

W I N T E R 2 0 2 5 / 2 0 2 6

# The NightWriter Review



V O L U M E 2 , I S S U E 1

# MARDI GRAS '95

## Nonfiction by Rob Rogers

*"Mardi Gras '95" was the first-place winner in nonfiction in the 2025 Golden Quill Writing Contest.*

He cracked open his crusted eyelids, his temples throbbing as if he'd been hit by a two-by-four. Beneath his left cheek lay a puddle of drool, and the weight of his Doc Martens sent spasms through his ankles as they dangled off the foot of the bed. A strand of silver beads choked his neck like a dog leash, and several plastic pieces were digging into his chest beneath his polo shirt, which was somehow still tucked into his khaki pants. He reeked of gym locker and menthol cigarette smoke. The coarse texture of an unwashed motel comforter chafed his nose, a hint of rottweiler piss cutting through the overpowering tang of grenadine and orange-flavored toilet wine. The room was dark, but he could hear the shadow in the other bed snoring.

He propped his head on his pillow and opened his clenched fist to find a crumpled half page torn from a phone book. Circled in black magic marker was the listing for the Days Inn in Slidell. He checked his pockets. Please, dear god, let the wallet be there. Good. He even had his driver's license, debit card, and five twenty-dollar bills. Nothing else but a receipt for Burger King and a crushed pack of Newport Lights with two cigarettes left.

The shadow in the other bed lifted his head into the crack of light fighting its way through the vinyl curtains. "You made it."

"Jesus, my head hurts. What time is it, ten?"

"Eleven-thirty." The shadow rolled on his side to face his freshman-year roommate. "Dude, what happened to you last night?"

"I was hoping you could tell me. My memory is kinda fuzzy. The last thing I can remember is getting back on the bus to go down to Bourbon Street. How many beers did we have here before we left?"

"I think you and me had six before we left, but the Tools only had two or three. There's a few left in the bathroom sink if you want one. But yeah, you were hitting that fifth of Jack pretty hard on the bus. You almost spilled it on the chicks in the front row."

"Oh yeah, I remember that," he chuckled. "I hope they're not staying here." He rubbed his temples. The hammer shots began reaching for his scalp. He pulled off his shoes and scratched at the socks atop his toes.

"What time did we get back last night?"

"We? *We* got back at two-thirty. But I don't know about you, man."

"Huh?"

"Dude, I haven't seen you since nine-thirty last night. You took off right after we got to Bourbon."

Acid reflux flashed in his stomach and forced out a belch of sour lime and Captain Morgan. He broke into a cold sweat before swallowing it all back down. A glance from Matt confirmed that he was not joking.

"Yeah, man. You were with us on Bourbon for about half an hour, then you just took off. We didn't even know you left. I had to spend the rest of the night babysitting the Tools. We spent like fifty bucks on beads just trying to get them some action."

What in the holy fuck?

"Yeah, man, you were in rare form. I think the Jack gave you some serious balls. I've never seen you talk to girls that way. You remember the Ole Miss girls?"

"Please tell me I didn't puke on them."

"Dude, as soon as we got to Bourbon, these four girls from Ole Miss were standing in front of the first bar we went to. Then you just went up to the hottest one and started talking to her. Like, really talking, not the gay shit you say to the girls on the second floor. The rest of us just started staring at her friends, and before the Tools could fuck it up, I told them I'd get them all Hurricanes. You know, just to give you a chance to not get cockblocked. I came back with four Hurricanes, expecting the girls to be gone, figuring we'd just start double-fisting. But you were making out with the blonde one against the lamp post."

"You're making this shit up, Matt."

"Seriously. The other girls were cool as shit. We were just hanging out, talking to them in the middle of Bourbon, and you

were putting in work right there on the sidewalk. Nothin' too dirty, just makin' out. Fuckin' Brad Pitt, man. Did you get that girl's number?"

He looked at Matt with incredulity.

"Yeah, dude. After a few minutes, you guys came back over, and her friend handed her a drink. Then you fist-bumped the blonde girl and winked and told her friends to have fun and stay safe. Then we kept walking down Bourbon, and you and the Tools got a couple more Hurricanes."

"Those things taste like shit. I don't know how much I can drink tonight."

"Yeah, you had like two or three more, but I think you dropped the last one in the gutter."

None of this sounded familiar.

"So we're walkin' down Bourbon, watching guys throw beads at the balconies and trying to get the girls to show their tits. And then I turn around, and you were gone."

He took a beat with this. He did not find it hard to believe that he had bolted. He gets the urge to flee frequently when around large groups of people having fun, especially at parties. But he could not remember any of what he was hearing.

"Yeah, you didn't say goodbye or anything. I called your name a couple of times, but it was nut-to-butt out there, and I couldn't even see across the other side of the street. There were thousands of people out there. And that wasn't even the busy part."

With a philosophical wrinkling of his brow, the forgetful freshman began plumbing the depths of his memory, searching for any snapshots that might help put the pieces together. It would be really nice if he could remember the girl from Ole Miss.

"The Tools thought we should look for you; they thought you might have gone to one of the titty bars. But you were gone. We just figured you'd go sleep on the bus or get a cab back here. When you weren't on the bus, we figured you were already back."

"Dude, I think I need to not drink tonight."

"How the hell did you get back here anyway? I still don't know the name of this hotel."

"It's a Days Inn." He threw the crumpled phone book page over to Matt. "I guess I found a ride. Thank god I guessed the right Days Inn. I still have cash, so I must not have gotten jacked."

"But how did you find the room?"

"I've always had a way of finding my way back to unfamiliar places. Or maybe I just followed the smell of your Old Spice and creatine shits."

Matt replied with a loud fart. And with that, it was time for Brad Pitt to strip off his sticky shirt and the pants smeared with street grease. It was finally time to empty his bladder.

He grabbed the last plastic cup from beside the bathroom sink, then turned the knob for the fake-tanning light and pounded five full glasses of water. Hangover helper. He'll brush his teeth later, after he has another Newport outside. But not until his head stops pounding. *How could I have smoked so many cigarettes last night? My mouth tastes like a biker's ass.* He returned to the room and threw a lukewarm Busch Light to his roommate.

"Matt, I think I may have called my parents last night."

"You what? You're shitting me."

"I don't know when or why, but I really think I may have called them from Bourbon."

"How? You don't even have a calling card? What, did you call them collect from a pay phone? Why the fuck would you do that?"

The juvenile mystique of the moment was now suddenly wearing off for both of them, especially the one whose memory was erased.

"I think I need to call them to let them know I'm okay."

"Bro, that is a terrible idea."

"I'm serious. I don't know what I said."

"And you want to find out? I thought you said you can't remember."

"I can't. Fuck, I'm not sure."

"Let's think about this for one second before we go pissing in the party pool. Do your parents know you're here?"

"Dude, nobody knows I'm here. You told me about this right after I got back from my date with Carrie. I only had five minutes to pack before the bus left. I didn't even tell those dicks at the frat."

"O-kaaay, so let's say you *didn't* call them. You're just gonna call them now and say, 'Hey, guys. I think I may have called y'all last night, and I just wanted to let you know that I got back to the hotel okay. The hotel in New Orleans. On the eleven-hour bus trip to Mardi Gras. The one I didn't tell you about.' How do you think that's gonna go over? Are you fuckin' crazy?"

"Dude, they won't tell your parents. They didn't even ask for your parents' number when we moved into the dorm."

"That's not my point. If you call your parents and tell them you're in New Orleans, they're gonna tear you a new asshole. They might freeze your debit card. It'll buttfuck the rest of our weekend. At least if they're worried, they'll wait to do anything drastic."

They both took their time wrestling with this idea. He had to admit Matt had a point.

"Yeah, I guess we're better off taking our chances. No need to worry them. Yeah, there's no way I could have called them."

Its decision made, the subcommittee adjourned. Brad Pitt grabbed another Beast Light and opened it over Matt's bed, just in case any spilled. "Get up, you lazy fuck. I need Waffle House, immediately."

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The bus home from New Orleans finally pulled into Gainesville on Sunday night just before ten-thirty. Brad Pitt managed to hold his shit in for the last five hours and was grateful they parked so close to their dorm. He was ten minutes away from breaking the No Deuces on Buses rule, but he managed to white-knuckle it. There was no way he could have held his breath that long.

"Matt, give me your dorm key and take my bag to the room. I'm about to shit my pants, so I'm gonna bolt off before the dorks in the front wake up. Tell the Tools I said bye and congrats on retaining their virginity."

His preferred stall was mercifully free when he arrived at the showers down the hall from their room. Thank god no one showers after nine on Sunday; there may have been casualties from the smell. Twenty minutes later, he returned to their room.

"Rob, I think you *did* call your parents. Look at this shit."

The red light on the digital answering machine beside their cordless phone blinked in a sequence too fast for human eyes to process. He recoiled at the thought of pressing the play button, but Matt already knew. They were suddenly thrust back into the real world.

"You. Have. Twenty-nine. Messages. Message. One. Friday at. 11:55. p.m." The robot voice seemed strangely amused at the number of messages.

Then his mother's voice shouted in distress and disbelief, something about where the hell was he, that she knew she should

never have let him join a frat, etc. The next fifteen messages were from his parents, mainly his mother, about one every hour from midnight until 3 p.m. on Saturday. He clicked through them without listening, as he suspected he knew their gist. Three messages were from the frat house. Apparently, his mother called them to find out where the hell he was.

He stopped listening after the nineteenth message and pressed delete.

"I'm fucked."

He did not relish the idea of having to move back home. He was just getting fully immersed in the college experience. Hell, he was even starting to go to his morning classes. Oh well, at least no cops were waiting at their room when he got back.

"She's going to cut my balls off. Do you have any weed left?"

"I think you'd better call them now to let them know you're okay."

"Fuck that. My sister has her own line in her room. I'll call her."

Kelly was a straight-A student, two years from graduating from the local performing arts magnet school where they grew up in South Florida, the star of the family. Until recently, the two of them hated each other. He was still bitter about the time she ratted him out to their parents for making out with his high school girlfriend in his bedroom after school, and she didn't miss his filth and his moods. But their relationship improved when he left for college, and they no longer had to share a bathroom. It also helped when he brought home a bottle of Jack Daniel's on Christmas break and listened to her vent about their parents.

"Kelly, what's up?"

"Holy shit, you're alive! Are you okay? Where the hell are you?"

"I'm back in Gainesville. We just got back from New Orleans."

"Uh, yeah, I know you were in New Orleans. We all know. Rob. Mardi Gras???"

"Matt and the guys down the hall bought tickets for a bus trip to Mardi Gras, but then one of the guys got the flu on Thursday and couldn't go. Matt asked me if I wanted to take his spot when I got back from a date on Thursday, and we left less than an hour later."

"Jesus."

"I got a little wasted on the first night and couldn't remember if I called to let you guys know about my trip."

“Rob, you called collect from a department store at eleven forty-five and asked for a ride back to your hotel. Do you even remember?”

He tried his best to choke down a chuckle and coughed instead.

“I’d just gotten back from a date with Geoff, and when I got out of the shower, I heard Mom screaming at Dad to get on a plane and go find you. He was in Jacksonville all week, and he told her there was nothing they could do. Did you tell her you were in Atlanta? Or Tampa?”

“Hmmm, yeah, I did a trip to Atlanta with some guys from the house three weeks ago. Matt and I saw Green Day in Tampa last weekend. I guess I must have been confused.”

“Mom said you were trashed. She couldn’t understand anything you were saying. The clerk from the store had to get on the phone and tell her you were at Mardi Gras and were calling from a shoe store near Bourbon Street and wanted a ride back to your hotel.”

The puzzle pieces were starting to fall into place. The face of a frustrated Asian clerk talking sternly into a phone flashed through his memory, but he couldn’t remember much more.

“Eventually, you just walked away, and she hung up. Dad walked in the door ten minutes later.”

“They’re pretty pissed, aren’t they? They apparently called the frat.”

“And your dorm. And the police in Gainesville and New Orleans. She tried to get the cops in New Orleans to help her report a missing teenager at Mardi Gras, and they told her no one was available. This morning, she even called the morgue.”

Interesting. He pondered his next move.

“Thank God it’s eleven. Do me a favor and wait until they leave for work tomorrow, then leave a message at Mom’s office telling her that I called and I’m okay. Tell her I have a few midterms, but I’ll call on Wednesday.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“I’m not gonna wake them up right now. I’m fucked either way, and I really need some sleep.”

“Rob, I’m in high school. *High school*. I leave before they do; I can’t just sleep in until noon like you. What am I supposed to do, call her from school?”

"It's a performing arts school. You can't come up with a reason to go to the nurse's office and call? Come on, Kel, I'll hook you up the next time I come home."

The straight-A student sighed.

"I can't believe you. You have no shame." She laughed.

"How's Geoff?"

"Wonderful. I talked him into going to prom. The dogs miss you. I tried to get George to pee on your bed, but he won't do it."

"Try your pillow. He always does it for me."

It was nice finally having a sister he could talk to. She would join him in Gainesville a year and a half later.

"Honestly, Rob, I didn't know you had it in you."

"It's college, you'll see. You're gonna love it."

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An hour before the bus had left for New Orleans on Thursday night, he was finishing pizza at a place near campus with a girl he met a month earlier, a freshman from Virginia in a sorority that had a social with his frat.

"I hope you don't mind if I drop you off at your dorm a little early tonight. I have an exam tomorrow, and I've got to get home to study." With her delicate hand with the ruby red nail polish, she lifted her finger to ask for the check.

He knew it would take a few minutes to get the waiter's attention, and he held his breath and tried to savor every second. He studied the form of her tender ivory collarbone as it dove beneath her blue blouse. Her dark hair lay effortlessly on her shoulders, her soft lips and nose often pointed down, somehow oblivious to the effect she had on men. She seemed embarrassed about her braces, but they only made her look younger and prettier. Yeah, it was those deep brown eyes that probably took hold of him the most. He wasn't used to girls looking at him that way.

"What? What is it?"

"Oh, nothing. Just looking."

"Okay, that's enough now, Robert." No one had ever called him Robert.

He tried to pay for dinner, but she insisted on splitting the check. She'd done that often since their first date a few weeks earlier. Nice

to date a modern woman. They picked up their backpacks and walked to the car.

“So, what are you doing this weekend? I heard Emiliano’s is pretty good; we could check it out. Maybe go to the coffee house after.”

“Sorry, but I can’t. Where are my keys?” She dug through her purse as he opened the passenger door.

His pulse raced as they approached his dorm, and he worried that the taste of the pizza lingering on his breath would ruin the moment. He could feel the excitement rushing through his sweat pores as he scanned the parking lot for the spot she would probably pick, and he hoped there was one shaded from the streetlights. There was nothing in the world like kissing her. Back with his high school girlfriend, the one who broke up with him right before Christmas a year ago, he had come to love tongue-kissing almost as much as sex. But kissing Carrie was a completely new experience. She kept her eyes open, and she quivered when he kissed her neck. She reacted to every touch. It made him feel alive.

It had taken him a while to meet girls at college. He’d hoped joining a fraternity would make that easier and help him overcome his shyness. But he couldn’t adapt to the meat market, the competition with the guys who like to lift weights and compete for numbers at parties. He met Carrie a month ago, just as he was about to leave another party with people he didn’t know. They talked on the patio, then outside. Nothing intense, no pressure, they just talked. She smiled at the awkward way he asked for her number when he walked her to her car. She was, without a doubt, the most beautiful girl he had met in Gainesville yet.

He unbuckled his seat belt when she parked in the back of the lot. Now at last, it was time for the payoff, and he leaned past the stick shift and tilted his head toward her. As their lips met and he could feel her breath, she softly placed her hand on his chest.

“Robert, can we talk for a minute?”

He did not know why, but he could feel his stomach fall beneath the tires.

“I just want to be fair with you. You know Jason who works in the kitchen at our sorority house? The one who is friends with Nicole? We were hanging out at her place last weekend. He knew Nicole’s brother in high school.”

All sense of taste washed off his tongue, and he felt his ribs cave into his lungs. He recalled that Nicole had a hot tub. He heard the parties at her place often ended after breakfast.

"I think he likes me. He's taking me out to dinner tomorrow."

He immediately knew that he had not been the last guy to kiss her. She saw a tear well in his right eye as he slowly pulled back. The shame of it sent a wave of fire down his spine.

"That sounds fun. It should be nice."

Her kindness made the silence much harder to bear.

"So I guess that means that you don't want to hang out on Saturday."

Her brown eyes met his again, pouring empathy onto his burns. She waited for him to say something else. She did not need to say that she wanted to remain friends. She communicated it with the soft caress of his wrist. Her lips struggled to find her next words. He tried to wait to hear them, but the silence broke him.

"Jason's a nice guy. I'm sure he likes you. You're gorgeous."

Still silence. Her eyes searched his face for confirmation that he was all right. She knew his heart had been broken recently. She knew how lonely he felt, his struggles to meet new people and identify with jock machismo, the need within him to fill a void through romantic connection. She sincerely liked him, and she did not want to trample his feelings.

"Carrie, I just met you a few weeks ago. Come on. It's okay." He sniffed back a tear like a third grader. She pretended not to notice.

She took his other hand. "Robert, Robert. Are you sure you're okay?"

He smiled.

Before he turned for the door, she gently pulled him back to her and pressed her lips on his. Straining to control his feelings, he reflexively succumbed to the urge to part his lips, and their tongues met again. He could feel her breathing rise as it had on their first dates, and they reclined together to the back of her front seat, his fingers softly gripping her hands. He moved down to softly kiss her neck again, and for several seconds, he felt her chest rise and fall as he moved toward her earlobe.

And then she pulled away. She smiled. Her brown eyes cast a spell of confusion over him.

"You're incorrigible. Have a nice weekend, Robert."

As her car pulled away, he dropped his backpack and stood alone in the darkness, beneath the shadow of the oak tree cast by the streetlight outside his dorm. He was numb, could hardly sense any feeling in his arms and legs. The other cars drove through the parking lot, and students carried groceries and books to their dorm rooms, but he could not sense their presence. For what felt like an eternity, he saw nothing, felt nothing.

After several minutes, he instinctively returned to his floor and opened the door to his room.

“Dude, I’m glad you’re back. One of the Tools has the clap, and he can’t go to Mardi Gras. The bus leaves in twenty minutes. Do you have anything you can’t miss tomorrow?”

The words initially did not register. It sounded important, but he just couldn’t tune in.

“Hey, Shithead, do you hear me? We have an extra seat on the bus to New Orleans. For Mardi Gras. Mar-Di-Grah! Beads, beer, and tits! We’ll be back Sunday night. Both of the other Tools have good fake IDs, so we don’t have to use my shitty one. You’ve got ten minutes to pack.”

He turned to look at Matt. The words slowly sank in.

“Rob, dude. Are you in?”

The heartbroken freshman set his backpack on his bed and rubbed his chin with his thumb and forefinger.

“Hell, yes. Let’s go.”

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**Rob Rogers** is an award-winning writer and attorney from Winter Garden, Florida. His first book, *Finding My Way Home: Fighting Depression Backpacking in Central Florida*, won the Bronze medal for Autobiography/Memoir at the 2025 Florida Authors & Publishers Association President’s Book Awards and was a finalist for Nonfiction: Mind/Body/Spirit in the Independent Author Network Book of the Year Awards. Rob’s other essays have been published in *Ponder Review*, *Still Points Art Quarterly*, *Four Tulips*, and *Thorn & Bloom*. Rob also writes a blog called the Central Florida Backpacking Desk Jockey ([BackpackingDeskJockey.blog](http://BackpackingDeskJockey.blog)). Learn more about Rob at [RobRogersWriter.com](http://RobRogersWriter.com).