

He counted down the seconds. The old clock, after living on the bar wall for a quarter of Harlem's life, now barely hung by the rotting splinters of an inevitable plummet towards the doorfront. *Tick*. He scrubbed down the ripped leather seats used by the unfathomably raggy beings once called customers. *Tock*. He wiped the mahogany counter to a sparkly finish, although the stickiness would never go away.

A scruffily handsome man in a navy suit entered, looking above him as to make sure his head was safe.

"We're closed", stated Harlem, in that groggy, unachieving tone in which he addresses most people. "It's ten past".

The man did not respond. He merely sat in front of Harlem, admiring his distended cheeks, jarred jaw---likely from a bar fight---and deep hazel eyes, and in doing so, making him utterly uncomfortable. The man then said his name, not with words, but with his eyes. By the lights of all things miracle, a word entered the mind of the unkempt bartender. *Timothy Hessner*. This name disturbed him, as it belonged to a childhood friend, whom he had seen bloody and dead at the side of a railroad track not much longer ago than when the old Ansonia was propped up. Harlem stepped back, cleaning a shot glass with a clean rag. Then the man spoke:

"I'd like uh beer. Any beer'll do, I just need uh drink."

Harlem leaned down, grabbing a Miller from his personal stash so he could pocket the money for himself without having to report the sale to any higher ups. He handed it to the misfigure in front of him. The fellow took a swig eagerly, in such a way that it was impossible not to notice his thirst. It was strange, in all respects, but it had a familiar essence.

And it was at that moment that Harlem broke down. Painful tears filled the gaps between his eyelids, and his vision became blurry. He wiped his watery eyes to find the man gone, the Miller half empty, the doors undisturbed, the place quieter than before. All that could be heard was the ticking of the old clock.

Harlem had had enough of the night. "One too many drinks," he thought reluctantly, completely convinced he had met the terribly divine spirit of his fearless friend in uniform, but trying his best to think otherwise. He closed the door behind him, the half-beer in one hand, a key in the other.

The walk home was not easy. November snow sprinkled harshly over the bartender, not that it mattered to him as he was lost in thought. Lamp posts led his way home. Slowly, Harlem

made his usual trek across the harsh wilderness of Worcester, Massachusetts, processing the unusual appearance of his friend. He remembered the news report detailing every excruciating part of Timothy's death. How the life of an ex-marine was meaningless to a man wielding a knife. Naturally, Hessner tried fighting the mugger. He was a fighter, unlike Harlem. He was tough. He had grit. But fists cannot defeat a knife unscathed, and although he scared the sorry man away, it did not occur without punishment. Hessner's skin was thick, but that night his blood ran thin, and soon green blades of grass were forever stained in the brave man's poppy-colored courage.

Harlem was home before he even noticed, and was in bed when he realized he had not eaten since noon. He rose, walking unrhythmically towards his small, beige refrigerator. He took a T.V. dinner from the freezer, and proceeded to cook it in the microwave. In his wait, Harlem looked at the plain faces of the room, detailing every little dent pasted on the drywall. To his left was a wallpaper, the only surface with any color, depicting the tale of Goldilocks and the Three Bears. His apartment used to hold a small nuclear family, something he somewhat envied, although he mostly felt relieved he did not have to care for a child. Anyways, it held him now, and Harlem was fine. He was not happy, but he was not spiteful at life either. He was wholly and completely fine. Except for one thing. He was bored. The same routine, with no twists and no changes, made him feel as plain as the walls around him. His mind was unchallenged, and his hands only touched bottles and, occasionally, the hands of lovely women. But they never stayed. Harlem turned his head towards the diploma hanging above his bedroom door. An engineer. That was Harlem's dream. Nothing made him happier than fixing things. In fact, that old Ansonia at his bar was a past project of his. He had his diploma, and he could find a job whenever he wanted, but to leave all of this behind? Harlem did not know where his life was headed. *Beep!* His dinner was ready. Harlem ate, brushed his teeth haphazardly, and plopped himself onto the brick he called a bed. Now was not the time for worries. Now was the time to rest.

A sweet darkness whizzed through the mind of the plain man, drifting him off in a candied mist towards a land of a million cumulated thoughts. Harlem was at peace, and for a moment of immeasurable infinity, in which seconds turned to hours, he saw himself smile. And his real body responded with a smile, also. Suddenly, the sweet darkness was replaced with a bright blue burning light, blinding the bare eyes of the dream-state bartender. In the wake of the

shining fire, Harlem saw a shining blue stone appear before him. In his head he knew its name, and thus, its message: *Meaning*. He welcomed it into his soul.

Harlem's hand reached without thought, as dreams are often out of one's control, and touched the glowing sapphire. A flash of light awoke him at the moment of impact between soul and flesh. That very moment, in fluttering shock and disbelief, Harlem reached for a pen and his journal, writing down the following:

*"I dreamt of glowing sapphires, as deep and as blue as the ocean, and when I touched them from the rock in the air I understood everything and nothing at all."*

Placing his leather-cased dream journal back to its proper home under his pillow, Harlem rose once more from his bed, to be greeted with a ringing pain in his head. The drowsiness of man is often the cause of morning ignorance, and this was the reason for Harlem's ability to neglect what lied in his hand. In reality, it was not until he tried to open his fridge door that he noticed the glistening object in his hand. A sapphire! Oh, why it must have been a miracle! A sign from God Himself. There was no chance Harlem could have brought it from work, as his hands were full that night. No, there was something divine about this translucent rock. It must have come to him by means of an unexplainable phenomenon. These thoughts did not come to Harlem immediately, rather after dropping the miraculous mineral in absolute confusion, and staring in awe.

Harlem decided to skip breakfast. He instead spent the morning and some of the afternoon researching precious rocks and paranormal activity over a cup of hot coffee. The internet held no answers, only room for more questions. He reluctantly stood from his chair, having finished his coffee a long time ago, and headed for the shower, taking the sapphire with him. Harlem undressed, showered patiently, and wrapped a towel around his waist, feeling rejuvenated. After getting dressed, he swallowed a couple more painkillers for his deathly headache, brushed his teeth, and headed for the door. Seconds after closing the door behind him, a startling reminder caused him to run back inside. He grabbed the sapphire from his bathroom sink and put it in his pocket, thinking it an omen from God. For the first time since his childhood, Harlem felt determined, like he was seen by someone above, though long forgotten. He sprinted down his apartment building staircase, feeling much too energized to take the elevator. And thus began Harlem's parade through Worcester towards his second home.

Upon arriving at his bar, Harlem noticed a small line of people in ragged clothes. The afternoon regulars, or the “Pubmob” as Harlem called them, were in such desperate need for a drink that they arrived before him, scratching at the doors of the bar. Harlem felt sorry for them, but they were his best customers. Among them was Lex, an African American man who came to the bar not to drink, but to tell stories and read books. It was an unusual tradition for an old man like him, but it made sense. After all, the bar used to belong to him, and old habits don't die for an old man.

“Hey Lex, how are ya?” asked Harlem in all informality. Lex laughed “I'm doin' alright, son, just fine. You certainly look chipper today.” Harlem responded with a nod, not knowing how to explain why he was happier. He pushed aside the small, zombie-like crowd of people in order to unlock the doors. Walking in, he looked up, as he always does, making sure his favorite clock did not meet its end on his crown. He made his way to the mahogany counter, and got ready for the stress that was about to ensue. It was time to make drinks.

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It was the usual crowd that crumbled in after the Pubmob: construction workers and office drones, lonely ladies, pretty ladies, lost men, and young friends that rang ignorant to the falling-out that would inevitably overcome them. Harlem took a look around at the world around him. This was his planet in an endless universe, his home, tiny in comparison to the rest of the galaxy. The inhabitants of his world drank heavily to celebrate, to mourn, to forget. And he was their ruler. Such was the illusion that would remain powerful in Harlem's mind, as if the blood pumping in his body contained remnants of such an image.

Again, Harlem took on bottles like scepters, waving them around as if to entrance his loyal subjects into a dizzy, dark demise. With his kingly grace came the righteous flow of alcohol into glasses long and thin, short and stub, grand and influential. Faces surrounded his stand like stars, glittering gems of opportunity, each shimmering mind and crowding constellation with a story to tell, as well as a favorite drink. He, the Lord of Stars, led his followers through the galaxy, past Jupiter and Neptune, further than the furthest reaches of man. With each declaration he poured, his stars flew deeper into that unknown.

A twinkle caught his eye. In front of him, a woman broke his illusion. Curly lengths of blond hair, tired yet glistening brown eyes, a small nose contrasted by her plump, red lips which

ousted a word: “Brandy”. Harlem stared at the woman for a minute. He asked for ID, which the woman returned with a smirk. Her lips broke apart into a smile that revealed her bright teeth. “Do I look that young?” she asked, reaching into her purse. Harlem did not answer. He merely accepted the woman’s driver’s licence and examined it closely. Her name was Gayle. She was a new face. A new star to add to his collection, perhaps. Harlem gave the woman a smile, and poured her a glass of brandy.

He leaned over the counter, his elbows supporting the immense weight of his shoulders. He, too, was tired. Yet, he spoke. “I’ve never seen you in here. You’re new to these parts?”

Gayle responded with a grin, spinning the glass in her hand, “Oh no, no, no. I live about twenty minutes from here. I take care of two very rambunctious kids all on my own, so I don’t get out much. I decided to take a break, even hired a babysitter. Honestly, I just need a change from my routine, even if it’s just for tonight.”

Harlem chuckled. He liked Gayle’s voice. It was perfectly clear, like the sound of a glass bottle as it bounced on the walls of an empty room. “Well, you came to the right place”, he said, standing up straight to clean a used shotglass. “You never know what can happen at a bar”.

The red lips widened once again with a tempting smile as Gayle took a sip from the glass of brandy. Like her lips, her eyes widened suddenly after, not with fear or shock, but with surprise and genuine joy. Her taste buds danced to the beat of the bar as the drink slid down her throat. She was ecstatic. This was the best brandy she had ever had.

Gayle called for the bartender to express her gratitude. Her eyes glistened brighter than any star in the sky. “Do you know how good this is?” Harlem stared at the woman with a puzzled face. “It’s just brandy, it’s not even that good of a drink. You must really not get out much,” he chuckled.

She explained, with wide, excited eyes, the utter brilliance of the liquid in her glass, urging Harlem to taste it. He refused, stating it was against the bar’s policy, but he was glad he was able to provide a moment of happiness to this single mother. This is what being a bartender was all about. Naturally, Gayle asked for another glass, and then another, and then another, until her shimmering eyes had become large dots lost in focus. Afraid that she drank more than she should have, Harlem cut her off, and made her pay her tab. He left her to her thoughts, pouring drinks for other customers, because this was a business of course. However, noticing that Gayle was happily drowning in her own head, he headed towards her to see if there was any way he

could help. He leaned over the counter again and let out a concerned but tired question: “Would you like me to call you a cab?”