

# #25

## The Nine Muses of New Orleans

Within the iridescent emerald walls of the Rex Room, the nine guests gather gleefully. Black and gold streamers litter the white tablecloths. Green and purple balloons line the painted walls. Crystal chandeliers twinkle with candlelight and cast a golden glow upon the first speaker's face.

Toasting the evening's guests, Anniversary opens, "Thank you all for celebrating with me. I declare! How happy I am there is no one true New Orleans Muse so that I may have this company all to myself."

Afterward, a prickly silence unfolds. The gaiety from Antoine's adjacent dining rooms spills in from the cracked door. Each waits for another to speak. The first to break the amiable silence is Revelry.

His buoyant voice rising over the clamor, "You are too kind Anniversary. You visit but once a year but when you do, you know how to get us Muses to enjoy a bit of folly. Although, it never takes much to get me to a party." His sly smile and spherical shape takes up a third of the room but moved languid and unencumbered. "I must rebut. There is a true Muse to the city and y'all are looking at him."

Those present groaned and scowled.

"Haven't I inspired the most marvelous merriment in New Orleans these 300 years? Without me, there would be no Mardi Gras, no parades, no parties, no *bon temps*. Can you imagine? The mortals come here to delight in their vices, fulfill fantasies and imbibe their inhibitions. They come here to let loose and lose themselves in our strange carnival land." Retreating with a shot of rum and thump on his chest, Revelry concludes: "Bacchus himself couldn't do a better job!"

"Presumptuous party-boy!" In an instant, proud Culture is standing. Her body carved from the finest oak, wrapped in the garb and gifts of many nations, both found and forgotten. Her core is strong but rough. Her edges blur.

"I am the true Muse of New Orleans! Others may come for festivities but who gave birth to these diversions? Me! I am all that comes from this land. I am of the ones that existed in the time before. I am what was created in the time between. I am what shall be borne. I bestow jazz, guide their second lines, I am the recipes we dine upon tonight. I am the clay and the sculptor" Culture ceases, reclining with graceful certainty "Without me, revelry has no meaning. I see your revelry and raise you all the reasons to revel!"

"I didn't want to start trouble. Three centuries is a long time!" interjects affable Anniversary.

"Excuse me!" Chuffing and shuffling slowly from his chair, aged and venerable Tradition rises. "I know just how long three centuries is better than anyone here!" His ruffled feathers flutter irritably. Exasperated at the lack of decorum exhibited, he fusses with the long white train of Rex royalty's bejeweled robes.

"Without me, where would we be? I have taken all the celebrations, the customs and have woven them into the fabric of this city!" Slamming his gloved hands on the table, his tobacco pipe puffing like a steam engine, "Our Saints and holidays, statues and flags, our strange way of doing things, it is the rituals that

people revere most and should never be changed. Under my hand, every stranger becomes familiar. That is what keeps a city going for 300 years!" Sputtering with indignation and exertion, Tradition coughs and collapses into his chair.

Across the table, a sardonic voice pokes, "He wears that monstrosity every year and every year he nearly strokes in it. "

The indignant guffaw that emits from Tradition alerts the others to the interruption of Influence. None are surprised at the scuffling. Precocious and idealistic Influence combats Tradition's immutability at every opportunity.

"I don't know or care much about being the 'true Muse of New Orleans,' but I know that *my* value will get only increase with time. Tradition, you have your place, but we need to elevate in all senses of the word. We can't move forward without reconciling the past. Are we what we are or what we are told to be? New Orleans has much to offer but it must be a freely given gift from the people, not a stolen cliché. That's our power and either get behind it or get out of the way, Oldtimer." A moment's pause reveals Influence climbing on the table with his face inches from beleaguered Tradition shouting, "Forward is the only option!"

Tradition readies his rebuttal when two new guests arrive.

"Influence, Tradition -- must you always bicker so? You have so much to learn from each other."

The genial voice coming from the doorway is Becoming. Wearing clothes both polished and beautiful but wrinkled like he hasn't been home to change them in weeks. He moves further into the room, grabs the glass Influence holds and downs the remnants.

"You two are an hour late" snarls Tradition, "Maybe you could try *becoming* a pocket watch, eh?"

Finding his seat, Becoming asks, "Anyhow, what is the meaning of all this fussing? Aren't we supposed to be celebrating? This is no place for bombast. Here, I offer that I am not the true Muse of New Orleans either. I doubt I ever could be. Pity me, friends! I am beholden to the tides of the city's souls. Sometimes their choices are sound, but sometimes I fear what they strive to be, what they are in danger of becoming." Without returning Influence's glass, Becoming reaches for more wine.

Not to be overlooked is Becoming's twin, Inheritance. Wearing only rags and threadbare garments, her posture is tightly guarded, hands compulsively wringing mossy tendrils from her head.

"What they are in danger of *becoming*, dear Twin - is nonexistent! What good are Culture's songs, Revelry's festivities, Tradition's Sundays, or Influence's visions **if there is nothing for them to stand upon?** The alligator ridden marshlands none of you deign to visit is the only thing keeping this fishbowl-swamp safe! I am the true Muse of New Orleans. I have guarded the city's dominion with what I could find. I made the land on which they've built an empire!" Slowly crumbling to her chair, Inheritance sobs, "Yet, they don't care that I'm slipping away. Soon I'll have nothing left to protect them, nothing to leave with them."

The celebration is dissolving quickly into heated discord. Feeling a steady hand on her shoulder, Inheritance looks into the beautifully creased face of Resilience. Rising with measured slowness, the silken gown and weathered jewels she wears belie the battered body beneath.

"I must speak now. I am glad to be celebrating too, Muses. But while we celebrate we must resolve the debts accrued in 300 years. Many times, forces beyond our control seem bent on destroying this place.

Katrina, Neptune's nefarious accomplice, ripped us apart, hemorrhaging hope into the floodwaters. I think of every soul I carried to the other side, the sorrowful rooftop cries. I think of the families I visit each night, still broken in quiet places, how much more can they take? I have grown stronger, it's true, but I live in fear of what lies ahead for our charges. Peace only comes to me watching them return. We may argue as to why they return but whatever the reason, it is great and wide. It's a lot to live up to, a lot to keep alive.

I was summoned here to give the mortals strength in their darkest nights. I now stay to repair the deep faultlines of division keeping them from the day. Resolute is their love for the city yet they lock away so many of their young? Keep so many poor? Push out their brothers? Nestled in my bosom are the ones that give to you Culture, and who keep you alive Tradition, who build you Influence - they cannot be forgotten."

Resilience doesn't return to her seat, instead crossing to the cracked door, ready for the faintest invocation from her flock.

"I think it is my time to put an end to this quibbling."

From the head of the table, mirrored-face Reflection rises stately and sublime.

"Muses, 300 years is meager time compared to other realms. Those in Rome and Cairo, they've been working millennia while we quarrel over centuries. Yet, in this small time, we have been witness to the incandescent. But we must acknowledge there is an arduous journey ahead. We must care for these souls for no one else will."

Raising his glass, Reflection continues, "They thought we would crumble into the sea. We rose like Atlantis! Look how they keep living. We are lucky to be the guardians of this city. Tonight, we rest our sharp tongues. There can be no true Muse of New Orleans. We are mere servants to the mortals that lived all those 300 years. Look! Look at their proud celebration! Tonight we toast to them - a crown jewel in the swamp, never shall it be put asunder."