

Astray at the Parades

Cling! Clong! Johnny heard the church bells ring. It was time to wake up. He peeked out of his window. The sun was still rising. In the appleskin moments of dawn, Johnny threw his undershirt and pants on. He moved over to his grand living room that was decorated with purple, green, and yellow ribbons. The young New Orleanian boy perched himself onto the couch to relax before the big day. It was oddly quiet outside, and he was fairly certain that the entire neighborhood of Black Pearl was oversleeping. His father trotted into the living room to greet the excited boy. “Zulu starts early, Johnny,” his father said, “so awaken your carnival cheer!” Johnny was a little tired, for he had stayed up late with his friends. They were all so excited for today, the big day. It was Fat Tuesday.

Johnny got completely dressed and headed over to the kitchen. The clock above the microwave projected the time, 7:00 a.m. Mother was in the kitchen cooking breakfast. Normally for breakfast, the family would eat eggs and bacon, but because it was Mardi Gras, Mother cooked chocolate chip pancakes. Johnny loved the pancakes. They were chocolatey, crisp, and warm. They were all he needed to get his amazing day started. He scarfed down the delicious food when it arrived at the table. Soon after, Father was loading the car and Johnny was brushing his teeth. He saw the green and yellow mixture in his eyes as he stared at his mirror. He liked how his eyes matched the colors of Mardi Gras in a way. “Alright, Johnny, we’ll head out in ten minutes,” shouted Father. Johnny, eager to witness the great parades, leaped out of the back door and jumped into the silver SUV.

The following ten minutes passed as if they were ten years. Johnny's eyes drifted from the back of the seat in front of him to the lofty oak trees that arched over the lumpy streets of the neighborhood. Johnny remembered how much he loved his little Crescent City. He knew he would have so much fun at the fascinating parades. At last, Mother and Father started the car and began to drive to the parade route. They exchanged a cheerful smile, and then looked at me. It seemed as if the entire world was smiling with them. The car radio was playing classic New Orleans jazz. *Vroom!* After turning corner after corner, the parade soon came into sight. Johnny observed the large crowds of tourists, locals, grandparents, children, men, and women. All of them had their arms high in the air and their eyes wide open. The parade was about to start! Johnny hustled out of the car after his parents had found a parking spot. The thrilled child rushed through the crowd. At last, he saw the first float. The Krewe of Zulu had started!

"Throw me something! Please! Please!" Johnny yelled. He was normally a very quiet and modest child, but Mardi Gras parades made him a whole different person. The float was decorated beautifully. The colorful combinations sparkled in the peoples' eyes. A very kind lady wearing a golden mask flung a string of golden beads down directly at Johnny. "Yes!" Johnny exclaimed. As Johnny inspected the beads closely, he saw the word "Zulu" printed in bold. "Look y'all, I got beads!" Johnny called out as he turned around. He expected to see his parents behind him. They were not there. Johnny's face became red. He started to think about where his parents could be. All of the shouting, colors, and jazz music seemed to fade away in his head. He looked around once again, and he ran down the parade route in panic. His parents normally tell him to meet up at a convenience store or a restaurant if he got lost, but he abandoned his parents before they could make sure he would be safe. He thought he saw his parents on the sidewalk, so

he ran to go check. “Uh oh. It's just an ordinary couple,” he whispered to himself in disappointment. While Johnny was running toward what he thought was his parents' car, he bumped into a tall, bearded man. The man looked angry. “Watch it, kid!” he barked. Parades don't make everyone happy during Mardi Gras. Johnny stepped aside and quietly uttered a meek apology. Right as Johnny almost lost all hope of ever reuniting with his parents, his old friend Samuel tapped his shoulder. He excitedly greeted Johnny. “Howdy man,” he said in his easygoing tone, “if you're looking for your parents, they went into that restaurant with the red umbrellas.” He pointed at the opposite side of the parade route. Johnny quickly thanked Samuel and cautiously attempted to squeeze himself back into the rapidly-growing crowd.

He felt as if he was in a dense forest. The adults that were waving their arms in the air were the trees swaying in the wind, and the band's loud instruments were the birds and animals making the forest come alive. Johnny was steadily making his way through the forest when a massive acorn slammed into his sun-tanned forehead. A huge string of beads landed on his head and caused him to grimace. He moved his hand over his forehead. His hand curved up gently and then curved down again as he moved it up his head. Something was wrong, for it almost hurt him when he touched his head. He had a bruise right in the center of his head. He looked down at the street and picked up the beads that had struck him. The curious boy looked at his reflection through the beads. He looked like a beluga. “I'm a Zuluga,” he murmured sadly, “a beluga that is lost at Zulu.”

At last, Johnny made it to the restaurant where his parents were. “Hey Johnny! Where were you! We came into this restaurant because we thought you would come here since you got lost! Why didn't you pay attention when we told you to come here if you couldn't find us?”

clamored Mother and Father. “I’m sorry, I got a little too excited. If you want to know about this bruise on my head, it's nothing to worry about. I just got hit with some beads.” said Johnny. The reunited family hugged and returned to the parade. Zulu was almost over, and neither of the three family members got to enjoy the parade yet. They soaked in all of the Mardi Gras cheer once again. Johnny was a bead-magnet. Everyone was having a great time and listening to the wonderful flourish of jazz music. The forest that Johnny had once walked through alone felt a whole lot nicer with his family. Overall, the essence of Mardi Gras isn’t just colors and fun. It's the unexpected events that make the season fun for the entire city of New Orleans.