





# GLITTER AND GLUE GUN

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*Am I woman enough to be a Muse?*

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The first step to becoming a Muse is writing a check. One Mardi Gras had barely ended—sun-faded strands of beads still decorated our front yard’s hurricane fence—but already New Orleanians were planning for the following year’s Mardi Gras and I had secured a spot riding in the Muses parade. I would be only a substitute Muse, parading in place of an official member of the all-female Carnival club that closed its membership a few years back after maxing out at around one thousand women. Substitute status wouldn’t keep me from ultimately shelling out the

equivalent of a Hawaiian honeymoon in order to participate, though, not to mention prep hours. In the time I spent on being a Muse I could have completed a manuscript for the theoretical second book I’ve been far too busy to write.

According to the now-indispensable parade-tracker apps (which chart parade progress in real time so that you can plan your beer runs and driving routes accordingly), thirty-two parades rolled through Orleans Parish during the last two weeks of Carnival 2014. Most of those passed within a block or two of the house I

share with my husband Matt and our son, Tibo. After renting in the same neighborhood for our first five years in New Orleans, we bought this house in 2005 in no small part for its proximity to the Uptown parade route. A typical Uptown-originating parade travels more than five miles and takes an hour or two to pass a given point, depending on its number of junior high and high school marching bands, dance troupes, flambeau carriers disseminating kerosene-fueled torchlight, walking clubs, clubs on horseback, tractor-pulled floats, tractor breakdowns, and the occasional holdup caused by drunken, sick, and/or combative float riders requiring police-assisted escort. Vegas cannot compete with the production complexity of the most elaborate parades.

I had never aspired to ride in a Mardi Gras parade. I'm too dependent on creature comforts like warmth and toilets, and I'm more voyeur than exhibitionist. New Orleans constantly forces you to choose a side, and parade voyeur is a joyful, full-throttle existence. Matt and I cannot imagine a Carnival season without the relentless sensory bombardment of parades staging, parades in progress, and parade cleanup. If living on a parade route means that we won't be able to move our cars or find our terrified cat for days and that we will be obliged to hold permanently scarring parade open houses—king cake sugars ground into rugs, green gumbo stains on the sofa, compromised plumbing—we, parade voyeurs extraordinaire, are willing to take the hit.

Still, when a group e-mail arrived from my friend Nathalie soliciting two other women to ride as Muses subs with her, I reflexively replied in the affirmative without even running it by Matt, with whom I share a bank account and a child. I'm sure I represent the majority of New Orleanians who lived through the Hurricane Katrina era when I say that, since that storm and flood, I'm fatalistic about culturally meaningful experiences in this city. Brass band shows, Mardi Gras Indian sightings, bowls of spaghetti at Mandina's, riverfront crawfish picnics, Mardi Gras parade seasons—any one could, literally, be our last. Even before Katrina, this city had a way of creating gauzy, super-spiritual moments that make you pinch yourself. Now, we're all less likely to take their recurrence for granted, and I'm more likely to exit my comfort zone in the name of cultural immersion, just in case. And, I suppose—though I had never intellectualized it—I had always hoped that I was woman enough to be a Muse.

Parading Carnival clubs—or, as we call them colloquially, krewes—fall into a few unofficial categories. These include the old-line krewes, like Rex and Proteus, whose parades are stately and whose membership is mostly established, white, New Orleans men; the super krewes, like Endymion and Bacchus, whose parades are bigger and flashier and whose ranks are less impenetrable; the political, or politically incorrect, krewes, like Le Krewe d'Etat and Tucks, whose messaging tends to hit you over the head with potty humor and/or sociopolitical

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commentary; the walking clubs, like the Societé de Sainte Anne and the Jefferson Buzzards, whose main objectives are masking and revelry; and a newer category of grass-roots-style walking clubs, like Chewbacchus and 'tit Rex, whose names often satirize the arcane language of Carnival traditions. (There's another subgroup of krewes that don't parade at all but instead celebrate exclusively at private parties and balls.)

Women used to be minor players in Carnival parading, especially in the nighttime parades. In 2001, one woman founded the Muses krewes to correct that, but I didn't register the first Muses parade as more remarkable than any of Carnival's other pageantry. I was still new to New Orleans and to Carnival, and everything about the season was equally surprising and outrageous. I'd had no clue that Carnival revelry lasts from Twelfth Night on January 6 until Fat Tuesday, which comes several weeks to two months later, *every year*. That my neighbors would decorate the exteriors of their homes with garish purple, green, and gold bunting *every year*. That stacked columns of king cakes bleeding similarly colored sugars would run the usual breads and cookies right out of supermarket bakeries for the duration of Carnival *every year*. That, without even trying, we would amass enough beads and plush and plastic miscellany tossed from parade floats to keep China in

the black *every year*. That the hard-partying city wakes up with the sun, smiling, on Mardi Gras morning *every year*. By the time I had gotten a handle on the holiday a few years later, the Muses had permanently altered the gender dynamics of Carnival parading by staging what is arguably the most satirical, envelope-pushing, imaginative, playful, colorful, well-attended, generous, and beloved parade on the Thursday evening before Mardi Gras *every year*.

A New Orleans friend who attended the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York City told me that one question distracted

her from enjoying the pomp and grandeur of that event: "When are they going to throw something?" New Orleans parades are, no matter the occasion, dispensaries of novelties. At the very least, you gain a couple of pounds in beads, and not for baring any skin. The well-publicized custom of flashing one's goods for beads is contained to Bourbon Street and shunned amid the family-friendly, block-party atmosphere of the rest of Carnival. (Admittedly, "family-friendly" carries a more liberal definition in New Orleans than it might in other towns, encompassing early morning drinking, sexual innuendo, and otherwise rational adults coming to fisticuffs over the best parade giveaways.)

Krewes with deeper pockets invest in specialty throws, the most common of

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which are plastic cups, doubloons (shiny aluminum coins), blinking jewelry, and medallion beads that feature a graphic or symbol to represent the krewe hurling it. A few krewes elevate their schwag philanthropy by dispensing hand-decorated throws. In my time in New Orleans, the most coveted of those has been the Zulu krewe's painted, glittered, and otherwise personalized coconuts.

The Zulus roll first thing on Fat Tuesday, earlier perhaps than Bloody Marys and breakfasts of barbecue ought even to be allowed, though both are prominent along the Zulu route. I leave the house before 7:30 AM by choice exactly once a year, and I display my prettiest Zulu coconuts in my husband's grandmother's antique hutch, alongside an inherited Lalique vase. I intend to bequeath both to my son. It's the least he deserves for tolerating the late nights and booze breath of Carnival season. (Kids also love Mardi Gras, but parade saturation is real; at a certain point every last one of them would rather be quietly playing Legos or skipping stones.)

A high-heeled shoe is the Muses' mascot—a symbol of great strength and great weakness, a Muses officer has said. Every year, Muses medallion beads feature a different shoe color and shape: red boot, black stiletto, yellow roller skate with hot-pink laces and wheels, etc. This year's shoe was gold and chunky with a high, narrow

heel—something Lady Gaga would wear. (It must be noted by someone who has been trending toward orthopedic footwear since she could walk that the Muses' shoe-of-the-year has never resembled a Danskø.) A crafty Muse threw a hand-decorated, Zulu-coconut-inspired shoe during one of the krewe's first parades, or so the story goes, and a decade and change later, per-

sonalized Muses shoes are objects of extreme fetishism, as all things of kitschy beauty and limited quantity become during Carnival's mass mania. This is not to downplay the tremendous aesthetic potential

of a Muses shoe, the best of which are runway-worthy, as long as the runway can handle a little glitter dust.

By Muses' decree, glitter and used shoes are predestined to conjoin. Where one is missing, the other loses purpose. Only a Muse and her glue can make it right. Months after my fellow substitutes and I had written our initial checks, the second step to becoming Muses was ordering six pounds of glitter from a company in Kansas that takes its superfine "foil particles" down to 1/128 of an inch. The third was acquiring forty-five pairs of secondhand shoes, primarily pumps. Nathalie, Robin (the third sub), and I accomplished this by dredging thrift shops, rummage sales, and the very personal detritus you inevitably encounter on sidewalks during early morning walkabouts in New Orleans.

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Though I knew when I signed on that my main goal as a Muses sub was to board my assigned float with my glittered and otherwise bedazzled shoes, it took some time, as well as some psychological acrobatics, for my inner crafter to blossom.

I first realized my artistic shortcomings in second grade, when my art teacher publicly shamed me for captioning a drawing with a cliché lifted from one of my mother’s needlepoint projects (I thought it needed a little something). I’ve since grown into the kind of mother who outsources artwork. Reading, I can handle. I look forward to multiplication tables. Tibo and I bake cookies together, for Pete’s sake. But I couldn’t wait for him to start preschool so I could stop making trips to Michael’s. He decorates gingerbread houses and Easter eggs with other kids’ moms. I shall offer them payment if they ever stop inviting him.

On Twelfth Night, which this year fell fifty-two days before the parade, Matt drove my fellow subs and me to the annual top-secret party at which Muses leadership unveils the year’s float designs to the krewe (the public doesn’t learn the designs until the parade rolls). The parade’s roughly twenty-three floats, reimagined each year, correspond to an overarching theme that serves as conduit for political ribbing, social commentary, and humor, not all of it comfortable. For example, this year’s basic theme was fashion. The parade’s title, “Muses: Ready-to-Wear You Out,” riffed on that motif, and the individual float subjects dug in still deeper. Our float,

number eight, would entail commentary on the trials of relieving oneself during parades. It would be painted with a queue of women holding their crotches, crossing their legs, and fending off a swarm of flies, and titled “Pret-A-Portalet: Ready to Pee.” Representative as it may have been of my own Carnival hardships, my assignment to the potty-humored float was a letdown—but only until I realized I had been spared riding on the racially charged Paula Deen float (“Separates”) or the bootilicious Miley Cyrus float (“House of Di Whore”).

I had always doubted my Muse-worthiness, but until this event I had never bothered putting my finger on the sticking point. All around me were hundreds of Muses, drinking, eating king cake, and apparently not stressing a wink about their controversial floats. Many were already dozens deep into their shoe-glittering projects. I might be a flats-wearing, (mostly) makeup-eschewing, I-love-my-hysterectomy feminist, but now I realized I was farm league in comparison. These were women who could apply lipstick without a mirror; women who, when they tailgate at Saints games, accessorize right down to a color-coordinated beer koozie; women who have entire crafting rooms. Women so comfortable in their femininity that, a few weeks later, they would begin circulating e-mails suggesting that for our headpieces, we might consider dangling faux-bloodied tampons or bits of crumpled, stained brown toilet paper from our wigs.

A true Muse, I decided, is beyond any category, era, or movement of feminism. She is a New Orleans broad. I would have to fake it.

A few nights later I had my first parade anxiety dream, in which I boarded our float without any shoes to throw. It was time to get to work, so I summoned Nathalie and Robin for an inaugural glittering session at my dining room table, which will never be the same. I managed to circumvent my feminist crafting angst by ignoring the glitter and pumps altogether at first, instead festooning a pair of arch-free sandals with Disney-themed duct tape and fuzzy pom-poms. Over the course of our glittering sessions, ten in all, each from two to ten hours, I employed numerous diversionary techniques—putting the kid to bed before I could begin, making popcorn, running out for more glue—but eventually I too became one with the hot glue gun. I even developed my own specialty in kids' shoes: a pink-glittered tap shoe I made for my niece and a rain boot I tricked out with red glitter, superhero duct tape, and ninja figurines for Tibo.

It's probably good that I didn't stumble across the Kansas glitter company's "material safety data sheet" until recently. The health hazards of glitter are "none," as long as you avoid contact with hands and mouth. Glitter was everywhere—embedded forevermore into the surface of our wooden table, dusting baseboards throughout the house, floating in our coffee, and pressed into my yoga mat, as a

fellow yogi noted during class one morning. One evening at bedtime, Tibo told me that he loved the way the glitter on his feet rubbed off on the sheets.

Figuratively speaking (I hope), glitter made its way right into my bloodstream during this seven-and-a-half-week Muses gestation period. I thought and talked about little else. One morning I bumped into a veteran Muse at a café and proceeded to ask her advice about fabric glues versus Elmer's and about how I might best secure some dried red beans and rice to a heeled Mary Jane. A woman who overheard us chimed in, "You must be riding in Muses. It sounds like this has been a real growth experience for you." I think I blushed.

I couldn't deny some significant changes. For one, our dining room was now entirely a crafting room, complete with shoe-drying racks, emptied bookshelves for shoe display, and storage containers arranged by bling: ribbon, duct tape, origami paper, figurines, beaded trim, sequins, stickers, faux flowers, alphabet cube beads, fabric roses, and pipe cleaners, among other Michael's doodads I now hoard. I had even glittered a pair of \$2.50 used Manolo Blahniks with a gradient steeper than a San Francisco street.

By the time Muses Eve rolled around, my shoes were in protective plastic bags and tagged with a personalized logo and my sense of triumph was so great that the parade itself seemed almost insignificant. My life as a Muse already felt that full. But

Santa Claus wouldn't quit before the big night, and neither would a New Orleans broad. It would have been a shame to miss the parade day's kaleidoscope of new experiences: seeing myself in a wig cap; wearing a mini toilet (but no faux bodily fluids) on my head; dancing with one thousand other Muses also wearing green satin togas at a rocking pre-parade party; riding through my breathtaking town on a float high enough to afford otherwise impossible views of the Mississippi River. I peed in an actual port-o-let on a float satirizing port-o-lets. I marveled at the Carnival-drunk crowds below for three and a half deafening hours and gifted thirty of the luckiest spectators with shoes I hope will make it into hutch or inheritance. One of my shoes, hurled from the float, even gave a friend a head contusion.

My Muses awaking came at a time when I had almost run out of reasons why I shouldn't move my family to the mountains or the ocean. A quieter place with more

room to run and fewer guns. After fourteen years of living here, I had settled into a kid-driven routine and, unconsciously, begun to believe that I'd lived through my last New Orleans-specific growth experience. But this place finds all kinds of ways to hang on to its converts. In the past, I'd had born-again-New-Orleanian moments while eating the thick, homey okra gumbo at Casamento's Restaurant; while listening to soul singer Irma Thomas slay the gospel tent at Jazz Fest; while watching from a rare grassy opening between levee and wharf as barges from China pushed down the Mississippi; and after rounding a corner early on a misty Fat Tuesday morning to catch a Mardi Gras Indian tribe, without an audience, chanting and stomping in full feathered regalia. It's possible that time and elbows will one day erode the final fleck of glitter from our dining room table, and that I will once again reevaluate our citizenship in this sinking city. But, for now, I'm a reinvigorated broad. Or at least broad-like. 🍷