

*Pushed Times,
Chewing Pepper*

MYRA JOLIVET



In Pushed Times, Chewing Pepper, Sarah emerges no longer vulnerable to family pressures to find a husband. She embraces her gift of visions to become an unintended crime fighter.

There is a Creole expression, “pushed times make a monkey chew pepper.” It means that in difficult times, we do things that we ordinarily would not. We share Sarah’s pushed times and can be inspired by her growth.

Pushed Times, Chewing Pepper

by Myra Jolivet

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PUSHED TIMES, CHEWING PEPPER

Sarah's Story

Myra Jolivet

“Pushed times make a monkey chew pepper”

(Challenging times inspire unique actions)

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PROLOGUE

Fear makes you count sidewalk cracks like a sugared-up 6 year old. I was filled with it as I walked the brittle sidewalk near 10th Street and University Avenue. It was an area of Berkeley, California that was not the Berkeley the world knew. There were no signs of social activism or environmental justice. The people who walked these Berkeley streets walked in survival code, head down, witnessing nothing. The streets were trimmed in urban blight and neglect. A microphone intimately taped to my lower body could have been a gun for my tastes, but it wasn't. It made the crotch of my pants hang funny. I found the correct address. It was a crumbling two-story wood-frame house that looked condemned. I took a deep breath and walked up the concrete steps. It wasn't the kind of place I would ever live and certainly wasn't where I intended to die. How did I become a police decoy for a crazy woman, like some played out movie plot? This was the clichéd birth of my new life. Problem was, the old life had to pass on and I was the one to bury it. My walk of survival was not in avoiding the truth any longer. I had done that for about a year. My walk now was full-faced into all of the signs and visions I had ignored, into the unsafe spaces of my nightmare.

CHAPTER ONE

If I didn't think it would make a few bitches in the family happy, I would jump from this damn window. Talking to my cousin Stacy always made me feel like that. But therapists who kill themselves don't get clever epitaphs, just pity.

I am family therapist to the crazies while my screaming knuckles grip my own sanity, tightly. I am Sarah Doucette Jean-Louis, the face of Louisiana ambiguity in looks and life. I am a California native with Louisiana roots. That part is not unique. I'm like hundreds of thousands of Louisiana black Creoles whose families migrated to California after World War II, the liberal state with plenty of jobs. And they had kids like me, aware of the culture but tired of it. My life is one big gumbo. My family and friends come in all colors and races, and my love life has had a few ingredients added that, like gumbo, should remain secret. The unique thing about me is that I inherited the gift of visions. I see into the future, I guess. It's difficult for me to accept that mind movies that come to me in a fit of nausea and headspinning hold prophetic value. But as Aunt Cat says, "We Creoles got plenty mystevious gifts, yeah." Her word for mysterious. I keep looking for books to help me with this but, at this point, I haven't found any that are as specific as I would need.

"Jean. Jean?"

Jean, my receptionist-assistant, appeared in the doorway, slender and in her perfectly pressed, every-short-coiffed-hair-in-place way. She was wearing one of her favorite pant suits. I

hated pant suits. Too matchy-matchy. I intentionally mixed up the jackets of my suits, even if they were the same color.

“Yes, Dr. Sarah? What is it?” she asked.

“Talking to Stacy always throws me off my game. She bragged about her husband and offered sympathy that I didn’t have one yet. Is this a contest? She needs to focus on her life. She pretended that she needed to talk about that God-awful family reunion coming up next week, but it was an opportunity to screw with me.” I stopped myself short of the neck-rolling anger that was building in my body. Stacy had been pushing my buttons since childhood.

Jean was apologetic.

“That’s why I almost didn’t put her call through. I know how she upsets you, but she said it was important.” Jean pursed her lips in a look of guilt and irritation.

I loved to say shocking things to Jean. “No problem, one day I’ll kill her. Kidding.”

She did her predictable gasp and then shook her head and smiled.

My cousin Stacy was a good Creole, unlike me. She perfected the art of marrying. Every good Creole woman had a husband. And the culture mainstay was that every woman should strive to get her M.R.S., and my Ph.D. just didn’t cut it with my family without a husband to add to my CV. The great man-grab was the oldest and most enduring family competition. One I never seemed to win.

Jean’s voice faded into the background as a numbing throb rocked my head. The room swayed and all I could see was a flash of jagged colors. A knife-sharp pain pierced the point between my eyebrows as I was hit by one of the colorful flashes that preceded my visions. The

sensations appeared without warning in visual language. In this one, I saw a dark room. I was dancing alone. Then I was in a bridal gown that had blood pouring down the front of it. I tried squinting to make the picture clearer, but it wasn't connected to my eyesight. It vanished, as always. Aunt Cat said I was lucky to have inherited her gift of vision. But Aunt Cat knew how to use and interpret what she saw. I just became confused. I have spent many years trying to find an explanation for the images that pop into my mind with physical symptoms. For most of my life, they were infrequent, but the older I get I've noticed an increase in visions while I'm sleeping or awake. Could this bloody wedding gown be a testament to my horrendous track record with men? Who knows?

My attention returned to the room and my sore temples. I tuned in to the muffled words of Jean.

“Dr. Sarah. Did you hear what I said?”

“Oh, sorry Jean, I was just looking out at that pretty blue sky.” I noticed the familiar figure on the street. Between the street vendors and pedestrians was one of my scariest patients, Mr. Corwin. Mr. Corwin progressed from overly interested patient to full-fledged stalker over the past six months. He's creepy, but I took an oath to help the creepy and the undesirable. It's my work. I want to help to connect Corwin to that better part of him. His spirit purpose. My friends want me to dump him.

“Oh my God, why is Corwin standing down there again looking up at this window? And wait 'till you see today's head wear, Jean. I have got to drop him as a patient one day. Does he have an appointment?” I asked.

“Yes, in about three minutes.” Jean answered while checking her watch.

“Is it my imagination or is he lurking around outside of our office more lately?” I asked.

“Yes, he is. This crush on you is becoming out of control. I think you need to send him to another therapist. I really believe that.” Jean rolled her eyes up to their familiar spot on the ceiling as she backed out of my office, closing the door. She took her place at her desk, ready to greet lurking, stalking Corwin.

I hated to leave my view of the gentrified downtown Oakland. I enjoyed staring at the lines of the new buildings snuggling between remnants of older, rougher times. I heard Jean knock as she walked back into my office.

She announced Mr. Corwin. “Your three o’clock came up to the mountain top.”

I stretched out a sarcastic smile in Jean’s direction.

“Oh, joy.”

“I’ll get him,” she said.

When the door re-opened, in walked the man who lived his life in that space between genius and bonkers. I could see Jean’s struggle to control a smile as he made his grand entrance. Corwin marched into the office, straight and tall as if he were leading a parade. The blazing red child’s bicycle helmet on his head made me think of those circus elephants. Corwin believed that wearing hats protected his brain from bad thoughts and strange voices. While he took several minutes to decide which chair to sit in, I nursed my insecurities that had re-emerged with Stacy’s call.

Maybe I really should be married. I am 40. Maybe Ma-ma is right and I do have a problem with men. Who knows, that gorgeous guy who's been coming to the club lately, Mr. "Oh-I'm-Fine," could be the one.

I stopped thinking about the gorgeous man of my dreams, to give my attention to the wacky one in front of me. Corwin was now touching each chair as if it were on fire.

Please pick a chair and sit down.

I didn't feel like dealing with Corwin. I had to search for my professional composure.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Corwin. How are we today?"

"Well, I have to say, I am struggling." He crossed his legs, and I could see black pantyhose covering his anemically pale legs. Corwin was dressed in a beautiful grey suit with a white shirt and maroon tie. If it weren't for the child's bicycle helmet and the pantyhose, he could have passed for a sane businessman or just sane, period. But Corwin was not able to hold a job or a business. His wife supported him. The fact that she married him probably qualified her to join him on my couch, but who was I to judge love? In my professional opinion, she did not want to admit she made a mistake in marrying Corwin. I also wondered if she feared he would become violent if she did leave him.

"So let's pick up where we left off and talk about why you are struggling," I said.

My practice was based on the Carl Jung philosophy and the belief that everyone has a spiritual purpose and that purpose is essential to our well-being. He also believed that all of us have shadows in contrast to our conscious personality. Mr. Corwin was a white male whose shadows stood erect in the face of what appeared to be his so-called "normal life." While he

whined, I looked past him and circus helmet askew, to the window behind him and the sky I cherished. But his copper-tinged annoying voice brought my eyes back into the room.

“The voices are stronger than ever, Dr. Sarah. Every time I think I’m doing better, they contact me and tell me to do crazy things.” Corwin’s voice was in his regular sing-song.

“But I think I need bigger hats so I don’t listen to them and don’t give in. I don’t want to do the things they want me to do. I mean sometimes I do want to do the things they tell me to do, but when they tell me to do them ...”

Holy Fridays.

I let Corwin talk, as we therapists do. Then I suggested that he begin to journal everything the voices tell him to do. I figured that if he is dangerous, this might be used as evidence one day, as I feared that Corwin might one day take out his entire family. He was a soft-spoken deviant whose eyes could go from warm to chill in seconds. The one-hour session with Corwin felt like three hours.

“I’ll see you next time. In two weeks.” I breathed out in relief.

“Yes, unless you need to see me more often?” He had the usual hope in his voice.

“No, every two weeks will do. And we don’t like it when you hang around outside of the office. Okay?”

I was firm. He ignored me. He stood up and marched out of my office with the same pomp and Sousa of his entrance. Jean saluted once he had cleared the door. But her laughter soon melted into serious concern. She shook her head from side-to-side.

“I like this less and less.”

“It happens. The therapist can often become the object of attention or even – yuck – affection,” I explained. I secretly thought to myself that if I had to be plagued with the Louisiana weirdness of visions into the future, they could at least tip me off as to when Corwin would blow. What the hell good are my visions anyway?

Three patients and an hour of paperwork later it was 5 o'clock and one step closer to Saturday and the chance to possibly meet the good-looking man I had my eyes on. The weekends were my time to indulge in my passion of singing. It began as a way to make extra money, but I kept it up because of my love of music and access to men. The club at Miss Pearl's Jam House at Jack London Square in Oakland had become my man laboratory. Unfortunately, the two men I had dated from my man lab were both duds. Leo was one of them. He over-cologned and wore cheap suits. Frank, who supposedly was not involved with anyone, had a violent girlfriend. One night, the girlfriend had followed us. We were about to walk into a movie theater when a car screeched up to the curb and a heavysset woman, ghetto-fabulous with curvy, long red nails jumped out of a sputtering car. She was wearing a flowered muumuu covering orange leggings and wiggling to balance in black stilettos.

“Frank. Frank!” she shouted walking toward us.

“What in the hell are you doin' with this bourgeois heifer? You tryin' to be all high-class now? Humph. Don't she know you not available?” She grabbed Frank's arm and turned to me.

“And you! Get ya own man, if you can. You need to stop trying to be white and maybe you’ll get a black man. Humph. Don’t know what anyone would see in you anyway. ...” She pulled Frank into the car while she continued to call me names, her comments trailing off into a series of “humphs.”

Onlookers applauded. I retreated in Chanel-wearing high-class humiliation. He never showed up again after that. Good riddance. So much for the man lab part, but it made for entertaining stories to laugh about with my girlfriends.

Once at home, I began to shake off the week and to plan what I would wear to perform with Chico on Saturday. I opened the refrigerator and honed in on last night’s steamed vegetables. I nuked the whole dish and took them into my bedroom while I searched my endless racks of outfits. I decided to up my courage with couture so that I would have the nerve to talk to the cute guy. I was a therapist stereotype, like the cobbler’s wife who had no shoes. I encouraged everyone else to move beyond their fears, while I hid behind my own. It was time to take some of my own advice. It was time to take my most feared step and actually flirt with a guy first. It was so difficult for me to do sober. I feared rejection like spiders. It was time for an important breakthrough for me and my social life.

Chico flung his pink boa over his shoulder and hammered the piano. He played the intro to my song three times because I was distracted and didn’t pick up his cues.

He whispered, “Start the song, shit!”

“Calm down,” I answered.

Chico was a gifted piano player who had never formally studied music. We were a pretty hot attraction at Miss Pearl’s Jam House. The restaurant overlooked the water. It had a bar area and dance floor.

“Okay, okay. I’m ready now,” I told Chico. He didn’t know it, but my eyes were on assignment, searching every corner of the room to see if the guy I wanted to meet was there as he had been several weekends over the past couple of months. I hadn’t told Chico what I was doing because he had lost patience with my crushes. Our first song was Nancy Wilson’s “Guess Who I Saw Today?” It was nearly perfect, not Nancy Wilson-perfect, but pretty close. I had studied voice and classical music in undergraduate school before I dove into psychology at Berkeley. One issue I recognized in my own life was that I had studied life more than I had actually lived it. I encouraged patients and friends to come out of their comfort zones, search for their internal wisdom and take huge faith leaps. But, I didn’t. I played it safe in my romantic life. It didn’t work for me, but I couldn’t help myself. I had a classic fear of confrontation and rejection. I would later learn that constructive confrontation and the courage to face possible rejection actually help to build healthy relationships rather than end them.

I tapped Chico on the shoulder.

“He’s here! He walked in, and I have officially stopped breathing.” My chest was heaving.

“Is this a new crush? I am so sick of you looking at men from afar and too chicken to say hello. Here’s you: is he here? Oh, there he is! Oh, is he coming? Girl, this time go up and

introduce yourself on the next break.” Chico was shaking his head while fanning his jeweled index finger and boa in frustration. I did a hard whisper so our conversation wouldn’t be picked up by the open microphones.

“Why should I have to go up to him and say my name? He should come up to me.”

“Do you know how silly that sounds?” Chico spit the words out, and they managed to sound comical. He actually reminded most people of the late comedian Richard Pryor.

“What, silly? I don’t want to make the first move. I’m the girl.” The comment rushed from my mouth before I could catch it.

“Yeah, it’s so much better to stare at him. All you need now is to hang your mouth open and drool and you make the whole package,” he said.

“Smartass.”

“Dumb ass,” he shot back.

“I love you, you no-piano-playing bag of wind,” I sneered.

“Love you back. And shit, if I could sing, you wouldn’t have to show up! Now, let’s entertain these people.” Chico flashed a smile at me.

“Let’s.” I smiled back.

Chico and I had become like sister and brother, or sister and sister since he was flamboyantly gay. His taste in clothing could be considered urban confusion. He often had to explain why many of his bold patterns should be worn in the same room, let alone on him. But we teased, taunted and insulted each other in fun.

We started the next song. A wave of something powerful blew through the room. The crowds parted. Not really, but it seemed that way to me as he walked from his seat to the men's room.

This time when he looks at me, I'll engage his eyes, smile and whisper hello. I tried to have swagger. Not easy for me, but I tried it out.

It took all of my courage, but I looked directly into the eyes of the bookish Adonis. He locked eyes with me for a long minute. He smiled and mouthed, "You're great." At least, that's what he seemed to say as he returned to his table. I was cool, he was cool. That is until I saw him reach for a table to break his fall. He had stumbled while walking away. Guess those heavy-duty eyeglasses needed updating.

Okay, not exactly smooth, but still handsome.

I grabbed the microphone and used it to steady my nervous hands. Chico's loud piano and the hum from the crowd calmed the nervous vibration in my chest. Four songs later, my dream man walked to the side of the stage to talk to me.

"You have a great voice. Contralto?"

"Yes," I squeaked, while the richness of my voice became impoverished.

"It is not my intent to interrupt your set, but I had to compliment you on doing a wonderful job with difficult songs. And you are a beautiful woman," he said.

He was right. I thought that I looked pretty hot in my lavender vintage gown with a flower in my hair. But it was kind of corny that he would use the word "set," like he was all into

the musician scene. It was a little Sammy Davis Jr.-groovy. But, he was talking to me, so c'est la vie.

“And who would you be?” I asked.

“I am Dr. Lance Gaston.”

Ah, hell, another French name. Did every African-American in California have to have Louisiana Creole roots? Truth was, it was either Louisiana or some other slave ship docking point in the south. But ... did he just say doctor? Oh, hell yes! I could see Ma-ma calling all of her friends pumped with pride, and the cherry on top would be making Stacy jealous! Oh yeah, this could work!

“Glad to greet you, Gaston.” I couldn't resist the alliteration. My eyes shyly looked down and then got stuck on his shoes.

Are those tassels on his shoes? Good Lord, my dreamy man is looking more like a nutty professor than a Denzel.

His nerdy-ness was funny to me, and I had trouble hiding the tiny smile that wrestled with my upper lip. He saw it, and his eyebrows spiked with confusion.

“What's so funny?”

“Nothing. I'm glad you like the way I sing,” I covered.

“I have been noticing you for a while,” he flirted.

“Really?”

“Yeah. I like this place. I like the entertainment.”

“Thank you. I like an audience who appreciates my show,” I flirted back.

“Maybe I can buy you a drink later?”

“I would like that. We break again in about 15 or 20 minutes.”

One martini later, Lance and I were sitting at a table near the stage area, expanding on our introduction. We exchanged histories and business cards.

“I moved to the Bay Area to join the pediatric department at Alta Bates hospital in Berkeley and I just bought a home in north Oakland,” he explained.

“You grow up around here?” I asked, now with a regular heart beat.

“No. I am originally from Sacramento. I missed out. You make Oakland look good.”

“Thank you, again. I actually grew up in Berkeley, but Oakland is home, too.” I was feeling much more comfortable. Thank God for vodka. I soon learned that my dream guy was not a god among men, but rather a human man who loved telling his own story – a lot. `

“I went to Houston for my pre-medicine work at Rice University. After that, I went east to Harvard Medical School. I spent a few years in Chicago and Los Angeles, but I had always planned to return to the Bay Area. It is home to me now.”

No wonder he talked like a text book. My friends and I had gone to some pretty heavy-duty schools and a few went Ivy League, but this guy was so Harvard. He had a tendency to over-enunciate, and he limited his use of contractions. He wasn't my usual type of man, but I was strangely drawn to him. I was usually attracted to smoother guys who were a little slick, but there was something about this one that I couldn't explain.

“This area is hard to beat. It has it all ...” I was beginning to launch into the Bay Area boasts of great weather, proximity to skiing and beaches, but Lance’s attention was diverted and he abruptly cut me off. He stood up and offered me his stiff hand like an insurance salesman.

“Well, it was great meeting you.” He sounded scripted.

What a bastard! It was like cold water doused on my hot dream. I didn’t know whether to be insulted or pissed off. I chose both and held my hand out with the same businesslike chilliness.

“Uh ... uh, sure. It was great meeting you, too.” I had to hide my anger and disappointment.

Man-bitch. Why come over and talk to me, get all friendly and flirty and then just go cold? I don’t get it.

I followed Lance’s gaze and realized that his group of friends had arrived. The group included a white woman with strawberry-blond hair and a kick ass body that she made more obvious with a powder blue skin-tight, all-in-one cat suit. It seemed to be made of one of the new spandex-blended fabrics because it hugged her curves more kindly than leather. The party also included two other men, possibly colleagues from the hospital, one black, one white and both with dates. I guessed the strawberry blonde was Lance’s date because she immediately kissed him on the cheek. My heart sank. I had waited weeks to meet this man only to crash and burn the first time we connected. I wore the look of the defeated and walked back onto the stage. I stood next to Chico to reach for my sweaty glass of water and to wind up our show.

“Are you ready to sing or are you just gonna suck from that glass? You may not need the cash from this gig, Mz. Girl, but I do!” Chico chastised me softly.

Chico didn't know what had happened. It would have pissed him off, and while I had rejoined him on the stage, my earlier spirit had not.

There I was again falling for another unavailable, bullshit man.

I pulled my shoulders up and back, put the drink down, stood up and remembered that I was a hot woman wearing expensive clothes.

“Yeah, I'm ready,” I responded to Chico a bit dazed.

“What did that Negro say to you?”

“It's okay. He didn't say anything.”

“Somethin' took the sparkle from you. Sarah, what did he say? I will hurt his fine ass!”

Chico put his hand on his hip, poised for a fight.

“No. You know how these things go. You don't really know people.” I didn't complete the thought of the sentence, but Chico accepted my answer.

I saw him lean to look toward Lance's group. I could tell from his face that he noticed the date. My mind quickly began to deconstruct my invented life with Lance in our renovated Victorian house with two girls attending a posh private school. My mother would live in the garage apartment, serving as part-nanny, part-critic. I gained control of my daydreaming mind and belted out “Stormy Weather.” The audience stood up with applause.

My eyes had wills of their own and refused to stop glancing at Lance's table. He never looked away from the woman who touched him often on his arm or leg.

Myra Jolivet

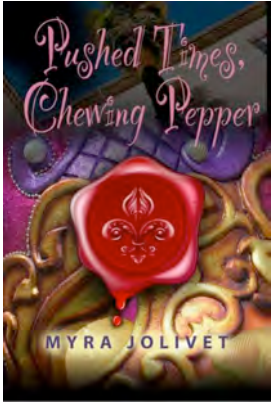
I closed my eyes through the remaining songs in order to make their table disappear.
When the show ended, I collected my well-worn sheet music.

“Fuck him. At least this time, Chico, I learned early.”

“That’s right, girlfriend. His loss.”

I squeezed Lance’s business card that hadn’t left my hand since he had given it to me, knowing I had just lied to Chico and myself. I had a feeling this was not really the end of Lance. I knew there was more to come, I just didn’t know what.

Where are those damn visions when I need them?



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