

Dispatch From New Orleans

Anne Babson

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The only time it's legal to mask in town these days is Mardi Gras. In fact, an old law on the books predating this regime says it's illegal to be in a parade and not mask. Meanwhile, the Icemen arrest anybody on a non-parade day who dares even to wear a head scarf like those Yemeni women I saw in my neighborhood until they fell under the ban and got shipped offshore.

Even on parade days, if you get stopped, you have to prove you're in a government-authorized Mardi Gras krewe in order to wear a costume if you're over ten years old. But most krewes have never gotten authorized. We roam the streets like the Mardi Gras Indians do, only we don't dance-battle other Indians (or krewes). We operate like medieval trade guilds. We have mysteries, secret signs, and we battle the ones demanding to see our IDs.

Of everyone in our krewe, Jennifer has a talent. She can saunter into a room with the Icemen, smile beatifically, look them full in the eye as if she might find them attractive, and then steals ID cards, phones—whatever our krewe needs.

Jennifer has that look. She looks like one of those girls on the purity pamphlets telling us to keep our legs closed (but still include a photo of a cheerleader doing the splits). She seems like she's Fedexed in from the white-picket fence world the Icemen hope for—a bunch of small-nosed girls grinning in an old toothpaste commercial. So basic it hurts.

Even though she isn't lanky like women on those pamphlets, she looks kind of sporty. She jogs in Audubon Park. She used to join second line parades on Sundays all over town. Now, the Icemen consider those protests, so the associations put them on hold for now, maybe forever, even though they promise to organize them again once martial law gets lifted. Only jazz funerals continue. You need a boxed corpse if you want to dance at New Orleans intersections these days.

Since last Fat Tuesday, Icemen have come for our krewe three times, and a couple of us got arrested, then incarcerated or sent to the offshore factories where they send the separated kids.

The first time, they picked up Reed and Joey at the French market. Somebody must have tipped them off because they knew to look for guys in pirate's outfits—something that used to be typical in the French Quarter near Pirate's Alley during Mardi Gras season, but now, it's rare. When the Icemen pounced right on them, we figured we had a mole. (Don't ask who. As one of us says, "Ain't no mole no mo'!")

The next time was at Jazzfest. Remy and Scooter posed as roadies for one of the boy bands that replaced the Marsalis brothers after their arrest. Scooter got caught with an amp full of thumb drives loaded with foreign journalism. You know, the real news after they shut down the fact-checkers.

Since it was Scooter's first offense, they're letting him serve his time in Angola prison up in mid-state. They made him a clown for the prison rodeo. Remy dropped his backstage pass and acted drunk, sprawled out behind the sound booth. They never noticed him, so some of the drives got to readers, maybe to you.

Then, they had Jamila on a boat to the offshore factories an hour after they picked her up. She had managed to stash her backpack of drives in the pool house of that ex-gay bar they called The Country Club. Jamila had worked

as a maid there to overhear Icemen's dinner conversations and take discreet pictures. They heard her accent, saw her skin, and assumed she was just an illegal, not part of a stealth krewe.

It gets tense every time we take action, but Jennifer, with the baton-twirler bounce in her step, her flat-ironed chestnut hair, her laughing eyes, looks like she couldn't keep a secret from her Chi Omega sorority sisters, much less the Icemen. They never see her coming.

The underground print shop jerry-rigged a hologram to stick on an invitation for the Oedipus Mardi Gras Ball. None of the rest of the krewe looked like the kind of Barbie-doll invitees the old-money men on the Stars-and-Bars parade floats invited to their cocktail hour. Jennifer was a salesclerk at Trashy Diva, so she could "borrow" an evening gown and accessorize it. She understands the dangers of the document drops and the detour of the chain gangs to Grand Island where they wait for cargo barges to Havana.

You've heard about the detours if you're from New Orleans. Some of those "armed and dangerous" escaped prisoners the Icemen search all over for end up in Cuba these days (with a little help from our krewes.) She knows she risks her life every night she steps out.

But this was, as Remy warned her, "Some next-level shit."

She wasn't dropping or detouring. This was extra.

I never know whether these dispatches I type make it outside Louisiana. I hope they do, so I should explain to you Yankees what Oedipus is, and why Jennifer was intimidated by what she had gotten asked to do.

Oedipus is the whitest Mardi Gras krewe. It was founded during Reconstruction after the Civil War. The rumor still circulates that men who masked themselves in hoods on other nights attended the unmasked Oedipus Ball during Mardi Gras. Before regime change, Oedipus always had the Marine Corps Band of New Orleans play at their ball, bass drums and bayonets, but now it's the ICE band that plays.

Consequently, most top Icemen are Oedipus krewe members. Oedipus has always been the elite, the powerful Mardi Gras krewe. Jennifer was entering with a fake invitation, and she planned to get as close to the Icemen's tables as possible.

Also, Yankees, Trashy Diva sells vintage-style formal wear, and Jennifer was able to score long, white gloves and a hunter green satin ball gown from work. I wove pearl beads into her tresses and pinned them in a slick chignon.

"How do I look?" She asked me.

"Ivanka as fuck," I assured her. "Nobody is going to think you have anything deeper on your mind than your last pedicure."

I am also the one who loaded and handed her the rhinestone-encrusted clutch, small enough to look like it only contained tampons and lipstick.

Jennifer slipped into the ball without hassle. She smiled like a purity pom-pom girl at the door guard, and he nodded. The hologram chimed under the scanner. They staffed a metal detector at the door, but Jennifer went in with an ICE band trombonist with whom she flirted just long enough to hide the clutch for a nanosecond in the bell of the trombone, which got passed through security breezily while Jennifer giggled.

All the Icemen asked her was whether she brought her cell phone with her.

"No, sir," Jennifer drawled demurely, "I sure didn't. Didn't the invitation say not to?"

"Oedipus has a longstanding no-photography, no-videography policy," we could hear them explain.

No photographs or video—that was perfect for us.

We stood tensely near the door in lawn jockey uniforms, watching to make sure she got in. There, we saw all the red carpet brass—the child-prison Carson family, that blonde from FOX and her quarterback husband, the guy with offshore banks who buys condominiums. Each time they wafted by like bad stenches, I wondered how close Jennifer could get to them. Might she dance with the squat guy who raised the price of the cancer drug last year? Might she sit on the lap of the Ice captain? Finally, we saw the Oedipus krewe royal court enter, and we headed for the streetcar stop on Saint Charles as agreed.

Remy turned to me and said, "I wish we could create a diversion for her."

I shook my head. That would mean we would all get captured if something went wrong.

Two streetcars churned by us under the oak branches. Then it got quiet. I could hear myself breathing shallowly. I looked up at all the metallic beads hanging from the oaks, reflecting streetlamp light. I thought of nooses.

When, in the distance, we saw an Oedipus guest exit. She glided deliberately, but not quickly toward us in white gloves up to her armpits. Her hands moved brightly in shadows. She didn't clutch the dutch anymore. She caught up to us.

We heard the pops in the distance, almost like the sound of champagne corks getting sabered. Distant voices wailed. The three of us stood silently, strangers at a transit stop. Then came sirens, a chopper above. We caught our breath collectively, and the sirens and the chopper whirring above us moved past us to the Oedipus ball.

The streetcar clattered toward us on the rails. We paid our fare in nickels. On the bench, Jennifer winced, slid off her heels, and stretched her toes. I tore off the lawn jockey hat.

"When we get back," I whispered, "I'll turn you brunette, give you a pixie cut. Return the dress. Say you lost the gloves on the parade route."

Back at the krewe house, I heard Jennifer sobbing in her room.

These days sure are hard. Parade queens aren't royalty. We all watch for flood waters rising. One day, they may overtake us unless some god raptures the dead from the city's mausoleums to form an immortal army to defend us.

I yearn for the days of the second line parades without corpses to excuse our dancing. I liked falling into the syncopation of neighbors bopping together, no cops to stop us doing the boogaloo.

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