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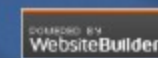
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Bars Near Hospitals By: Dylan Gierok

His words hit my ear drums like sleeves of fire crackers dangling from the lobes. The migraines were getting worse. I reached into the center drawer and pulled out the small, brown bottle of relief. The cacophony of the man's voice coupled with the pale screams as they resisted their exit charmed my stomach. Three hapless, chalky ovals landed in a sweaty palm. I catapulted them to the back of my throat and flushed them down with a gulp of bourbon that sat disguised in a stained coffee cup with the caption "World's Best Dad!" or "Dad" or something equally full of shit like that. Instant relief.

I noticed the man was staring and silent. Desperate expectation sculpted the muscles around his eyes. If I hadn't put those pills down, I probably would've projected the gas station burnin' I had for breakfast across the room onto his puppy dog face. I didn't decipher a word he had said, but I recognized the expression.

"So you think your wife is cheating on you?"

"Yes!" His eagerness to be heard lifted his voice to a glass-shattering falsetto. I took another gulp.

"Have you..." I continued on with the usual spiel. As always, it served as a cue to open the lachrymal flood gates. As he whimpered and choked on his own sobs, I prayed for his wife's sake that she was cheating on him. Whoever she was, she deserved better than this.

When she called I was about a dozen rows back from the over-turned tractor trailer that had dammed traffic. By the sound of it, she was already at the airport. I didn't blame her for leaving. I envied her. She was free. She should have done it sooner. I tried to cry, I tried to get angry.

Eventually a uniform began funneling traffic around the semi, interrupting my attempt at inducing catharsis. As my turn to pass approached, I heard the distinct shriek of rubber ripping on pavement.

"Looks like a clean break," the doctor circled the dark line that cut across two glowing bones. The room began to spin around my head. I tried to ask for a cup of water. An instant later I was on my back staring into a bright light. Gradually, blurred forms hovering beneath the light melded into faces. One of the faces disappeared and was replaced by the doctor's. His mouth emitted a string of sound. Nothing intelligible. Again, I tried to ask for a cup of water but all that came out was a dry gurgle. The doctor arched an eyebrow. I used my remaining strength to mime sipping a glass.

"How's your wife, Jim?" Our offices were identical, but my desk was maple, his was cherry.

"She..." every muscle from the diaphragm to my scalp tightened. Dr. Fishburne kept his schedule tight. As soon as he called to "talk about some things", I knew bad news was on the way. I cleared my throat and decided to make his job easier. "She's fine. In Scottsdale. With her family for the week."

"Scottsdale! Beautiful town. My wife has some family down there as well." I knew this part of his job wasn't something he looked forward to, but my compassion was running thin. Bullshit is bullshit. I tilted my head.

He took a deep breath that sucked all the warm air out of the room. "When you broke your arm, we ran some tests. You know, standard operating procedure." he paused. His eyes were bloodshot. Moisture gathered around the cracks of his eyelids.

I nodded.

It hadn't occurred to me until then, but you never see bars near hospitals.

"It looks like yours is Terminal..." she ran her finger across the screen that gave her marionette skin a cadaver look. "Terminal D. Can I call someone to help you with your bag?" Her eyes acknowledged the cast that kept my arm useless.

I ignored her question and grabbed the boarding pass from the counter-top. "Terminal D, you said?"

She smiled with feigned politeness and nodded.

The hum of the suitcase wheels on the linoleum was a soothing contrast to the squeals of children and babbling of suits on their cell phones. D is for dog. D is for door. D is for donut. D is for diagnosis. D is for "Terminal-fucking-D... I thought of everything I could that started with the letter D. My brain was losing some of its finer functions, short-term memory, sensitivity to hot and cold, basic reasoning, etc... Nothing important. So I had resorted to what my seventh grade history teacher had called "Stupid Human Intelligence Tricks". Or, for example, SHIT.

By the time I reached Terminal C, my breath was gone. The treatments and 18 hour sleep cycles had atrophied my muscles into strawberry jam. I stopped for a couple deep inhales and exhailes, but as soon as I caught my breath something else took it away.

"James?" Her voice. We had few curt exchanges over the phone since the divorce, but actually hearing her voice... Her voice was the reason I asked her out the night we met. It was what kept me in love for 30 years. I took one last inhale and turned around. The air around her sparkled like cheap fireworks. At first I thought, this must be what magic feels like. Then I realized, no, this is what feigning feels like.

Smoke hovered around our heads, moving from one set of lungs to another. I hated bars. They were the quintessence of human frailty. Men snobbering over women in clown paint, drinking until a week's worth of pay splattered on the pavement outside, and enough generic conversation to fill half of a Stephen King novel. Roy, my roommate and the reason why I was here, stumbled back into his chair with a tiny glass of amber liquid in each hand. "Thanks for coming, Jimmy," he sid one of the glasses my way, spilling most of it on the table. "I can't wait for you to meet her. She's amazing. They're up next." I winced; the only thing worse than a bar is open-mic night at a bar. The Buddy Holly look-a-like on stage was in the middle of what could have been mistaken for a cat trapped in a Chinese restaurant kitchen. As he hit the last note, a few claps erupted through the competing volumes of conversation.

Another Buddy Holly wanna-be grabbed the microphone as Buddy Holly II picked up his guitar. "Alright, next up we have Maple Lane." More weak applause. Two guys sporting the Bob Dylan climbed onto stage, one with an acoustic guitar, the other an upright bass.

"Bottoms up," Roy demanded. While he poured the liquor down his throat, I tossed my share on the floor. "How do you put those down so easy, Jimmy?" His voice struggled through the burn of the alcohol.

I shrugged.

When I looked back to the stage, an obviously bashful 20 something with cropped brown curls and nothing up front was standing in front of the microphone between the two Dylans. Roy tried to whistle through his fingers but managed only to soak his hand in saliva.

The bassist slapped the body of his instrument four times, the guitarist followed his cue. A few beats later the girl shed any hint of modesty. A melody that would have hushed the Sirens poured from her mouth. 20 short minutes later, the angel on stage thanked everyone and floated off. Roy grabbed my arm and B-lined through the crowd.

"Mare! Mare!" Roy's lips tripped over the M's. I knew I would spend the night listening to him swear off alcohol into the toilet. "M-mare?"

"Hey, Roy," her lack of enthusiasm revealed that their "relationship" was another one of Roy's delusions.

"Jimmy, this is Marilyn. Marilyn, this is my roommate Jimmy." Burning cheeks and rolling eyes made it apparent that Jimmy was not my preferred moniker.

Marilyn stuck out her hand. I reciprocated.

"You have cold hands," she commented.

"Cold hands, warm heart," I recited.

She smiled. "Nice to meet you, James."

Regaining consciousness, my sense of smell came back before anything else. The distinct sterility of "hospital" punched my nose. Next, blurs of light. Then voices. Then, the pain. All I could do was groan.

Two nurses appeared next to my bed. One of them ran off calling for the doctor while the other held my hand. A few minutes later Dr. Fishburne walked in holding a clipboard and an envelope. He dismissed the nurses. "How are you feeling, Jim?"

Between groans, I managed to choke out, "My head."

He cupped his hand on my shoulder. "I can't imagine the pain you're in right now. There's no nice way to say what I have to tell you. So, here goes: The growth is putting a tremendous amount of pressure on your brain. There's an almost guaranteed chance that operating will only making it worse."

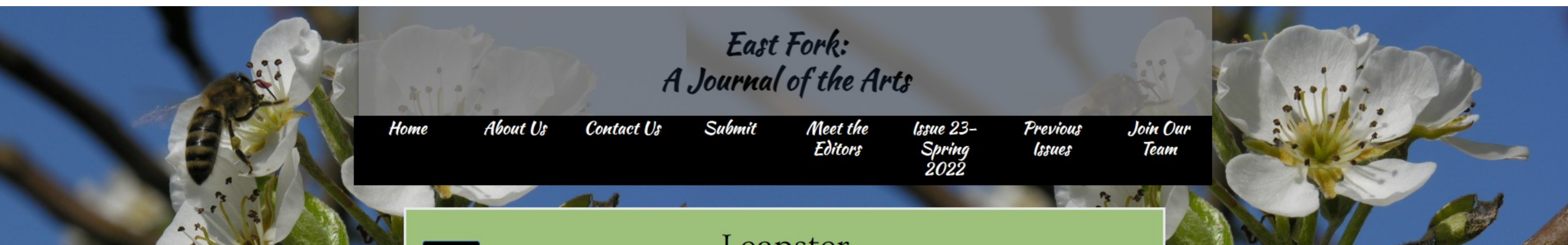
"M-fuck morphine?" I tried to ask.

"We've got you on a heavy drip already. Anyone could kill you," he pulled his hand from my shoulder and ran it through his hair. "We do have a cocktail, though. The pain will be gone, but so will everything else. We only offer it to terminal patients in situations like yours."

"Where's Marilyn?" I wasn't sure if I had actually seen her before I went down.

"I'm sorry, Jim. She..." he paused.

I motioned for him to stop. "How about that cocktail?"



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Leapster

By: Kara Dunford

Dear Chaudette,

I was born under unusual circumstances. It's suspected that my family lineage may have something to do with it. My momma always said the delicate tang between the Sun and the Earth ruled our destiny. Daddy suspected Yoodoo. I was born in New Orleans on February 20th, 1924. With the turn of the century enthusiasm in the air and Daddy's new job as a steam boat engineer, my parents were over the moon with excitement. Momma turned me into a girl. Parents for glowing lights. Am. Always a heavy ball. Momma could find a way even behind the house - cat Sammy and his Egyptian origin. A little history on the family you see, my mother was born on the Summer Seaside, June 24th, 1870 and my father on the Winter Seaside, December 24th, 1875.

Doctor Laurent Dubois delivered me into this world on Saint Francis de Roux Avenue, in the infamous shadowy span of his private office. Momma said nearly half the French Quarter refused to get within a mile of the handlebar mustache doctor because it was rumored he practiced Yoodoo in the swamps every evening. Momma and Daddy said he was a kindhearted man who was a bit on the eccentric side but a fine doctor none the less. Momma went into labor February 20th, 1924, at eight forty five P.M. for childhood incarnated. Rosa Lee was like family she helped my swollen belly. Momma walked down the stairwell and caught the street car to Saint Francis de Roux Avenue. Daddy was out in Fontainebleau celebrating his promotion with the big sheets at the steam boat company, so poor Momma only had Doctor Dubois and Rosa Lee to comfort her as I refused to enter the world until the time was right. Momma would recall the story of my birth to me over four years on my "real" Birthday, as she called me in her lap and pressed her fingers into my hand as if to say, "Listen up, this is real important." Momma was so much pain, as I was her first born, that she said the barely noticed a Doctor's rubber tip boots of herbs around the room, and missed a newspaper sized bunch of flame around Momma's head. This was not the typical home delivery room, dark yards of period fabric were hung over the windows and candles illuminated carvings of figures placed on tables around the room. The doctor chanted above Momma as she passed out from the pain, reviving her with a sip of potion he wore in a vial around his neck. Momma found the strength to make the final push at two twenty nine A.M. The kind Doctor told her, "You is one lucky lady, Mrs. Harbour. Only one out of every 1460 babies born is born on a Leap Day."

We even made the front page of the newspaper, First Leap Day baby of the New Century. Daddy, smiling and proud, sat behind Momma and me on the front step of Doctor Dubois' Saint Francis de Roux Avenue practice. This is the story of my life as a Leapster and the unusual circumstances I've grown to breathe and accept over time. I am twenty seven years old, living in Saint Louis now, there was nothing holding me back in New Orleans, as everyone I once loved is now dead and gone. I've started a job as a historian at the Saint Louis Society of National Landmark and Preservation Council. Hillary Durham, President of the Society, was so impressed with my knowledge that she hired me on the spot after meeting up at a cafe for my interview. Mrs. Durham asked me, "Mrs. Harbour, how on earth do you know so much? Did you spend your childhood buried nose deep in the history section at Dictionary?" "No Ma'am. My mother taught me everything I know," I responded. Mrs. Durham then got me talking about the advent of the gas turbine and its possible demise of the Mississippi steam boat golden era. "Daddy always said that as long as the Mississippi was still running and the tourist were still coming the steam boat would remain a staple in New Orleans culture," the madly warden of the Mississippi ran through my veins and I couldn't sleep. "Daddy even made a trip to see the retirement of The Belle of Louisville in 1914, the oldest operating steam boat on the western river." I instantly regurgitated my words. "You Daddy, huh?" Mrs. Durham checked. "Oh, I'm sorry for the confusion Mrs. Durham, we see family has referred to my great grandfather as Daddy for generations." I tried to recover quickly. "Hmm, must be another quirk of the Creole culture." She said. Thank god, saved by the notorious odd Crocotee yet again. I thought, "I returned to my apartment, turned and pulled the photo album I've carried with me for so long now. I opened the red leather cover and gazed into the eyes of those I've loved over the years, some long gone, others still around but who will never know of my existence. Faces I've loved and cherished, babies, children, adults, cats, dogs, and birds so many faces, so many scores."

Only five other people on this earth have known who I really am, only one is still living today. Momma, Daddy, and Rosa Lee, because they spent more time with me than any other. I was born with me watching me grow, watching me suffer, but they are gone now. I carry their love and lessons about life with me everywhere. The other two, Doctor Dubois, and Magnus Scott Wilhelm, my dear first husband and one true love, only one of those two men is still living. I've attended his funeral in my own mind, for he is still alive now. The pain of losing everyone I ever loved, you once knew and loved is enough to make some people ending their own life. I admit I've come close to the edge before, while living in Chicago while back. I intentionally put myself in the line of danger many times. "Too cowardly to take my own life, I believed this to be my only option. Something or someone always intervened, though, right at the moment before something truly horrific was about to happen to me. Whether it be in a dark alley, on the edge of a high rise, on a bridge, railroad, something always prevented me from getting what I thought I wanted. Now I realize that my time here on earth has only just begun at twenty seven. I have only just started my journey, a journey that I feel before should have snuffed out many years back."

Magnus and I were married in Daddy and Momma's beautiful backyard during a time of free spiritiveness, love, and flowers. I was eighteen, Magnus ten years my senior. We met at university, he was started that at my age I was working as an adjunct professor already and pursuing my doctorate. Magnus was a campaign to protect the Vietnam War. Vice President of the Louisiana University chapter of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, he was a man on a mission. I spotted Magnus handing out flowers on campus, as I was exiting my History of the Mississippi Steam Boat Evolution course. His unkempt appearance was fighting to get in at first. "What on earth is wrong with those people? Where I'm from you don't want to look like a vagabond. I thought, as he approached me with a toothy smile and outstretched arm, offering me the brightness of his daffodils.

"A flower for peace and solidarity sister, why don't you join me at the sit in tonight?" I was taken aback by his forwardness. I can remember a time when men would go to a young woman's parents to request permission to court. "I beg your pardon?" I asked him of spontaneous choice, as he waved from my head to my feet. "We need support, especially from a beauty like yourself." He claimed in that smooth hallelu Creole voice. "I guess I am first this evening?" I imagined in their snuggled up and I said, "No, I live on Saint Francis de Roux." I said. "This is not far. I'll catch the bus and we can go together. The sit in is on the steps of the Judicial building, the snakes won't be us inside after closing hours so we're pulling an all nighter. The plan is to line up in front of the entrance so in the morning the snakes can't get in," he pressed on. I couldn't help but admire his enthusiasm, as he explained his objectives to the war, and how as VP of some hippie commune club he was going to convince the state of Louisiana to write up an official statement to the White House declaring a withdrawal of all Louisiana war soldiers from the war. "Oh, don't worry me Magnus, it'll be starting in five days of his house arrest." "Oh yeah, sorry I am a selfish woman for bringing others into my life for my own comfort and joy, but I have learned a great deal about human interaction over the years and have grown to love my companionship, aside from my old soul I can't seem to shake from life."

March 24th, 1945, was the day Rosa Lee started my journals. The Harbour baby should be starting to walk now and the look like she nearly just came outta the Mamma a few minutes ago. All pink and tiny, can't hold her head up and drinks nothing but milk that I gotta buy by the bulk from the farmers market year round. She look nothing like her Momma, Lord we been begging Mr. Harbour to let us take her to the doctor but he gets all funny acting like we can't take the child out of the house.

March 7th, 1905. They gone and done it, took that child to see Doctor Dubois on Saint Francis de Roux all wrapped up like a Christmas present in her blankets. I hurried behind Mrs. Harbour carrying the milk bottles. That first doctor took one look at Siria Rae lit a book of some of that yoodoo magic, put his hands on her head and started laughing! Like he was real happy this child not growing! He looked right at Mrs. Harbour and said, "I told you, you are lucky lady Mrs. Harbour." The doctor said he'd explain it all to me, but I had to leave the room because this was family business and the fewer people who know the better. Mrs. Harbour refused and said, "Rosa Lee will stay, she's family, besides she's been with the child every day since she arrived on this earth."

Momma started adding to the journals over the years too, a delicate mixture between Momma's keeping story and Rosa Lee's square chicken scratch grace the pages of the journals I treasure. February 29th, 1996. Today is your third Birthday Siria Rae, your father and I am so proud of you. With Doctor Dubois help we now understand what a challenge today must be for you. Your existence is that of a three year old, your mind that of a twelve year old. Rosa Lee and I promise to record your life for you until you are able to see your own, if you wish that is. We imagine you will have the story sometime around 1928, that sounds a world away to you doesn't it? It should be a grandchild by the time my own daughter can write her own name. I am so sorry for this condition your father and I have bestowed upon you. If we had only known, I am not mourning your existence by any means Siria Rae, never want you to think this. I am mourning the experiences you will be denied because your father and I are not like you. We will be long gone by the time you begin your journey into this world as a functioning human being. This revelation has caused a great deal of sleepless nights for your father and I, this is why today on your third Birthday we are naming Doctor Dubois your guardian. He has trained us with the secret of his identity, therefore we trust him to provide care and guidance to you when we no longer can. You will forever hold my heart to your tiny hands.

Love your mother,
Chaudette L. Harbour

Daddy passed away March 20th, 1906, the first day of spring, on that beloved steam boat he found so much joy in. Momma followed twelve years later on September 22nd, 1918, the first day of autumn, peacefully while snuggled in a basket in the sunroom. The coincidence of their births and death dates was yet another prediction Momma had made years ago. "The delicate tang between the Sun and the Earth rule our destiny." I had celebrated seventeen Birthdays when I went to live with Doctor Dubois on Saint Francis de Roux. He has always been like an uncle to me, my parents frequently visited him and we even took vacations together to ensure my comfort with the handle bar mustache doctor. He explained the importance of keeping our secret from the world by sharing his life lessons with me. "Trust no one with the secret of your gift young lady," he said with piercing eyes directed at mine. "I made the mistake once, an I landed on one side in a decade long stint as a tub rat." He never hid gaze from me as if trying to press back a painful memory.

It was Doctor Dubois who suggested I move from New Orleans, the only home I had ever known. He taught me the means of survival for our kind. "Don't get too familiar with folks if they study you, face too hot they gonna know you ain't aged but a day since they met you." Words of wisdom from an old pro. He has helped me cope with the fact that my mind will always be years ahead of my body. He taught me to appreciate the short amount of time we are granted with those we love, to live without anger and hate, for this gift or curse we have been handed is rare. So I began my journey hopping from city to city, working odd jobs, attending numerous universities for a variety of disciplines. We meet up every several years, the doctor based his headquarters out of New Orleans, running the till by day, searching for those like us, old souls through the night.

Today I keep to myself, it is exhausting to stay current with all the latest changes in society. I have witnessed so much progression, so much pain, and so many deaths. It is 2012, a world I would have never imagined living in, a world so different from the one I was born into. One in every 1460, that is the chance one has to be born on a Leap Day. Doctor Dubois and myself are still searching for the chance of being born like us, slipping through the cracks of time. That delicate tang between the Sun and the Earth Momma talked about, producing a child born on a day that only comes around once every four years. Some may argue that I am a Leapster, but others may say I am a girl. I guess we will have plenty of time to find out. Enclosed are my journals, decades of a family history you have never known until today. I know you will cherish the secret your great-grandmother created in a world as foreign as a history book to you. I have been watching you my little Leapster grand baby.

Love your grandmother,
Siria Rae Harbour