

Mardi Gras

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Ron had never been attracted by speed, but with the windy plain's slope down from the mountains, he was running at over one hundred miles an hour. This wasn't fun or thrilling. In fact, it scared him, but he wished he could go faster. A rocket wouldn't be fast enough of course. He could still see with perfect clarity, and all he could see were Kay's legs wrapped so tightly around a stranger's bare waist. When he had opened his front door his eye had taken it in, but he had backed away before the image could work its way into his brain. Now it would not go away. They hadn't seen or heard him, and he had set his briefcase back down in his Buick and driven away. After the stop at the bank, where he left the family car, he walked to the import dealer and bought the little Triumph Spitfire he had been driving by for weeks. His hands shook and the man in the lot had to help him lower the ragtop.

Three hours out of Denver the radar detector squealed and Ron cut his speed in half. He snapped off the radio. He would use this time to think. He had to come up with a destination. He would drive into the Atlantic eventually, if he kept on like this.

Seeing the patrol car ahead of him, driving in the same direction, made the first decision easy. Ron took the next exit, and worked the Spitfire back up to speed, more gently this time.

Dusk was not far away and he was in Kansas. Kansas for god's sake. It was nearly two hours before he flashed through Oklahoma and into Texas. He had lived his whole life around Denver and had never once set foot in these flat, desolate states. But it made him feel like he was getting somewhere, crossing through Oklahoma in twenty minutes.

It was fully dark now, the night broken only by his head-

lights and the odd glare of isolated homes, and Ron slowed under the cover of the darkness. He turned on the radio and chanced upon a live report of Mardi Gras festivities in New Orleans. There would be a crashing finale on Fat Tuesday. Ron could hear the revelry in the background. Instead of remembering coming home early to the surprise, Ron remembered leaving for work that morning, and he realized it was almost Tuesday now.

Ron slowed again, enough to keep the map from blowing out of the car. He caught snatches of roads and numbers and turned onto the first road that led in the direction of New Orleans. He stopped for gas when he had to, buying candy bars and chips and sodas for road food. He had never driven like this in his life, but he had heard of younger men doing it and it made him feel that way. Young. He was going to a party and he couldn't even take the time to sleep, he was that wild and that young.

It was something to have a convertible sports car, he thought. And to be driving at one in the morning in the first week of March with the top down. The south was a good place just for that. The wind, deflecting off his leather flight jacket, had just the right chill to keep him from losing track of the driving.

When he drove fast enough it was as if there was nothing behind him. If he drove far enough, he thought, it might even be like he had never laid eyes on his wife's legs in his entire life. If he got far enough into the French Quarter it might be like being born again, with everything before him instead of behind him.

Whenever he thought about his wife he would turn away from her and drive a little faster, remembering what it was like to be young and going to a party. He had goose bumps under the leather of his heavy jacket. Sometimes he would get as far as to wonder what she was telling their daughters, about where Daddy was. He pictured the traces of fear and doubt that must be eating at her, the slick taste of guilt crinkling and blackening the glossy edges of her successful deceit. But ever since he had decided he was going to Mardi Gras he had been able to funnel his thoughts back to the happy noises of the revelers and he smiled, knowing he would soon join in that.

By dawn Wichita Falls was behind him and he figured if he

could average seventy-five miles an hour he could be in New Orleans by two in the afternoon. He flicked through the radio stations, settling for recorded Dixieland Jazz, which he had never listened to before in his life.

They may have found his car in the bank lot by now. When they did she would discover the withdrawal from their savings and she would know she had been caught. As awful as that would be, it would be easier for her to know it absolutely. Ron wished he had been thinking clearly enough to cover his tracks, to leave her in doubt a bit longer.

He drove faster as he wondered at how simple he had been for never suspecting a thing. He tried to comfort himself by saying that it wasn't a requirement that he be suspicious. That was not a part of marriage. But her bridge nights and all her meetings as a realtor danced about before him and it was hard not to see what an incredible dupe he had been. The thought of everyone he knew chuckling over the way his wife spent days groveling with a stranger nearly made him sick.

He flicked through the radio stations again, but couldn't find anymore live reports with the happy noises of the crowds. He was sweating from the way he had been thinking and he wriggled out of his jacket, keeping first one hand, then the other, on the wheel while he fought with the binding material. He threw the coat into the narrow slit of the back seat and studied the map again, adding up all the small red numbers alongside his route, detouring around Dallas.

By ten he had side-slipped Shreveport and was in Louisiana. That made four new states for him. A pretty successful trip, he decided, for a man who had only been in three states in his entire life. He lay out a course for Baton Rouge and drove on, buoyed up by the new state and the unfamiliar heavy, wet heat spilling past his bug smeared windshield. He glanced at the bushy trees with their never ending foldings of greens and darker greens, and thought he might lose himself forever in foliage like that.

He filled up once more in Baton Rouge and climbed stiffly back into the low seat which had already formed to his body. The freeway was on stilts now, riding over a mucky wasteland of black water and grey-green trees that Ron assumed was the bayou.

The traffic clotted near New Orleans and for a long time Ron

watched the red reflection of his entire car mirrored in the hub of a semi tire. He took the next exit he could.

He had never seen such a confusion of diagonal cross streets, missing street signs, and run down buildings. He took every street that ran south or east, for as far as it would go, until he was on what would be more accurately described as a trail. Even without his jacket, he was sweating. But he liked the smell of the air; it was full of water and some gentle decay. It was not like the Denver slums. The buildings he drove by were so different, with their porches and scraggling yards, that he wasn't even sure if this was a slum. He had never imagined a slum with palm trees.

Ron came to the Mississippi. He stopped and stared, liking how it moved as if there was nothing else in the world to do. He turned onto a dirty road that followed the river. He couldn't be lost now, with the slow, brown river to guide him. He could almost hear those people hooting and shouting and laughing. He drove slowly along the deserted river, and couldn't help thinking of the quietness that had always surrounded his wife. He had thought it meant that everything was all right. He guessed now that it had probably meant something else.

He had never been wild, and sometimes he thought he had never been young. But Kay had been so soothing and calm that Ron thought she loved him for his lack of wildness. They never fought. In bed they read to each other. Ron let her have her way and that maintained the calm. Now he wondered if he should have been wilder for her.

He looked at the placid water oozing between the concrete and metal banks, and knew that he was wrong. It was Kay who had taken her feet off the ground to wrap her legs around something strange and unknown. Ron would have followed the lazy, opaque waters forever.

The quiet died out gradually and Ron saw barricades up ahead. A policeman waved an orange baton at him and Ron followed it to his left. He was the only one following the river in, and the bored policemen kept waving their sticks at him.

Their path led to the Superdome. There was a steady trickle of people pouring from its exits, adding to the throng that filled all the streets to the east. Ron followed the car in front of him and parked next to it in the dark concrete shelter. Two men and

two women got out of the car that he had followed. They were happy and young and they said hello.

Ron walked down the smooth ramps with them, and they faltered in the brightness at the exit together. But when their eyes adjusted the four young people dashed across the street and, though he tried to follow, they were swallowed by the crowd. So was Ron.

He hustled along, smiling with all these people, and the next time he looked up he saw a sign on the boulevard that said Canal Street. Floats kept going by and women on the floats threw things into the crowds, plastic bracelets and necklaces and coins. A coin hit Ron in the chest and he caught it before it bounced away. A girl who could have been one of his daughters was pushed against him by the crowd. Ron held the coin out to her and she took it from him, smiling. A moment later she held a bead necklace up to him, holding it open with both hands. Ron bowed and she slipped the beads over his head. He felt it on his neck and said thank you.

Ron bumped through the crowds still dazed from twenty hours in his new car. He laughed out loud when he saw the sign for Bourbon Street. It was nearly impossible to move through the crowds, but everybody was happy and did not mind being nudged back and forth. Ron turned onto Bourbon Street, still laughing.

He bought a can of Dixie beer from a street vendor and dropped a piece of the ice that clung to the can down the neck of his shirt. The tingling felt just like he imagined the party would. A block later he bought a T-shirt with a row of leaping jesters across the chest. He unbuttoned his business shirt and stripped it off, letting it drop onto the pavement to be trampled. Someone hooted and clapped him on the back. Ron grinned and pulled the T-shirt over his head. He finished his beer and saw the man beside him squash an empty can on the side of his head. Ron tried it too. It hurt and he laughed again.

The buildings surrounding him had tall, narrow doors and windows and wrought-iron porches on the second story. People spilled from all the windows and all the doors and hung out over the iron railings of the porches. It was as noisy a place as Ron had ever heard. Kay would probably have hated it. But Ron wasn't sure anymore. He pretended that she would, then vowed

not to think of her anymore. The noise and the people would definitely frighten his daughters, who were too timid to ever put a necklace around a stranger.

A crescendo of laughing and hollering broke out in front of him and Ron followed the crowd's gaze up to see a lacy bra sailing out over the street. A second one followed.

The porch was packed with women, and a few men. The two bra flingers shook slim shoulders with breasts at the admirers below and disintegrated in giggling laughter. Coins and beads showered their section of balcony. One of the women tried to stretch a bracelet around her breast but it snapped off and spun into the crowd. Men struggled on the pavement for it.

Soon the women forgot the crowd and stood on the balcony, half naked, talking and drinking like anyone else, being occasionally pelted by a handful of beads when someone spotted them for the first time. They would laugh then and wave.

Ron stared at their nakedness, there for everyone to see, then turned suddenly away. He bought another beer and drank it in just a few swallows. His eyes watered with the sting of the carbonation but he was able to look at the woman and not see his wife's body in place of hers. He belched enormously, and someone beside him shouted 'Bravo!'

Ron slipped into a bar and the noise of the crowd was drowned by the throbbing of the drums and the blare of the horns.

The black men in the band were all sweating profusely and Ron bought a red drink called a Hurricane. It was what everybody was drinking and it tasted sweet and powerful at once. He drank it off and got another. He watched the trombone player's cheeks puff and fall until he was pushed away from the bar.

He was in the swirl of the crowd then and a woman grabbed his arm, took a drink from his Hurricane and danced several steps with him before swirling away and repeating her trick with the next man she bumped into. Ron watched her until she was out of sight. He bought one more Hurricane, in a plastic cup, and struggled out of the bar. The naked women on the balcony were gone.

Ron started to sip on his drink. He was jostled by the crowd and some of the drink slipped over the edge of the cup. He licked at the sticky red juice on his fingers.

He was going to have to slow down, he thought. After the long drive the drink was going to his head. He tried to add up the hours he had been awake, and the numbers lined up like little red mile markers on a map, starting with his wife under a stranger and ending here with a laughing naked woman trying to put a bracelet around her breast. He couldn't add up the tiny red numerals. He said out loud that he had been up for two days and someone toasted to that.

Dusk came and Ron gave himself up to whatever direction the crowd traveled in. The tumult kept increasing. There were people in confusing costumes jostling through the crowds. Ron tried to focus on them but they were too colorful and gaudy. Floats drifted about in the streets, broken away from their designated paths and lost in the unyielding crush of the party.

A man on stilts, dressed like a jester, lurched past and crashed into the crowd. He was caught before he reached their heads and thrown back up to a vertical position. But he couldn't find his legs under him and he crashed again. Ron helped catch him and he heard the man begging to be let down. Ron pushed with everyone else to throw him upright. He fell in the opposite direction and Ron dropped into the wake of a lost float. The people already on it pulled him up and he sat on its edge. Fireworks split the sky but Ron could only see snatches of them between the tall, close buildings. He lay back on the crepe paper of the float and watched the flashes of light and bright colors. The fireworks stayed visible on his eye after they had faded and died out. Everything swirled about the bits of color his eyes held, and Ron fingered the beads around his neck to anchor himself to something. More people were climbing on the float all the time. One of them stepped on Ron and fell over. He crawled back over and grasped Ron's head, laughing and apologizing. He fell off the float when Ron sat up and he lay on the street, laughing until the crowd swallowed him.

A sudden roar broke from the crowd, followed by a hush, and Ron felt the world begin to tilt. He gripped the necklace the girl had given him and felt himself rolling. He jumped toward the crowd that had opened for the first time since he had entered it.

Ron landed on his feet, staggered and sat down. He turned in time to see the float list slowly, irrevocably, with people leap-

ing off and away from it. It landed on its side, losing a little crepe paper, and the people closed back around it, jumping up and down, chanting and screaming. Someone pulled Ron to his feet and kissed him, shouting something about the captain and his ship. He tried to return the embrace but he stumbled against a wall of people. The laughing crowd shouted and shoved at him and Ron liked to have their hands on him like that. It wasn't a mean shoving, but something that friends might do.

Ron closed his eyes and sniffed at the perfume the kiss had left near his face. He started to dance with himself, but someone soft slipped under his arms and they danced together, to the music seeping out of a bar. Ron never opened his eyes and when the song was over his partner kissed him hard on the mouth and spun off into the crowd. Ron wondered if it could have been Kay. They used to dance slowly like that together, in their living room, before the girls were old enough to tease them.

Ron stumbled on and realized he had fallen out of the thickest part of the crowd. He turned a corner, looking for it again, and then another one. But the party had lost him. He could almost walk now, but it was hard to stand up without the support of the crowd.

He crossed a large cobblestoned square. He sat down once, unexpectedly, and traced the joints between the bricks with his fingers. He looked at all the moving legs and realized he was still surrounded by people. But not like before. He could see past these legs. They didn't block out everything else.

He stood and continued his crossing. At the other end of the square, past its wrought-iron fencing, was a cafe of some sort, brightly lit with colorful awnings. Ron steered away from it and sidled along a large dark building, edging farther out of the protection of the crowd.

Ron stopped at the huge log pilings edging the water. Fireworks still burst over his head and he watched them reflecting in the rolling surface of the big river. It was no longer muddy. The water sparkled and shined and flowered in the colorful bursts of the rockets. Yet it flowed the same as ever, and Ron knew it never once wrapped its legs around strangers. Even though it could change from muddy and drab to this colorful, quiet splendor, Ron knew it would never do that.

He stumbled to the ladder-like stairway that led strangely

right into the river. He walked slowly down the iron steps and felt the warm water close around his ankles. He took another step but there were no more on the stairway and Ron plunged into the river.

The surprising current took him away from the ladder immediately and Ron rolled onto his back and watched an enormous burst of color open up above him. He smiled. His ears were under the water and he could not hear the explosion. Ron let his body relax into the nudging flow of the river and he wished that everything had always stayed like this. Then he had the odd thought that maybe they had and that the naked stranger was simply one of those quick bursts of riotousness that flashed onto the river now and then, leaving it unchanged when it faded.

He turned over then and started to swim down the stream, quietly so he didn't disturb the surface. His ears were out of the water and the noise returned to him but he no longer had to watch the bright violent flashes of the fireworks.

A row of small, white lights looped from a stick framework on the left bank of the river and Ron could see people standing under them. One of them pointed and soon they were yelling at him and Ron dove under the surface. When he came up a few feet later there was more yelling and laughing and some cursing. A boat motor started and Ron told the man in it that he wanted to stay out here but was soon dragged back to shore. The man was a waiter and he was mad but laughing and he brought Ron a free cup of coffee, because he never saw a first at Mardi Gras anymore.

People crowded around Ron's table and laughed at him and wanted to know what he was doing. He told them he was swimming to Denver to a woman who was his wife. They laughed so hard one of them fell over and Ron looked at him on the floor and he started to smile too.

He told them he had been cheated by the quietist thing he had ever known, but that if it could be quiet again he thought he would go back. They cheered. It was a long, long drive though, and Ron stood back up and wandered away from the river, toward where the roar was at its most tumultuous. It was probably equally chaotic in his house in Denver right now, and he thought it wouldn't hurt for that to continue for a while yet.

When he did call Denver it was starting to get light and he had considerable trouble talking. He told her he was at the Mardi Gras and that it had been great fun and he wished she had come with him. She was crying hard and he looked down the street, at the colored men who were already beginning to hose down the cobblestone, and then he looked up to the iron balconies where no naked women hung.

His wife began to speak but Ron interrupted her and said again what a great, crowded party it had been but that it was over now, wasn't it, and he really wished she had come with him. ❁