It Felt Like a Stampede
Surviving (and Learning to Love) Mardi Gras as a 7-Year-Old

Donte Riley

PRE-READING:
• Look at the pictures. What might be scary about Mardi Gras to a child? What might be exciting?
• Consider the simile used in the title. What is the author trying to express?

I was 7 years old when I first encountered a Mardi Gras parade. There was lots of noise, such as people playing music and the crowd cheering the street performers with high-pitched yells and applause. There were big, tall people everywhere, and I felt like I was in a gigantic forest.

I can also recall a very scary but exciting line of moving vehicles—or “floats”—detailed with strange paintings, colorful sheets, beautiful flowers, and lots of glitter.

There were high school marching bands with brightly colored uniforms, stepping with a hip type of rhythm. There were people in costumes on horses, and then there were police on horses, trotting along the crowded streets.

The best thing was trying to catch the stuff that people were throwing from the floats. They threw materials in all shapes and sizes into the sweaty humidity. They threw colored beads, plastic drinking cups, glittered coconuts, stuffed animals, and once I even caught a $20 bill!

I remember that I felt uncomfortable and worried that I would somehow become lost or maybe even get stampeded. I kept thinking, “What if?” What if a horse steps on me? What if I get lost and can’t find my mom? And worse yet, what if I get kidnapped?! The fearful feelings only lasted a few hours. I watched the older kids running around and laughing. They didn’t seem afraid of anything, so I didn’t feel so
uncomfortable and alone. And after a big slice of King Cake and a cold drink, I was ready to fit in with the enormous crowds, and I was filled with energy like a brand new car battery.

Mardi Gras is an amazing celebration with people having lots of fun during the outrageous events. After Hurricane Katrina it was never the same. It was still very crowded, but I didn’t know as many people. So many people had moved away. I look back now, and see how understandable it was that my 7-year-old self was frightened, but the memory that I keep is the memory of "wow."

Mardi Gras (which means “Fat Tuesday” in French) is the last day that people can have big parties and eat and drink as they please—before they enter the period of Lent, which starts on Ash Wednesday. For Christians, Lent is a time of sacrifice and fasting. In the United States, the Catholic French who settled in Louisiana brought the traditions of Mardi Gras with them from their native country. The celebration took root in New Orleans, which now boasts the most famous carnival in the United States.

Donte is 19 years old and is incarcerated at Allen Correctional Center in Kinder, Louisiana, due to not obeying Louisiana laws. He is currently attending education classes, trying to learn more and get his HiSET. His passion is working with dogs that come from abusive homes. He previously trained dogs at Dixon Correctional Institute in Jackson, Louisiana, in the hopes that they would one day have a “forever” home.

POST-READING:
• Find some key words and phrases that the author uses to convey how he felt overwhelmed by the Mardi Gras parade.
• Find some key words and phrases that the author uses to convey his enthusiasm and growing comfort with the parade.
• Share and write about a time when you felt both overwhelmed and excited by a celebration.