

A Price for Harlan

Harrisburg, Illinois - August 1983

It's yet another sweltering evening. The town's been going to hell for a long time, but this summer the mercury has felt like that's a literal statement as much as a condemnation of the local economy. Harrisburg is like plenty of other boom towns across the region. The coal doesn't boom no more, so neither do the towns.

As July melts into August, the end of the heat's oppression feels like it will never come. Just like the good times gone seem like they never happened.

Nestled on the edge of downtown is JoJo's Bar. It's a hole in the wall, to be sure. Its window AC barely keeps pace with the punishing day, but the cold brews flow and that's what matters. JoJo's earns its rough-and-tumble reputation on Friday and Saturday when there'll be live music and enough atmosphere to pull in the country boys from the surrounding satellite communities.

But it's Tuesday evening and while JoJo's is anything but packed, it can always count on a few locals to help keep the lights on. Tonight, the White Sox are hammering the Twins on the old TV on the high corner shelf. It looks like it's gonna be another good night as they continue an improbable journey towards their first postseason appearance since '59. It's the type of year that turns indifferent fans into rabid ones, if only so they can be swept away from their own mundane lives for a little while.

Harlan Pruitt is only too content to be swept away as he sits on his stool, a half-drunk can of Bud in front of him and an empty shot glass next to that. This isn't his first drink of the night, and he'd bet his house it wasn't going to be his last. But if he did, he'd lose that bet.

Harlan's a "dusty jeans and work boots" kind of guy despite the summer heat. He isn't slow, but no one would call him a deep thinker either. His

numbed mind drifts between the game and everything he's trying to drown out. It's been two weeks to the day since Jolene walked out and he's aged two years in that time. *I didn't need her anyway*, he lies to himself for the hundredth time as his mind loops the narrative yet again.

A marriage that was never a bed of roses turned to shit shortly after he lost his job in the coal mine last February. *Yeah, I didn't handle it the best, but where was the god damn support after all I did for her over the years?* Though he was never a bad man, Harlan's memory and ability to fairly assess those events is somewhat flawed.

Drifting from pity towards despair, his monologue moans on. *I'm gonna be fifty in a couple years. Who the fuck is going to give me a job when the mines open up again? IF they open up again.*

Ray strolls down from the other end of the bar to his downtrodden client. "Need anything Harlan?"

"Nah, not yet Knuckles. I'm good for the moment." Harlan's attention drifts from his life back into the game for the moment.

Ray Stidham's been doing this job for a long time. He's an easy pour and a good listener—the classic example of a lost soul that got so comfortable in his skin that he never saw a need to be found. The locals call him Knuckles because his hands show the scars from a rough youth. A fiery soul in his younger days, that flame died with maturity and left only a patient man of modest means and ambitions.

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Across the street and down two buildings, the Seamstress sits at one of three wobbly metal tables outside Ginny's Diner, a sweating glass of sweet tea going warm in front of her, untouched. The shadows are starting to elongate, but the sun hasn't let go of its vice grip on the sky just yet. Heat shimmers off the

asphalt in waves that make the storefronts across the way ripple like a mirage, but the Seamstress feels nothing of it.

She looks every bit the part she plays: floral print dress with a cardigan despite the heat, sensible orthopedic shoes, purse clasped primly in her lap. Her shoulder length hair, iron-gray, hangs mostly straight with just a touch of wave to its last inch. Wire-rimmed glasses perched halfway down her nose correct what time has taken. Those passing by see exactly what she wants them to see—someone's grandmother, perhaps waiting for a ride, perhaps just enjoying the day.

Her fingers move constantly in her lap, hidden behind her purse. She's not nervous. The Seamstress is so far beyond knowing nervousness that it's a feeling she can't even empathize with anymore. Rather the movement is intentional and rhythmic, like counting something invisible, or conducting a hidden orchestra.

Across the street, JoJo's sits between the Ace Hardware and a shuttered feed store. It's pretty much nothing but a low, cinder block box. The bar's neon window signs are lit, but they're impotent against the late afternoon daylight.

The Seamstress takes a slow breath and takes in the town around her. Not with her eyes—with something older — more primal. A boy two blocks over nursing a sprained ankle that would never quite heal right, the legacy of a drunk father's shove. A woman in the apartment above the pharmacy has cancer already seeded in her breast, still three months from discovery. The mechanic at the Sinclair station — his heart will give out before the first snowfall, tearing his family asunder.

Harrisburg is full of small deaths and damages. Tears in the fabric that want mending—or widening. She smiles to herself, marveling at how the loom of time can be influenced as long as it remains... balanced. Honor its balance and the world is yours to control. Ignore the balance and you become the debt collected.

A man walks past, and she nods pleasantly to him. He touches the brim of his cap without really seeing her.

A couple in their thirties occupy the table nearest the diner's door, sharing a basket of onion rings. They talk in the easy, half-attentive way of people who've been married long enough to be perfectly capable of finishing each other's thoughts. Rex, their German Shepherd, lies sprawled beneath the table, leash looped around the chair leg. He pants softly in the heat with his tongue lolling out.

The Seamstress folds her hands over her purse and waits, patient as a spider, while the heat presses down on Harrisburg. She feels a dull throb of pain returning to her hip and with it, annoyance. Studying the couple, she considers their balance to each other and reflects on her youth when taking a life brought such joy. No consideration of cosmic balance, just simple wanton lust and embraced desire.

She looks from the woman to the man. Either would do, she reflects. It isn't like they are of any significance. Still, it would be an unnecessary tremor. Enjoyable, but unnecessary, so she will forgo it for the lesser path today. She smiles though in the evening sun, for it is nearly time to bring about a new age.

Casting her gaze casually the couple's way, she sets her teeth together and purses her lips ever so slightly. Very slowly, with the deliberate movements of an apex predator on the prowl she begins to seep air into her lungs. Seconds pass and the slow flow of air continues.

Rex's eyes open; his ears perk up. Somewhere deep, his primal DNA screams at his modern self— you're in danger! "Get up!", his instincts say, but the time of action has passed before he realizes fully that it is upon him. Rex's eyes are intense with the will to resist, but his body has already betrayed him, like a snake bit rodent. The venom, for how else can one describe it, has taken hold. All that is left is for the system to finish its shut down. In the quiet shade under the table, Rex's head droops halfway, holds for a moment, and then drops to the pavement as he gives up his soul.

The Seamstress slows her inhale to a stop. Holding the air inside, she closes her eyes, turns towards the sun, and allows its warmth to permeate her face. The

crow's feet somewhat fade as the skin of her face tightens. Ever so slightly, her hair color changes. The throb leaves her hip. The hands resting on her lap lose some of their telltale sunspots. She doesn't become young, just younger. The moment doesn't call for more, so the tapestry won't be taxed further. No one else has to die, yet.

She opens her eyes and trains them on the door of JoJo's. Her vision is slightly unclear so she pushes her glasses further up her nose to adjust the prescription ever so slightly. Sipping slowly from her sweet tea, she smiles, for the time is nearly at hand now.

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"Could I get a couple more pitchers over here?", "Junior" Sorrels calls from halfway down the bar. Knuckles looks up from tidying some glasses and heads over to him. "Sure can", comes the reply, dutifully, but without much warmth.

Ray doesn't think much of Junior - a grown man a little too quick to fight. He's a good fighter though, Ray has thought to himself on more than one occasion. Not good as in talented. Aw, hell no. He's kinda shit as a fighter. But he gets over his altercations about as quickly as he gets into them and he has a knack for only getting into them with like-minded people. It's a little tiresome, but not really much of a problem and that's enough for Ray when it comes to patrons. There won't be trouble tonight Ray thinks. There's never trouble during the week. Trouble's a weekend game.

The pitchers filled, Junior completes the transaction by tossing a ten on the bar and heads back to the card table in the corner. It's basically the same poker game that has been going on for years. Same game, different Tuesday. The gathering is more an excuse to not drink alone than serious gambling most weeks. Occasionally someone will drift through town and join in with the regulars. And occasionally the games will get a little more tense. But for the

most part, it's just good old boys with a decade or more of history together. That's what passes for friendship in little towns.

Outside, Darla Faye approaches the familiar watering hole, the neon Old Style sign humming above the door. She swings the door wide and pops in, a bounce in her step.

She's straight in from the salon; hair shelled in place with enough Aqua Net to fight off a thunderstorm. Darla's entrance, as is often the case, draws the attention of nearly everyone. Cards stop dealing momentarily, the game is forgotten. Even Knuckles stops polishing a glass for one brief moment. Then the machinery of JoJo's spins back into routine.

The last four hours have been tiring but the excitement for ladies' night out sustained her. Surveying the scene as her eyes adjust to the dark room, she quickly spots her cohort and beelines towards them.

Traci, seeing her approach, launches the first playful verbal jab of the night, "well, look who figured out how to tell time!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah - the salon was a disaster tonight. I swear I cut the whole town's hair in the last eight hours." Darla pulls up at the edge of the table. She flicks her Bic, cupping the flame like there is some sort of wind in the bar, and gets her menthol going.

"Lord, sit down and take a load off," Traci says, dragging the ashtray closer, the heavy glass kind that looks like it could stop a bullet. Her security badge dangles from a retractable clip at her hip, name and photo turned backward like it is in hiding. She put in a twelve-hour day at the nursing home and arrived still in her scrubs not fifteen minutes earlier. Traci's tired from her day too, but she's not the type to say no to friends in need of a drink.

Shay slides further into the booth across the duct tape repaired fake leather seat, reaching for a fresh Marlboro, her dollar store shirt unbuttoned over a concert tee that was black once.

“Damn I’ve missed you guys! We never get out anymore!” Shay grins and lights up. “What are we gossiping about first?”, she asks, a twinkle of mischief filling her eyes.

Darla plops down next to her, the excitement of the reunion bubbling to the surface.

Darla takes a long drag, watching the bar in the mirror. “Speaking of never getting out—did you see Junior’s Trans Am in the lot? Mmmm, mmmm... won’t be more than a couple of those 7&7s and we’ll need a crowbar to pry Traci off his crotch”, she says mockingly, not an ounce of unkindness in her voice.

“Please! I’m so over that twerp”, Traci deflects. In the moment, she probably believes it. “Besides, I heard the mine is doing another round of layoffs. He’s probably gonna be giving that car back to the bank for Christmas.”

The jukebox spins up and drops the Eurythmics into the room. “Sweet dreams are made of this” seeps through the background.

“It’s true,” Shay says finally. “Ward came home with the news last night.” She flicks ash, her eyes on nothing. “Half crews for the winter,” her voice seems to deflate as the words come out.

“Oh dear!” Traci gasps, “Honey, is he going to be one of the cuts?”

“He doesn’t think so,” Shay replies, wondering - hoping - not for the first time, that Ward isn’t merely putting on a brave face for her benefit.

“Everything’s gonna work out fine Shay - you know it will!”, Traci says like she believes it, because someone has to.

“God will see us through. You know he will,” Shay says.

They fall into a little quiet from there, but not the awkward kind. The kind where the three of them could smoke and breathe and be exactly who they are without explanation or justification. The kind of reflection moments you earn through many years of friendship.

The door opens and in walks the Seamstress. A disturbance at the door on a Tuesday evening draws everyone’s attention for at least a moment. It isn’t that it’s rare, it’s that there’s just not enough going on for it to be any other way.

After a brief inspection most of the room quickly drifts back to their own concerns.

Instinctively at the sight of the stranger to town, Darla checks her purse without thinking. Reflexively she rubs the side gently, feeling the handle of her .22. Vaguely, her mind registers that it's an irrational response to a grandmother entering a bar, but it's habit. She doesn't expect trouble. She never expects it. But along the way, life taught her she should always be prepared in case it walks into her life.

"What'd Pastor Neal say on Sunday about the family fair this weekend?" Shay asks, exhaling smoke toward the ceiling to join the small cloud forming there and subtly moving the subject to less stressful topics.

The hair on Darla's neck tingles and she glances toward the door again and back. Shay notices because Shay notices everything.

"What?" she asks.

"Nothing. Just not someone I've seen around here before." She pulls her thoughts away from the stranger and back into their conversation.

The Seamstress pauses just inside, takes the room in once, then walks over and settles onto the stool beside Harlan.

"Hey", offers up Harlan flatly. It's the best he's got at the moment. Recognizing the proximity chosen by the Seamstress, he can conclude only one thing: she's a talker looking to start up a conversation. He feels compelled to add, "Look, you're very welcome to sit here, but I'm afraid I'm not going to be much for company tonight. I'm just lookin' to sit with my thoughts."

The Seamstress looks him in the eye and offers the compassion only a grandmother has. "Good evening, dear. I am sorry for the trials this world has placed upon you."

"You don't know the half of it" he says. *Fuck, now I'm talking to her. Why'd I do that?*

"Oh, child, but I do. Your wife has left. Infidelity is such a harsh scourge on the soul. And for her to run off with little Dakota. Such a sad story really."

Harlan's face gapes at what he hears. "H-how do you know about that? Do I know you?"

Ignoring the question, the Seamstress continues, "But Harlan, there is good news for you." Her eyes twinkle in their grey agedness and it's rather unsettling. Her voice almost that of a schoolteacher leading a third grader through class, she continues "The master has need of you and tonight will not end in the tragedy that was your path. You see Harlan, you were to die tonight in a car crash on the way home. This very evening. A bit too much to drink I'm afraid. Tsk. It's good I'm here."

Harlan appears for all intents and purposes to have flipped from taking part in his life to simply watching it unfold as if on TV.

"Be a dear and wait here for me. I won't be long."

Harlan feels confusion at the statement, but it comes to him numb. He wants to question her but really, does it matter? Everything is going to be ok now, he hears himself say. The master has need of him. Content with this truth, he takes a deep breath and turns his head back to the game.

Sliding off her slightly too tall for her size bar stool, the Seamstress crosses the bar to where Darla and the girls are animated. Darla notices her approach first and breaks out of the conversational exchange. She watches as the old lady makes her way. Nothing indicates a reason for concern, but she knows the situation has become atypical, and her nervous system picks up the adrenaline a notch.

Stopping at the side of the table as typically a waitress would, she meets the gaze of the three. That motherly tone exudes, "Rejoice Darla, for the master has called upon you as well as Harlan this day."

The motherly voice deepens to that of kind authority, "It is time dearie. Be a doll and go powder your nose, will you?"

Darla looks slightly confused. Her brain feels this is both unreasonable and perfectly acceptable.

“Run along now, honey. The master is not to be kept waiting.” Darla’s eyes water up. Not from concern or inner conflict. Quite possibly it’s pride at being the chosen.

The Seamstress doesn’t stay to see Darla slowly excuse herself from her friends to use the restroom. They find themselves unable to question the situation fully either. It is unique, sure. But is it bad? They think not. As Darla begins her walk, the Seamstress is already halfway back to Harlan’s side.

“Our time has come, Harlan. Let’s be on our way.”

She eyes the bartender with a grandmotherly gaze as they make their way past him standing sentry by the taps. She stops, considers, and reaches into her purse to pull out a roll of hundreds, which she gently sets on the bar in front of Ray.

“I’m sorry for your troubles tonight, dearie. Rejoice that the master has not woven you into the tapestry.” She gives Ray’s hand, resting on the bar inches from the money, a kind pat. He feels frozen in ice, unable to move or respond, as she returns a guiding hand to the small of Harlan’s back and he begins to walk again towards the back exit. They’re followed just a few steps behind by Darla walking with stoic conviction in her expression.

Ray looks down at the money dumbly for a moment. He can’t escape the feeling that this is forbidden fruit best avoided at all cost. Then, slowly, he picks up the bundle and slides it into his apron pocket.

Harlan and the Seamstress exit the back door hitting the wall of heat beyond the bubble of comfort JoJo’s provides as Darla turns into the lady’s room. A black Lincoln idles by the back door waiting to take them away. Two men stand at relaxed attention on each side of the back door. Dressed in pristine black suits and wearing dark shades, their tight clean haircuts and whitish pale skin make it possible for them to pass as twins. One opens the door promptly at the Seamstress’s appearance.

Harlan steps in and slides across the seat. The Seamstress steps the first foot into the car, “Off we-”

BLAM! The blast comes from just inside the door, the back wall of a bathroom stall newly painted with parts of Darla.

“Eh-hem. Off we go gentlemen.” She takes her seat next to Harlan as the two men close the door and take their positions in the front seats. Calmly the car rolls away.

From inside the car, the Seamstress doesn't hear the initial screams of Traci, the first to rush to Darla's side, but she feels them. *The scales are balanced, the tapestry intact*, she thinks to herself, a small smile of satisfaction spreading her wrinkling face, revealing her yellowed and crooked teeth.

“It's a long way to Chicago Harlan. Make yourself comfortable.”