

Fat Tuesday

by Gary V. Powell

Three weeks of Mardi Gras beads cascade down Chelsea's breasts—rain drops dancing on a terraced garden. Tonight's boy, Emile, pulls her along like a toy on a string. She hitch-hiked here from a trailer park near Memphis with Bri and Ashley, only to lose those girls to a party on Upperline five nights into Carnival.

"This way," Emile says. He wants to show her something. All her boys do.

They cross Canal and join the boiling crowd on Bourbon Street, neon and crystal meth streaking the night. Dick-masked college girls giggle past. A flashing form in a feathered cape slithers a hand between her legs. Up ahead, Emile's muscled shoulders roll beneath his black t-shirt. She likes his smile and Cajun accent, his earring and dangerous ink. He shrimps out of Pass Christian with his brothers and their wives, is what he said.

They turn onto St. Peter and push past Pat O'Brien's, Hurricanes brewing in alleys, dark shapes wrestling in wrought-iron courtyards to a jazz and Zeydeco beat. He steers her through Jackson Square, his rough hands on her slender hips, past pigeons, mimes and Voodoo Queens offering to read their fortunes, as if they have one beyond this moment and the next, beyond his shrimp boat and her trailer court with its crying babies and broken bottles, past the artists and horse drawn carriages, until they reach the River.

Beignets sizzle at Café Du Monde, the air thick with grease and powdered sugar. A breeze off the Gulf smells of oil and fish and money to be made. Emile spins her around and kisses her. He holds her tiny face in his large calloused hands, gazes deep into her cerulean eyes, and with fireworks bursting bright over the Cathedral, purple, green, and red spider webs slouching across the evening sky, tells Chelsea he doesn't give a shit where she comes from.

For the first time in her life, neither does she.

