

Parade

2345 Words

I'm fucking dying here on the pavement on Gravier and Tchoupitoulas while the neon Mardi Gras floats roll by. The combination of nausea, animal attraction and guilt is hitting me hard in the gut, making me feel stupid like I might pass out. The leering men in jester costumes hold up whole bags of beads for this dime piece in the beaded bra. If only she'd run for them. *Just* bounce a bit. But she won't. Some confused projection of *self respect*.

Seven homemade Seven and Sevens deep which by bar standards means more like eleven. My stomach churns, my frustration with this chick is only adding to my discomfort. Lilly ran off with her kid, Oliver, as soon as I started talking to Miss Beaded Bra and I don't give a fuck. Mostly don't. *I mean why should I?* We're not anything, we're not committed, that was her choice. She's always wanted to be *open*. But she can't take it, doesn't want to see it. What does she want from me anyway? We're both single parents, with estranged co-parents. We live an hour and a half away from each other and still, she's got demands. *Needs* and *Requests* she calls them. *Manipulation* and *Bullshit* I call it. Plus I haven't tasted or touched that pussy in weeks. She wanted me over for her birthday but I was tired and didn't want to have some big romantic night. I'm not her man. I'm my own man and that's it. That's it. That's it. I think I'm gonna throw up.

I'm resting on the curb now watching my best friend Kendrick tease my daughter, Ava for her wagon full of loot. Ava loves Kendrick. Miss Beaded Bra comes and sits next to me. Kendrick's the one who has his eye on her. I was only fulfilling my role as wingman by chatting her up over there. It's what we do, we always have. It works. Lily don't need to get it.

“What's your name?”

Her voice is sharp and young and something about it turns me on. It's hard to tell how old she is. Could be seventeen or twenty five. She's got porcelain skin, long dark curls and a full belly with curves like I like. Kendrick eyes me and chuckles as he continues to play with Ava.

"Brent."

"That's my boyfriend's name."

She giggles.

"Where's he at?"

I do my one-raised eyebrow move the chicks die for. I've got killer brows, I've been told. She touches my hair. Her face is closer to mine all of the sudden and I swear I see gold flecks in her light brown eyes...like the goldschlager. I was drinking a few hours ago with my Memphis homies.

"He's in Dallas."

"He don't do carnival?"

She's still close, playing with my curls I'm inhaling the scent of her, she's all discount store perfume and cleaning products and all of the sudden the churning spreads from my belly to my whole body and I wish she'd leave. She's looking away at the old couples; tourists most likely, in the front row, videotaping the floats as they motor by tossing beads and blasting music. Her voice is softer than her hard jaw line I notice when she turns her head to me and answers.

"I mean, he does, normally. He got called away for work though, so, different area code, anything goes, ya know?" She smirks now.

Kendrick's walked away from Ava and she's staring at me, curious, bored and slightly judgmental, in her typical seven year old way. We were at the park all morning then had lunch at

her favorite local spot, Ruby Slipper and walked around checking out parades, just the two of us, before linking up with my boys. I roll my eyes at her then look away and before I can move or say another thing it's coming up. The beer, the liquor, the eggs, the sandwich, the ice-cream, all in a stew of stomach bile. Ava's next to me now looking concerned.

Shock and disgust flicker across Miss Beaded Bra's pretty face. She's jumping up and Ava puts a small hand on my back and looks around calling *Kendrick!* to come help. I'm puking all over Miss Beaded Bra's shoes before she can get away. It sucks for her that she's wearing sandals. Her toes are swimming in chunks. I can see pieces of the corn and pulled pork barbecue I gorged on earlier decorating her silver painted toes. I can't stop. I'm retching. It's in my long hair and on my jeans. Miss Beaded Bra is yelping and jumping backward into a woman with a stroller.

"Eeeeeeeew Brent! Fuck! *Gross!* Learn how to hold your fucking liquor dude! Gross! Fuck!"

She's grabbing her friends, fuller bodied and a bit older than her, they're either older sisters or chicks chosen strategically to make her look better; bookends Kendrick and I call them. They're making their way through the crowd in the opposite direction looking back to glare and shake their heads at me every few steps. Ava's found some napkins and is attempting to pick vomit from my hair. She whispers in my ear,

"You ok, Daddy?"

A different guilt now. One that her mother taught me. Tiana and I made Ava not too far from here, right after the Zulu Ball eight years ago. She's a Mardi Gras baby. My ride or die. We

tried to make it work for a minute, her mom and I, we are just better when we're not together. I may just be better with as little expectations placed on me as possible.

Kendrick sits down on the curb at my other side.

“Bro. That’s not how we wingman...”

He’s grinning, eyes twinkling, matching his shiny brown head. I can’t speak. I need some water. He just keeps joking.

“Ooooh wait. *Wait*. I see. I get it now. *You* a damn genius bro. You would sacrifice your pride for me. Ok! That’s my *dude!*”

He’s cracking up now. I’m lying back on the pavement. Swallowing down some of the salty vomit chunks left in my mouth.

“*Water...please...*”

A dry looking, whitish pink hand adorned in rings holds an open thermos in front of my face. I know that thermos. It’s the clunky green one Lilly leaves everywhere. It’s Lilly’s hand. She’s back and she’s maybe the only one who’s listening to me. All time- super-woman as usual. I feel better knowing she came back.

“Here, dumb-ass, take it.”

There’s a tenderness to her that’s both comforting and arousing. I sit up a tiny bit and grab the thermos, drinking down the rest of the cold water inside. She’s next to me now, with Oliver; her sleeping boy strapped to her chest, pulling wipes from God knows where cleaning my face, hands and jeans.

“Thanks...”

She's holding my face tight with one hand. She squints her eyes and smiles that mischievous smile that does it for me and whispers through my dirty hair.

"I'm just cleaning you up so I can fuck you up."

I laugh and stop when I realize it's only making things spin faster.

"Too late Lil. I'm already fucked."

She sighs deeply.

"Touché boo. You *are*, you *are*. Let's get you and Ava to bed."

The parade ends. The crowds head toward the quarter mostly with some folks turning back and walking around us. Cops on horseback and in cruisers are out slowly corralling parade goers off of the route, on to some, any other path.

All of the sudden, Kendrick and Lilly are helping me up from behind, cajoling as they lift.

"Ok little lady, I hope you enjoyed your big night out."

"Let's get you back to the nursing home Gramps."

This has them all chuckling, Ava the loudest of course, these days she really gets a kick out of seeing her dad taken down a notch. I know she loves me, as flawed and in-process as I am, I'm her Dad. She's the most important thing to me.

Tomorrow I'll make sure to keep her up on my shoulders for the whole parade so she can get a shit-ton of beads. Kendrick's wrapping my arm around his solid shoulder and Lilly holds my other hand while she pulls Ava, in her wagon perched on rainbows of glittering prize-beads, with the other. We head back to our hotel a couple blocks away. The building and pavement all

seem to glisten with glitter, afterglow. It's a warm evening. We're walking down a side street, toward some quiet.

Lilly smells good. Like the incense and oils they sell at the head shop. The type Kendrick and I call a clean hippy. I haven't told K but she definitely borders on dirty some days. Like the time I went to visit her when Oliver's daycare was shut down for a week and she hadn't showered or put deodorant on in days. I still loved her. I wouldn't tell her that. Not in those words. I don't want to hurt her.

She's humming something quietly now and Kendrick and Ava are making up words. I can't really hear clearly. I'm far away in thought and body. It's taking an eternity to get to our hotel.

A cop crawls by in a cruiser with the window down.

"Is he ok?"

Lilly grins at him and nods quickly.

"Just partied a little too hard sir. He's visiting from *Canada*."

I cringe as everyone laughs and the officer nods knowingly before driving away.

I was born and raised on the Bayou. Whatever. Let them have their fun. Tomorrow I'll drink less and laugh more.

We finally get to our mid-grade hotel and Kendrick takes Ava up without me so I can have a minute with Lilly. I clean my mouth with three sticks of gum and more water and she starts kissing me first soft and tentative then hard. She's trying to keep a safe distance between my chest and her sleeping nine month old. Inevitably his soft, sweet-smelling baby-head squishes into my chest for a few seconds here and there. He starts to whine a half-awake, vague

protest moan and Lilly sighs deeply as she strokes his head and coos softly to him. She kisses my cheek then backs up so she's on the sidewalk and I'm still leaning, slumping really against the concrete side of the Hotel. She's standing in the light of the streetlamp looking me up and down with a sexy half-smile on her face. There's a glow coming from her, I swear.

“You're a class-act.”

This is the thing about Lilly that I love. For all her *requests* and *demands*, there is something so self-determined about her. She's like an animal. Like a wolf or a cat. She gets mad and goes away then comes back joking and playing. She's easy, mostly.

I'm squinting at her trying to focus. The world is still spinning and I giggle like a kid, suddenly aware that this squint may be identical to my seductive, *I want to know you*, look. I can't think of anything to say so I repeat her words back to her.

“You are a class act...too.”

She's laughing and backing away from me, her arms hugged around her son. There's a breeze and it feels late. I'm sure if the sky would stay still I'd see all the February stars.

“Well Brent, It's been real, as usual.”

She will always be smarter, more together, wittier and more charming than me. She's older and has a couple more wrinkles though. And Miss Beaded Bra wanted to talk to *me*. This is what I think as I smile weakly and wave to her as she steps backward on to the oneway, right into the drunk driver plowing a red chevy S-10 down the dark and quiet street.

I ride in the ambulance with her. They keep asking if I'm her husband. If I'm Oliver's father. I can't speak. They nod at each other. There is blood on Lilly's head and her lip's busted open. Her arms are mangled and hang at odd angles. Somehow Oliver seems okay. She knew even as she died, how to take care of him. Why didn't she take care of *herself*? Why was she even out here with me so late? Why was she out here with me at all?

She's dead on arrival. Aside from a scrape on his forehead, Oliver's fine. I hold him in the fluorescent lights of the unnaturally clean hospital until her friends come. He cries for a while and I sing to him; a song that used to work for Ava. He finally falls asleep. I wish I could too. Lilly's friends are a couple I guess I met once before in passing. They ask me questions and I can't answer. They try to hug me but I can't hug back. They cry and rub my shoulders. I can see their hands on me but I can't feel their touch.

I never told her I loved her. I must have said that aloud because the brown haired one starts gripping my head really tight and telling me, *She Knew. She knew. It's ok Brent, She knew.* The other one shakes her head a little and goes to talk to a nurse. They finally put me in a cab and peel Oliver from my arms. They say a lot of things that seem meant to comfort me but are really just to comfort themselves. I don't know. All I remember hearing, as the cab whizzes off into the warm, cloudless night is, *It's not your fault.* I know that. How could it be? I'm happy to be back at my hotel with my snoring number one and my best friend. I'm happy now, to be here, here where Lilly's not. Someone has to pick up the mess, the huge mess that's always made by the parade.