

Detroit's Main Vein.

AS IF if they were waiting for someone, the *Detroit Free Press* classified advertisements lay neatly folded at the Line 29 bus stop on Trumbull at Warren. Codell picked them up from the bench and read an advertisement circled in red ink:

AORTA BAR 883-0452
376 W. McNICHOLS
Detroit's Original DJ Bar
Drink Spec.-Sandwich
Wed-Thurs oldies. Fri-Sat
Contemp. Dance Music.

Codell took it as a personal message to him, tore the ad from the *Freep*, and tucked it in his pocket.

That Thursday night, he rode Line 23 out of the Cass Corridor, five miles north to McNichols. He got off; pounding rock music greeted him; the Aorta? No, Bookies Club 870. Live music, worth checking out. Two blocks east was the Aorta Bar: Detroit's Main Vein. Codell pulled open the door; the wind grabbed it and Codell was sucked into the Aorta, smoky and dim with black and red decor. Booths in the back provided a modicum of privacy to discreet couples. A disc jockey was spinning the Temptations; the dance floor percolated and the DJ segued to the "Tracks of My Tears" with nary a heartbeat between songs. Miraculously, the DJ looked like Smokey Robinson.

Codell joined the row of stool-stationed barflies, as diverse as the bridge of the starship *Enterprise*, and ordered a Stroh's. At a buck a draft, the price was right. Next to him, a woman was reading a paperback: *Atlas Shrugged*. "First time I've seen someone with a book at a dance club," Codell grinned to her.

Written by K.G. Jones.

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“That’s because you’ve never been here before,” she said, cold as the ice in her drink. Pinned above her heart, a sky blue button with heavy black lettering swore, **S.H.I.T.** The small print explained: **Sure Happy It’s Thursday** and Aorta Bar HARVEY MOTOWN AND ROCK N’ ROLL.

“How can you concentrate to read?” Codell queried.

She slapped *Atlas* closed and said pointedly: “When people interrupt me, I can’t.”

“I’m sorry - just making conversation. I get it, not everyone wants to talk.”

“No, that’s fine, I’m getting bored, anyway.” She caught the eye of the bartender, who brought her a fresh drink. “Here you go, Sadie.” He bore a remarkable resemblance to Eddie Kendricks.

“The bartender knows your drink. You must live here,” Codell speculated.

“Feels like it sometimes,” said Sadie.

“Ever hear of the Bronx? By Wayne State. That place feels like home to me.”

“Never heard of it. If that’s home, what brings you out here?”

“I got a message from above,” Codell said. “On a bus bench.” Sadie scoffed.

“Thought I might get to dance with someone,” Codell said. Treading quickly, he tread carefully. “Do you only come here to read?”

“I come here to not dance,” said Sadie. She tugged a bell-bottom up to her knee. From there down, her leg was prosthetic.

“Oh!” said Codell. “That makes it easy to say no.”

"It does indeed," said Sophie with a deep sip.

"Then why hang at a dance club?" Codell probed. "You just watch and tap your foot?"

"You got it." Sadie raised her glass. "I'm remembering a friend."

"A guy friend?"

"A girl friend. We used to dance here."

"What happened? Is that when you lost your leg?"

"No. She died. Alcohol poisoning. She drank herself to death.

"She was 27."

There was a long pause as Codell absorbed it. "No wonder you're drinking," he said. "I know this guy, Victor. A lot older, but same thing. Kind of blows your mind to watch."

The DJ took the pulse of the Aorta and shifted songs; the bar wallowed in "Reflections." The dance floor tilted as some couples got off and others got it on. They clung to each other in the half light, melting into one beating and living thing. Sadie sang along. It was transcendent. It was supreme. Codell saw her in profile and thought: You're Diana Ross.

"You can dance, don't tell me you can't," Codell said. "Your leg doesn't have anything to do with it. We can dance if you want. C'mon."

"I don't think so."

"Lean on me," Codell suggested. "I can't dance fast, anyway."

"Thanks. No."

"I'm not your girlfriend, am I."

Sadie's eyes glazed over with tears. She was a long way away.

"Don't cry!" Codell sputtered. "Don't. Don't. Oh shit, I didn't mean to make you cry." Sadie dabbed with a bar napkin that made her face wetter.

She breathed deeply. "I'm okay. It doesn't have anything to do with you."

The whole place was throbbing. The bartender was working his way back to Sadie. "Babe. You ready for another one?"

"Sure," Sadie surrendered. "Why not."

The bartender to Codell: "'nother one?"

"No thanks."

"You're leaving," Sadie stated. "Hope I didn't drive you away."

"No, no, not at all. Thought I'd check out the club down the street. Long as I'm out this far."

"That's Bookie's," Sadie said. "Hope you like punk."

The DJ played the Spinners. Sadie nodded in the direction of a bouncing, round-faced woman. "You could dance with her. Ask her. I know her."

"No thanks," said Codell. "I want to dance with you."

"Next time, maybe."

"Next time."

Codell got up. Sadie looked up to him.

“By the way,” she said. “Thanks for not asking. How I lost my leg. Thanks for not making some stupid comment about it.”

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Codell pushed himself out of the Aorta, against the wind, and exhaled regret. Something had shifted; the weather maybe. Why was it so windy? Did the air pressure drop? He took his bearings. McNichols and Second Avenue. Where was the bus stop? Did it run this late? Litter swirled, disrespecting his feet. Everything swirled. He didn't feel like he was anywhere.

He wanted to run, but at that time of night he didn't dare; someone might call the police. After a minute, he started to walk, one tentative foot in front of the other. In the small hours in the prison of himself, the emptiness of the street became more frightening than its darkness.

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