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# Dancing in the Streets

AFTER JOINING A DANCE TROUPE IN NEW ORLEANS, **KATY SIMPSON SMITH** LEARNS TO FEEL COMFORTABLE IN HER OWN SKIN (AND GLITTER, AND MERMAID WIG).

Photograph by Michael Flippo



**IN NEW ORLEANS**, real estate agents will advertise a mudroom or extra-large closet as a “costume room.” It helps, I’m told, to keep the glitter contained.

Here in my adopted city, Mardi Gras is far from a single day. It involves weeks (sometimes months) of parades and festivities that stretch from Epiphany on January 6 to the day before Ash Wednesday. Kim, the woman who sold me my house, is a member of the Sirens, one of the two dozen dance troupes that—along with high school marching bands, men riding motorized recliners, and neon squid on poles—join the city’s famous floats during Carnival. I don’t know where else in America grown women are so invested in public dancing, but since I moved to this city, joining a dance troupe has been my most secret and fervent ambition.



The author, center, performs in a parade last year in New Orleans.

From my position on the sidelines, the Sirens strike me as the most beautiful of them all, dressed in corsets and wigs in every color of the ocean; I try to mimic their moves as they pass. "You should try out," Kim says to me one day. *Try out?* It's like the pope casually inviting me to join the priesthood. My experience is limited to uncoordinated though passionate car dancing. Even so, I say to myself, "Katy, you are either a coward or a conqueror of dreams." Which is how, a month later on an early April morning, I show up at a dance studio with 80 other aspirants and pretend I'm Margot Fonteyn.

Several auditionees nervously eye my beanpole body and ask if I did ballet. I show them I cannot touch my toes, and they relax. We are all prickly with assumptions: They'll want the skinny girls, the leaping gymnast girls, the girls who are the opposite of us.

The committee announces only 15 of us will be accepted. In what feels like the time it takes bread to become toast, they teach us a complicated sample of choreography and then ask us to perform it back for them. The choreographers' lingo forms a nonsense narrative—"little cat, tiptoe, wash-your-hair, and now we're swimming, grab yourself, turn, and *juggle!*"

Halfway through, I realize I am bringing lasting shame upon my family. My shoulder rolls are jerks, and my elbows are as soft as cookie dough, leaving the rest of my arms spasmodic. When it comes time for the pirouette, I forget to rise up on a pointed foot entirely; my turn screeches on the rubber floor like nails across a chalkboard.

When Kim calls that afternoon, I laughingly make a statement of apology for my poor performance. Her congratulations and invitation to join the Sirens strike me dumb. After hanging up, I *jeté* across the room.

**FROM LATE JUNE** through the start of Carnival, we 15 recruits rehearse twice a week. The first months of summer training are for breaking in the newbies like me, and we go over the eight dances from previous years. In September, the rest of the Sirens join us to learn and practice four new dances.

At summer training, the pace of instruction far surpasses the computational speed of the human brain. There's an excess of giggling—the kind that sometimes occurs on terrible blind dates or at funerals. The teacher shoots pained looks our way: "No, not T. rex arms—*graceful* arms, people!"

The tempo begins to slow down in September, and as the months go by and I haltingly improve, I start to pay closer attention to the collection of bodies around me. They're as diverse as seashells: the range of shapes, the array of bottoms—pear-shaped, balloon-shaped, pancake-shaped—each with its own attitude. The size of the body has no correlation with its ability to move. Dance, it turns out, is entirely democratic. Thighs shake and breasts hop around, and all this flesh moves with fluidity and precision.

In the last weeks before Mardi Gras, we meet at a track so we can practice simultaneously walking while doing the moves we've been learning as stationary routines, circling the rec league footballers and preteen baton twirlers and toddlers escaped from the playground.

We prepare our costumes. The mermaid's outfit is a clockwork of moving parts: the corset, the tendrils, the fishnets, the wig, the glitter, the sequins, the compression socks, the antichafing gel, the hand warmers. The more senior Sirens' advice gets real specific, real quick: Don't cut your toenails the week before a parade. Eat a bucket of pasta the night before. Start hydrating six days out. Remove your wedding ring so you don't rip your neighbor's fishnet. [Discountstripper.com](http://Discountstripper.com) is an excellent costuming source.

After our trial-run parade, I develop bruises over my ribs and blisters on my hip bones. "Do you ever get blisters?" I ask my mermaid mentor, feeling like a martyr. "You mean like these?" she says, pulling up her shirt to reveal a deep gash beneath her armpit, where the boning from her corset has popped out and dug into her skin.

The typical Mardi Gras parade route is five miles. The mermaids with Fitbits tell us this will translate, with all our prancing, into 25,000 steps. Our goal is to have fun.

My first official parade falls on a chilly night with an 80 percent chance of rain. Our 5 p.m. call time sees a cluster of half-clad women shivering on the side of the road, glancing with mistrust at the gathering clouds. A light, cold rain begins to fall. By the end of the route, our feet soaked from the flooded streets and our makeup smeared, I turn to another new girl and say, "I'm so sad." She says, eyes wide, "I've never been sadder in my life." The following morning, I limp downstairs like someone whose crutches have been stolen.

But then the weather is glorious for our second parade, and the crowds bigger. We joyously leap around hot piles of Clydesdale poop like Scottish Highlanders. Watching the crowd as we pass is like watching a zoetrope of humanity. The faces are dull, the faces are manic, the faces are checking their phones, the faces are screaming, "Yas, queen!" When someone yells, "You're so beautiful!" each one of us takes it like a jolt to the heart.

Our final parade is warmer still, with the screamiest crowds yet. We are Mardi Gras goddesses devoted entirely to pleasure, to the shine of the klieg lights and the stomach-thumping bass from the speakers, and that periodic moment of climax when the confetti cannon of the lead float erupts like Times Square at the dawning of a new era. Nothing can match the glory of a well-danced parade; it links the individual with a collective with a community. You become the object of adoration, but only because your body is an appendage of a larger organism, and that organism is a sparkly manifestation of the whole city's desire to celebrate motion, song, excess, hips, the way the body can continue to shimmy long past the point when the heart gives up. A well-timed dance can defibrillate the soul.

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**A FEW WEEKS** after that final parade, I volunteer to help with the spring tryouts. I fold myself beneath the ballet barre to watch the choreographer walk the petrified women through the steps. As she speeds through the shoulder rolls and chaînés, I look out over the jungle of floral leggings and am amazed, and somewhat stricken, to see that they're all *basically* getting it. Is it possible that a crowd of women, each dancing slightly imperfectly, just *look* like they're moving in unison?

This room holds the lithe and the stiff, the gangly and the buxom. Women in swiny skirts and professional gear, with mermaid tights and pearl tiaras, in tank tops that read “Suck it up buttercup” and “I need coffee.” Women who are 25 and 55, black and white, Latina and East Asian and South Asian. Number 29 stands still in a shift dress, while Number 2 keeps dancing after the music ends. Number 95 is petite and perfectly symmetrical, but she can’t keep up. Granted, *no one* can keep up, but failure swamps her. She quietly slips out.

The gulf emerges between those who are comfortable in their bodies and those who aren’t—which, it turns out, is the entire moral of this story. The container is beside the point; it’s the spirit that’s being examined. As one Siren tells the dancers during a bouncy butt shake, “if you’re not OK touching yourself, you’re in the wrong place.”

I ask the committee what exactly they’re looking for. Though they take notes on things like “quality of movement,” it really comes down to disposition. They give these women an impossible task—and then see who has fun anyway. But how does a woman have fun in her own body? How does she overcome years of direct and indirect shaming—of fashion advertisements and celebrity diets, of admonitions to acquire a “beach body” and the tyranny and gloss of social media, of listening to family members say the wrong thing, of looking at herself in the mirror and hoping no one ever sees what she sees—to feel pleurably at home in her skin?

I finally ask Kim, who’s on the committee, why I had been chosen. She says mostly it was because I was enthusiastic. Because I smiled through the fear.



## About the Author

Katy Simpson Smith is the author of *The Story of Land and Sea* and *Free Men*. Her novel *The Everlasting* will be published in March. She lives in New Orleans.