October 25th, 1999.

Monday morning. Just got into work. I log onto my computer, jump on-line and check e-mail. Up until this point, it was not that different from any of the previous Mondays of my adult life. After I deleted the garbage e-mails our inboxes are filled with, I get to one from Shelly. Shelly is living in Tennessee, with another one of our friends, Rene. This e-mail was an open invite for anyone who might want to drive to Tennessee, meet up with them, and then continue on to see our beloved Cleveland Browns play in New Orleans that Sunday.

I blow it off, thinking there is no way I am going to be able to go. I go about my business the rest of the day and never give this invitation a second thought.

Fast forward to the end of my day. I get home from work looking to take a nap before going out to drink beer and watch Monday night football at a local pub with friends. Just as I am about to achieve shuteye, the phone rings. It is my buddy Jeff D, a spontaneous lad with a zest for life. He received the same email that morning.

The call started with me telling JD “there’s no way we can pull that off”. In less than five minutes, he had be completely convinced that I would have to be a madman to not make this roadie, which would start in Nashville, head to The Big Easy for Halloween weekend, and culminate in us seeing our beloved Cleveland Browns possibly get their first win of the new era in the Superdome. It was all set. We would leave Friday.

After stopping and spending a night in Nashville to rendezvous with our friends, it’s off to the home of Mardi Gras. The plan was a simple one: drink ourselves into oblivion on Saturday, and wake up and do it all over again on Sunday before the Browns game versus the Saints.

Saturday night, we head down to Bourbon Street, and when we get there, let me tell you, we were shocked at what it was like. Not only all of the different people dressed up in some crazy costumes, but also how many of those crazy costumes are Browns fans. It was like a Browns tailgate party down there. Dog masks everywhere! Then, we see the sign. The perfect sign to signal we were exactly where we are supposed to be. The sign reads “BIG ASS BEERS $5”. Now when it says big ass beers, it does not mean 23oz. It didn’t mean 46 oz. These were 72 oz beers. Yes a six-pack of beers in one cup!!! Part A of The Plan worked to perfection. Now, go pass out and do it again!

Sunday morning. It is a little after 7 and it is time to head down for the game. These New Orleans people are crazy. We had heard of a couple of places around the Superdome where the crowd shows up early and ready to go. So we head down there and find out we are actually getting a late start. 7 AM? Late start, oh boy! We walk in and start all over again. We spend a few hours prepping for the game, before heading over to the Dome and the start of the game.

Of course this turned out to be when the fun really started. The winless Cleveland Browns versus The Saints. For most of the day, the game is terrible. The Browns could only muster 9 first downs and 243 total yards in the game. The Saints held the time of possession advantage, 41:00 to 19:00. Ricky Williams ran all over the Browns that day, chalking up 40 carries for 179 yards but could not manage getting into the end zone. New Orleans struck first, on a 5-yard touchdown pass from Billy Joe Hobert to Keith Poole. Following a Hobert interception, the Browns struck back on a 27 yard Tim Couch to Marc Edwards connection to even the score on the first play after the turnover. The Saints kicked a late field goal to take the halftime lead 10-7.

New Orleans continued to pound our defense running the ball down their throats and chewing up the clock. Fortunately a very opportunistic defense was able to force five Saint turnovers and the offense found ways to capitalize. After a Saints fumble, Couch threw for his second touchdown, a 24 yarder to Kevin Johnson. The Saints answered with a field goal to make the score 14-13 going into the fourth quarter.

Now, you want to talk about some pessimistic fans. Saints fans were talking about leaving. They could not even beat the Browns. The fourth quarter was much like the first three. The Browns offense could not muster anything, and the

defense was getting worked, but continued to get some turnovers to keep them alive. When New Orleans gets the ball with about 4 minutes to go, down by one, we are pretty nervous. We could be seeing the first win after the return of the Browns. Or we could be getting our hearts broken, a long way away from home.

The Saints continue to run the ball and get down to field goal range with under a minute left when their drive stalls. Here comes Doug Brien to kick a 46-yard field goal to beat our Browns. The snap is good, the hold is good, and the kick sails right through the uprights, 16-14 Saints. We blew it. There are 21 seconds to go, with the Browns needing a field goal for a miracle win.

One particularly pessimistic long time Saints season ticket holder sitting in front of me kept saying the same thing over and over again.

“Stranger things have happened.”

We take the kick and return it to the 25 yard line. Incomplete pass. 13 seconds to go. Couch completes a pass to Leslie Shepherd at our own 44 yard line. Browns ball, 56 yards from the end zone and 6 seconds left. No time for a pass and a field goal. Tim has to try to throw it as far as he can and pray.

Couch takes the snap, rolls right, takes a crow-hop, and throws a football about as far as he can. And what happens? Kevin Johnson makes the catch! In the end zone! Touchdown Browns! Browns win! This sets off a celebration like no other. JD was finally discovered about 8 sections over in a large contingent of Browns fans. Shelly and Rene, normally two girlie type girls, were barking in the ears of 200 people. I sat in a slightly stunned state before joining in the celebration.

I guess the moral to this story is you just never know. When our teams win, there is nothing else like it in the world. There is always a story that goes along with every win. Enjoy those stories. Tell those stories. And make sure you are still sticking around when the biggest and best story of them all gets to be told. Trust me, that was like winning a Super Bowl to me that day, so I can tell you, it will be completely worth the agony we have already endured and may continue to endure, to still be around for that day. Especially if you can honestly say you never left. Remember, stranger things have happened!