canal street was just to my immediate right at 3 o'clock on the dial. Mindful ,I became conscious that every eye I could see seemed acutely aware of me. There were hundreds of bouncing partying rabble eyeing me with interest ,their bobbing heads forming a wavy sea of round hairy Orbs. Refusing to be intimidated ,I steadfastly resisted any urge to pump my exhausted legs ,abandon my post ,or join the native dance. Just then about ten feet away on my near immediate left ,at say 8 o'clock of the dial ,appeared a thin young man. He was encased head to toe in a Davy Crocket inspired attire , complete with coonskin hat ,soft brown leather suede jacket , pants ,and moccasins featuring long flowing tassels stringing down from his sleeves ,pleats , and pockets. He had his arms swung around behind him grasping the hands of a young strikingly clear skinned blue eyed jewel of God's divine inspiration sent down from heaven for the benefit of mankind. She was wearing a large Indian crafted leather string necklace draped around her long slender neck. Fanning out like rays of the sun ,it's fingers touching the outer extremes of her perfectly ironed and starched white translucent blouse as it rested blissfully against her youthful perky apple sized breast. Dreams ,people ,are made from far less. Her's as her escort's

own head was bobbing with those quick little ,“funky chicken”, moves in compliance with their master’s sonic demand. After a moment ,he began nervously glancing sideways at me ,and then quickly shifting his eyes forward seemingly requesting my permission to cross that empty stretch of cobble stone that surrounded me. An area ,I might have appeared to be in the act of policing I mused to myself. Regardless ,he appeared too timid ,fearful ,or even unable to proceed forward unless I first acknowledged ,and approved of his petition to do so. None of this escaped the sea of bobbing eyes that quickly picked up on this interaction ,and were as attentive as a horde of starving lawyers chasing a convoy of screaming ambulances. Curiously I ,without hesitation ,found myself calmly smiling back nodding my approval with his next glance. I then watched as he ,with a grin as big as a mule eating briars ,attempted to proceed across the clearing with his young lady friend in tow. I swear with God as my witness ,this is all true. She ,resisting his pull ,turned beaming those huge baby blue eyes into my own ,as if pleading for me to make official my approval of herself as well. Being intrigued by this ,I could only but of course smile back at her approvingly ,and much appreciatively ; I ,having enjoyed the opportunity to explore her rare beauty head on ,face to face ,eye to eye. And now as she stepped a little forward from the edge of the crowd revealing more of herself ,I could see that her blue slacks matched her dreamy eyes. The fabric of which was pulled skin tight over her long delicate legs stopping with a split just above her finely turned ankles ,her brown ultra light weight leather sandals sporting less than a 2 inch heel .Oh my God ! , I gasped ,she is tall as well. I beamed a smile from inside out ,repeating my go ahead nod. She smiled back at me ,and with her head still bobbing scooted right across from 8 o’clock to 4 o’clock behind her buckskin Bo leaving my realm of nothingness empty and now somehow lonely as well. Empty

on a street that was basically awash with rhythmic pulsating human flesh. Immediately with an outcry of jubilation the crowd made their pleasure known. Somehow I had managed to get it right. More couples inspired by the outcome I figured, began lining up as if to form a cue within the assemblage. They were maneuvering themselves so as to come up to ,and cross over from that very same spot the first pair had use. Just as if there was some sort of a invisible portal there that had been located or established by the earlier two. All other distractions being mute ,I was able to nearly ignore all other party go'ers along the edge of my realm as they all appeared content just to have a front seat to the rite of passage before them. Except for that one found gateway at 8 o'clock all else was apparently regarded as unbreachable. There had to be some level of clandestine organization or devilment involved to keep it so, didn't there? They were acting as a group sat upon a common interest. No one caring to break the spell.

Bump-pi-de bump ,bump ,bump ; two by two each new couple stepped up in turn to the portal ,and played out the same scenario that the first couple had. I had the power!! I couldn't believe what I was seeing with my own slightly anesthetized eyes ,and their own must be alcohol diluted vision ,but I had the power. And what's more ,I soon discovered that I could wield even a more poignant influence. To do so ,I needed only to delay my approval of the more fabulous ,“femme tale” ,offerings coming before me. For just by making them wait even an instant longer ,I could sense myself stealing from them a measure of their brash confidence ,their energy ,or more definitively their essence. Apparently their super inflated egos would become quickly stressed with anything less than an instant approval ,incorrectly assuming that the speeder my nod the more fabulous they must be. Hot dang! ,I had me a beauty contest. And then effortlessly I could

then transfer that same sequestered energy to another less vivacious female by locking eyes ,smiling ,and giving my little nod of approval earlier on. The reduced stress apparently allowing them to receive the essence I had just slipped away from a previous fem. or fems. Upon receiving this energy they all reacted as if they felt a mild electric shock. Unexpectedly energized ,they each smiled back hardily at me in apparent thankful acknowledgment that they knew it was a gift from me. The crowd roared their pleasure at this new trick as well as ,as each ,and every couple proceeded to parade themselves pass me. I had the power! I tell you I had it! As long as that broadcasted drum loop kept repeating ,and I mean for what must of been 15 minutes ,I ,yours truly ,for all practical purposes held sway over a thirty five foot plus diameter circle of nothingness surrounded by total drunken bacchanalian mayhem. And not only over the cobblestone pavement and sidewalks stretching from brick building face to brick building face ,but of those select souls that would venture to transverse it as well. Clearly ,I ,myself was in possession of an awesome commission. Unwittingly drafted into service by a benevolent higher power to disperse previously unknown ,un-herald Mardi Gras redemption. I was altering these women's perception of themselves if only for one special night ,even if only for the duration of just one magical moment on Bourbon street. A moment when we were all perhaps just puppets of the shadows dancing wickedly on the facades of the buildings above our heads. A moment when anything was conceivable ,including my new found self esteem. Truly ,if I hadn't been there and experienced it my own astounded self ,I wouldn't be quick to acknowledge it to be possible either.

Opposite of me across the way at 12 o'clock I could see the back side of a huge stocky club doorman / bouncer. He was in distress. Both his huge black hands protruding out from the



mid arm length sleeves of his white dinner jacket were flapping up and down with palms against the brick veneer. His neck twisted as he look over his right shoulder back at me ,his eye lobbying for assistance. He appeared frozen in place. Splattered spread eagle against the wall he seemed unable to precede forward nor it would appear could he retreat backwards. My more gracious subjects coming first ,I rationed , I left him there buttered up against the brick. After all he had tried to slide by without permission. Now he could wait.

Cuing up ,my next petitioner's were two very fine Southern Bells accompanied by a sharply dressed man. The three of them clasping hands together as if to form a chain. Just as it had before ,the drama unfolded for first him ,then the first and then also the second girl. A younger sister no doubt ,and she sadly without her own date. Oh, if only I could of been a younger man. Facing me head on ,all three pleaded ,with their eyes ,lips ,and gestures as they swung their arms together ,for me to make an exception and allow the three of them to pass through my domain together. They not wanting to get separated that is. No doubt why ,the younger of the two women ,reek of sublime innocence. "Please Mister just this one time", I knew they were saying. Displaying a little chivalry ,but feeling a tinny bit mischievous as well ,I first delayed taking a pinch more than usual amount of essence from the older very 'femme tale ' sister ,before be stowing it upon her younger more mousey sibling. At first the younger girl appeared stunned ,and then elated. She straighten right up tossing her hair back ,held her head high ,and then looked through my eyes into the recesses of my soul as if she knew me oh so well. Slowly with her full sweet young lips ,she clearly exaggerated a big ,"Thank You " ,and as soon as I could bring myself to nod ,they shuffled together with tiny mouse-like steps across my vacant kingdom. Oh Lord ! ,I

couldn't help myself but muse ,that may of been a tad too much ,look out hearts here she comes. She has mine already. Dam! ,growing old sucks ,I thought.

On that note without warning the drums came to a sudden halt ,the beat was silenced ,the spell having peaked died suddenly as evening's shadows often do. Without fanfare the crowd stopped bobbing ,the doorman /bouncer preceded unhampered along his way as the circle caved in from every side ,becoming as if it had never existed. One might be incline to think it had been only a dream or a codeine inspired illusion. If one having been there didn't know the better that is. I had been taking those same "meds" for years without any such event before or since. Suddenly finding myself powerless, vulnerable ,and a little ashamed of how drunk I had become with my now defunct power ,I lowered my head quickly losing myself into the crowd seeking new shadows for refuge less someone ask me to give light on what had just happened.

I don't know how such a ,"happening", could have occurred and won't pretend to. I have no idea of how the planets were aligned that night ,or if it could even of mattered. Nor if some ancient Voo Doo ritual or rite of passage had been truly played out as it seem. It was not any feather in my cap ,as I was just another pawn in the play presented before all of us that night. Accordingly ,my final gain if I am to have one ,may be this story itself. As for results I dare say my own inflated ego must of been the shortest lived of all. Well I guess there are some things that can't be taken away. The memory of the radiance of beauty I observed that night for one. Perhaps the crowd responded as they did because I ,myself being so physically depleted and not responding to their master's will as they were ,gave them the impression that I must be someone powerful , and whom should be given a wide birth. Supreme Master of

nil ,I presume. Or who knows ,some freak may have been above me on that balcony banishing a weapon or maybe Rod Serling with a camera filming a new “Twilight Zone” episode and they were all acting. Indeed let me take a moment ,and thank the universe and give it credit for a job well done ; for putting together such an elaborate scheme to convince me otherwise ,if less than real it truly was. And of course it’s all about our perceptions isn’t it. If you were to interview anyone of those couples that paraded themselves pass me that night , they might relate a totally different view of the event. And then again another couple’s story may not be so different than the one reported here. I just know that no matter how insane it may sound to you out there ,it was as real as my next breath is to me. And it had to be real also to the other people whom I’ve talked about that accepted the truth of the world as I was experiencing it. Accordingly ,they interacted with me on those terms. Even the doorman / bouncer who clearly did not want to take part in our little drama was force to play one just the same. There’s an old saying that "Truth is stranger than fiction" ,and I consider that night on Bourbon Street as a supremely poignant example. Even at the least ,whether I had some momentary mystical power or it was all just in my own distorted perception of the moment ,**in that moment for me ,I was for all practical purposes ,the Grand Marshall of Mardi Gras .**

By Johnny Harvill

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