

Sugar Shack

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Sugar Shack

Harry Palmer was bored as hell. He stooped over the scratched and faded surface of his yellow lunch counter, scrubbing vainly at a stain that had likely seen more years than him. All he could think was “What the hell was the point?”

While this simple sentiment was intended for the ancient, stubborn stain under his fingers, it was actually deep and multi-purpose in nature. It was a “one-size-fits-all” tool that allowed Harry to criticize any situation instantly. Over the years, he had found that it could be applied equally well to start a conversation with like-minded observers of the human race, or as a simple blunt instrument with which to beat down the shallow opinions of the more slope-headed patrons of his dusty little cafe.

The Sugar Shack cafe was a tiny little restaurant containing six tables and a compact, U-shaped lunch counter in the middle. The Sugar Shack actually had two names, each displayed on separate signs and mounted perpendicular to the other outside above the large plate-glass window. If you were standing right in front of the cafe looking directly at it, you would see the name "The Sugar Shack". If you were walking north or south down Renfrew Street towards the cafe, you would think it was called "The First Avenue Cafe". Harry had always known it as the Sugar Shack, but whatever it was called, it had probably operated at this same location for over fifty years. The cafe was showing its age too. The traffic of countless patrons had worn away a patch in the linoleum inside the front door, and the yellow speckled pattern on the lunch counter and the tables had been faded from years of sunlight, wiping, and the small scrapes left by plates and cutlery. Much of the time, it could be described as cozy. When it was full of people, it could be described as cramped or even claustrophobic. But somehow, the little place always felt homey and familiar. The air was usually musty or stuffy (like a damp closet), warm and moist with the heat of the kitchen and hungry bodies.

This particular morning, business wasn't all that bad. By eight-thirty, the café was half-filled with a large group of Eaton's delivery drivers (unionized). These guys usually started piling in at their regular tables around seven thirty. They always arrived in pairs, one young guy and one old fart. Now they totaled a dozen loud, chattering men, clad in dark blue jumpsuits, drinking Harry's charred coffee and filling the café with plumes of thick blue cigarette smoke. Harry knew that they came to his place mostly because it was cheap and because he always let them smoke, in spite of the city by-law against smoking in public restaurants.

Harry continued absent-mindedly wiping the lunch counter using large circular motions. Each circle brought out the nagging pain in his lower back. “Goddamned counter never looks clean,” he muttered to himself.

At sixty-two years of age, Harry knew he was getting old, but some days (like today) he felt it more than others. In his mind, Harry Palmer had once been among the strongest and most respected men in his neighbourhood, striding proudly down Renfrew Street as if he had paved it himself. In the not-so distant past, Harry had owned not only the Sugar Shack, but two other businesses as well: a dress shop next door, and a sporting goods

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store located one block to the south. Back in those days, he could see the difference he made in his city, from the services he provided to the people in the neighbourhood, to the jobs and advice he gave them.

Unfortunately, Harry lost a lot of money when the “Asian Flu” hit in the late nineties, and he was forced with the difficult decision of which of his three businesses to sell. He figured that “people always gotta eat”, so the dress shop and sporting goods store were history, being transformed by new owners into a Salvation Army consignment store and “Action Liquidators” respectively. Harry focused his attention on managing the Sugar Shack and improving its business. However, he found that owning a business such as a restaurant and actively managing it on a daily business were very different things. Back in the days before the crunch, he used to glide up to the curb in his Benz, and saunter in to talk to the shift manager, asking vague questions about the busiest times of day or a rumour about a deal at Costco. He rarely talked to his customers back then, and he almost never paid attention to his staff. What the hell his waitress’s name again? Min? Ming? May! That was it.

Back in those days, dealing with the staff wasn’t his worry. May however, had other ideas. She would take advantage of his presence in the café to complain about the cheap coffee (“too bitter”) or what she claimed was poor ventilation in the kitchen. On some days it was the condensation on the inside of the windows (“Too much steam. Customers can’t see out!”). He usually would try to placate her with some promise that these issues would be investigated. Over time May learned to doubt Harry’s sincerity, and she would challenge him. Harry began to use a new tactic, telling May that if she didn’t like working there, she should go find a job somewhere else that would pay a sorry waitress like her a dollar above the minimum wage.

Harry had to admit though that from the little he had seen, May was always a good worker and well liked by all the customers. Nevertheless, she had been a tremendous pain in the ass, and he was relieved when she finally quit the Sugar Shack just over a year ago.

After a nasty version of their weekly confrontation about all of Harry’s failings and everything that was wrong with the café, May totally lost her temper and, with teary-eyes and a cracking voice, she had flung her apron down and yelled something that sounded like “Skoo you Harry Palm!”, and then she had wheeled around and stormed out for good, holding her middle finger high above her head for all to admire. This event had not been lost on the young kids sitting next to the front door eating their fries and gravy. They had hooted out “Go May!” and then had snickered and laughed behind Harry’s back for the next two hours.

Ray Mah, Harry’s long-time cook, had not been very happy with May’s departure and even though he never said anything substantial about it, Harry knew Ray held a bit of a grudge. Maybe Ray and May had been friends or something. Whatever. Who cares? It was all just business anyway, so (ah, here it comes!) what the hell was the point?

Besides, pretty soon he figured he'd be able to shrug this whole monkey business off his back. Harry had been trying to sell the Sugar Shack for the better part of the past year,

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and had finally managed to attract a serious potential buyer, a younger Chinese businessman named Paul Lee, who seemed pretty serious about buying the cafe.

Harry blinked out of his memories by someone muttering “bill”. Harry stood up from the counter, against the wishes of his creaking lower back, and brought the half-empty pot over to top up the driver’s mugs.

“Little more coffee?”

Before anyone else could answer, one of the older guys said “Naw. We better get going. Just the bill.” All the drivers got up and started putting on their jackets and pulling out their wallets.

“Okay” Harry replied. He scribbled in his pad and dropped the bill casually on the end of the table. With a rustling of paper money and a little grade school arithmetic, the men finished their transaction, and Harry watched them herd outside to their row of dark blue delivery trucks. Time to go slack off somewhere else, he thought sarcastically.

Breakfasts, lunches and dinners came and went, one day the same as the next. Life inside the cafe seemed to stand still while the rest of the world passed by outside the window, without a second thought. These days, Harry felt as though whatever influence he had once had in his neighbourhood had faded irrevocably. There were no more favours or advice to be asked of him or collected on around here.

On Thursday morning, at quarter to nine, old Mrs. MacLean, a retired schoolteacher, would shuffle in. She was a haggard old thing, curved precariously between stooped shoulders and sagging, wrinkled support hosiery. Carrying some free community newspaper and a purse jammed with Kleenex, she always plunked herself down at the same table (the two-seater against the south wall). She would always order tea and brown toast. Harry would ask Ray to put down her toast and then while Harry was preparing a small stainless steel teapot and some orange pekoe, Mrs. MacLean would begin some preparations of her own. It was a bizarre ritual that Harry could never quite see the point to. While her order was being placed, the old lady would laboriously wipe down every square inch of her table and chair using a couple of napkins. Once this was completed, she would then wrap the handles of her cutlery with more napkins. A minimum of ten napkins were routinely sacrificed in fulfilling this ritual cleansing.

Harry watched the same ritual play itself out today, and could barely hide his thinly veiled disgust as the old lady cut her toast into small pieces with her knife and fork and gingerly extracted each piece from her fork using old yellow teeth.

“Crazy old broad.” Harry fumed to himself. “What’s her problem? My cutlery is always clean.”

Harry remembered how May used to dote on the old lady, speaking uncustomarily quietly and with more reverence than she did with any of her other customers. May always brought the old bat way too many napkins too.

Just after lunch that day, Paul Lee called Harry back.

"Mista Palma. How are you?" Harry hoped that the close of the sale would now be close at hand.

"Very good Paul!"

"Good, good, " he replied in his smiling, rapid voice. "I think everything is looking good for the deal so far, but I want to come by tonight to discuss some things. Just some details to go over before we let the lawyers have their fun. Okay Harry?"

"Sure, no problem Paul. Come on over later." Harry tried to calm the rising anticipation in his voice.

"I have some nice fresh homemade apple pie and Columbian coffee. I'll have it ready for you when you get here Paul." Harry noticed that his voice had become sickly sweet and accommodating to the little man. He hated the sound of himself.

"That sounds great Harry. I'll see you around eight. Okay?"

"Perfect. Looking forward to it."

Lee said "Bye" and hung up without waiting for Harry's reply. Harry stood there with the phone buzzing in his right hand down by his waist, consumed with one thought. "Shit. I gotta go buy a pie and some good coffee."

Ray Mah had watched through the pass bar as his boss put the phone back on its cradle. Ray pretended to be busy beside the grill, but had heard the brief phone call and knew that Harry was getting close to closing the sale of the cafe. Finally.

"Watch things for a while Ray. I'm going shopping. Back in an hour or so."

Friday evening came, and so did Paul Lee, right on time.

"How'r you Harry?" Lee said, while shaking Harry's hand rapidly.

On this day, Paul Lee seemed to stand up a little taller than his 5 foot 6 frame. He wore a simple grey business suit that had probably gone out of fashion thirty years earlier. His tie was knotted in a ridiculously large double Windsor, making him look like a boy who had been playing in his father's clothes closet.

"Hi Paul. Have a seat." Harry motioned towards the curved yellow lunch counter. "Let me get you that pie and coffee, eh?"

"Yeah, sure." Paul Lee didn't look up to Harry right away. He seemed preoccupied.

Behind the counter, Harry carefully sliced out a piece of his new bakery pie, and poured a mug of the freshly-brewed gourmet Columbian roast.

"There you are," Harry announced as he placed the cup and side plate carefully in front of the other man. He watched for Lee's reaction.

Lee glanced at his watch and then forked in a small piece of the pie, followed by a quick sip of the coffee. "You buying better coffee these days Harry, or just trying to impress me?" Lee, stone-faced, stared at Harry for what seemed like an eternity before winking and emitting a high-pitched laugh, thrilled with the small trick he had just achieved. Harry just smiled and shrugged off the jibe. Under the counter, Harry wiped sweaty palms against the sides of his pants. He watched Lee chew and gulp mechanically for another minute, wondering what was in the man's mind. What did he want? How close (or far away) was he from closing this bloody deal anyway?

Harry reflected on how the anticipation of this sale had slowly been building over the past couple of months. It began with an almost giddy rush of initial contact: phone calls and a letter to back up the buyer's intent on paper. Then many more phone calls, visits, and more phone calls as the particulars of the property were brought out in detail to Lee's satisfaction.

Harry had done some of his own due diligence on Paul Lee and his past businesses, and had found him to be an efficient and apparently capable operator. In person, he was just as inscrutable as the financial records, board minutes and press releases that Harry had read while researching him. Harry had many of the facts on Lee, but it was frustrating to still not know quite where he stood with this little man, or what Lee's underlying motivation was for wanting to purchase the cafe.

"There's just a couple of things to go over first," said Lee suddenly, as if there had never been a break in their chitchat. "Your price is still too high for me." Now Lee made direct eye contact. His thin black eyebrows were raised high on his forehead in a sympathetic expression that Harry was skeptical of. Harry felt his forehead get a little clammy. Shit, now what? Hadn't he given Lee complete access to his premises, let him review the books and all the business records? This whole thing had taken weeks and weeks worth of stupid details. Hadn't he been as accommodating as possible? This had to be just some bullshit little pressure tactic to get Lee a better price.

"You gotta come down a bit before I can do this Harry. You're too high for me right now."

What was he after, Harry wondered. "Why do you say that?"

"For starters, I think the ventilation system in the kitchen is going to need some major maintenance work done before I can use it."

"What do you mean?" Harry tried to hide the disbelief in his voice and face.

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"It's too old. It doesn't work well. I can't just leave the back door open like you do. It's not safe at night. Not in this neighbourhood."

Jesus! How the hell did he know about that? "Aw, c'mon Paul! The ventilation's not all that bad. I don't think it needs major work! It's a bit old, but it works fine." Harry felt defensive. All of a sudden this wasn't going very well.

"Well," Paul Lee continued in a matter-of-fact way, "It's too old. That's all there is to it."

Harry looked down at his shoe and then up to Lee's gold tie clip and Rolex watch. Probably one of those "RoloX" rip-off clone watches, he decided.

"Well," Harry said, gathering himself up with a fresh breath, "what if I give the front here a good new coat of paint? I'll pressure wash the outside too. Make it look real nice for you, so you can start up with a fresh face on for your customers, eh?"

Lee regarded Harry's clenched smile with mild skepticism, and smiled back gently. "Okay, that's not a bad start, but what about the damage around the front window?" Lee waved his skinny arm in the direction of the large, dusty plate glass window that looked out on Renfrew Street. "The inside of that sill is all dry rot I think." Lee plunged a forkload of pie into his mouth.

"What are you talking about!" Harry was genuinely in disbelief over this latest allegation and didn't even try to hide it from his guest. "The paint's a little blistered, that's all!"

At that, Lee pulled the fork out of his mouth, and his smile went away. He walked a few paces until he was hunched over the window-side table. Harry saw Lee's shoulder move and heard some hideous scraping and scratching noises. In spite of his sore back, Harry almost leapt over the counter to see what Lee was doing to his poor old windowsill.

"Harry, this paint is six layers thick!" Lee scraped up some huge chunks of paint, and then, to Harry's growing shock and disbelief, proceeded to gouge out small chunks of grey and black wood from the now bare patches of the windowsill.

"Easy there!" Harry heard himself bark. His host-like demeanor was also scratched down to the core by Lee's unexpected vandalism.

"Your new paint job will just cover the nicotine stains on the walls and ceiling Harry, but this window sill is completely rotten. People sitting here can see it! It's no good like this."

Harry looked down and clenched his teeth and fists at the crude threats and pledges of love that had been carved into the old wood by scores of those greasy teenage kids who only ever ordered coffee, and fries with gravy. The selfish little bastards.

"I'm not trying to be hard on you Harry," Lee said. Harry heard some sympathy in the voice. "These are just what I have to deal with if I'm going to run my business here."

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Harry exhaled, trying to calm his temper so he could speak. He counted on this sale, and Lee had been the only serious potential buyer he'd seen in months. His inner pragmatist advised him to check his ego at the door and just do what needed to be done to close the sale. Harry hated his inner fucking pragmatist. All the same, he wondered how Lee had known about the kitchen and the windowsill! Harry had turned off the fan in the kitchen when Paul did his initial inspection weeks ago, and the man had never been near enough to the window before to notice the carvings in sill, much less the rot underneath all that paint. How did all this stuff come up?

Harry sighed. At the end of the day, all that mattered was that Lee was right. Harry had little choice but to drop his price or do all the reno work to Lee's satisfaction, which would probably end up being a huge pain in the ass. What the hell was the point?

"Okay Paul. What are you asking for?" This was it.

"Ten less."

"Ten? You've gotta be joking! Three will do the whole thing with cash to spare!"

"And you originally promised me a turn-key business that I could start operating the day after the sale. Obviously that's no longer the case now, is it?" Lee said, wagging his index finger at the older man in a manner that was both teasing and incredibly serious. "I lose money each day we are closed to fix these problems, right? Maybe one week, maybe two getting all this sh-stuff fixed and cleaning everything. It all takes my time and money."

Lee had laboured over pronouncing the "s" in "stuff", sounding more like "shtuff". Maybe he had almost said "shit"? Harry noticed that the younger man never swore. Meanwhile, a flood of expletives coursed through Harry's own mind.

"Five" Harry replied.

"Ten."

"Seven."

Lee paused, as if he was caught in the depths of some complex personal deliberation, and then he cocked his head slightly, as if nodding to an unseen accomplice. "Okay, I can live with seven. The price will come down by seven thousand then."

Shit! Seven thousand dollars less! Harry now really started to resent his tiny cafe and the tiny little man who had just determined what it was worth.

Lee's face and voice lightened noticeably now as he spoke again. "Okay Good." Lee announced. "I'll come by tomorrow after five to drop off the papers. I want to get started here as soon as possible."

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Saturday was a particularly dead day. Harry spent most of the morning leaning on the yellow lunch counter under a pale spring sunbeam, glancing at the business section. Clouds of dust swirled and danced in a wide swath of sunlight, and Harry saw himself walking around Lost Lagoon at Stanley Park. He felt his wife Carol pat his arm as he looked up into bright sunlight filtering through glowing, translucent green and yellow leaves.

Carol said something trivial about her sister, but Harry didn't hear it. The light, the cool breeze and the ruckus from a dispute between ducks had completely occupied him. Carol said his name and lightly pressed his arm again to get his attention. Harry came out of himself and apologized for not answering and then he looked in her green eyes and remembered how much he loved her. She recognized his feeling as soon as it crossed his face, and she answered it with a warm loving smile. How her eyes shone! Even without any makeup and with her hair tied up in a scarf, Carol possessed such a pureness and light!

In the background, Harry's little radio played "Somewhere Beyond the Sea". The sound of rustling paper startled Harry back to the present, and he watched passively as the sports section slid off the counter and landed on the floor, sending more faint billows of dust into the air. Harry looked at his watch and sighed. He'd have to pick up some flowers tomorrow morning. He always brought Carol fresh flowers on Sunday. God how he missed her.

Ray crept out and silently kept Harry company for a few minutes.

"You can shut down the grill and go home early today Ray. I'm gonna stay for the rest of the day though." Harry stayed behind the counter and waited for the rest of the afternoon. It was so dead today.

After five o'clock, the little bell inside the front door made its weak noise and Paul Lee walked in, wearing the same suit but carrying a new-looking brown briefcase.

"Good afternoon sir! How are you today?"

"Hi Paul. Howyadoin" Harry rattled mechanically.

Lee stretched out a thin hand and Harry shook it lightly. Lee's face beamed in a wide, gilded smile.

"I'm very excited about this deal Harry. We're going to breathe some new life into this business, be very profitable!"

Lee was almost babbling. Harry had never seen him like this before.

"Wait here Harry. There's someone who wants to see you."

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Lee spun around and opened the front door, calling and waving at his shiny Volvo S70 convertible. A thirty-something Chinese woman stepped out onto the curb and walked calmly to the door, apparently not interested in rushing, in spite of Lee's enthusiastic urging. Harry watched the young woman pull at the shoulder strap of her purse. Her heels click-clacked on the threshold of the front door.

Suddenly Harry realized that he was looking at May Wei.

"Well I'll be a son of a..." Harry let the thought trail off in his head.

May walked across the short distance from the door to Paul Lee's side as if she was walking the length of a Hollywood red carpet. Harry caught a bright glint on her left hand, and began to understand.

He felt a burning heat growing in the back of his neck, and he glared at Lee with renewed mistrust. Lee noticed Harry's intense expression and became self-conscious.

"Uh, Harry, this is my wife, May."

"Uh-huh."

"I, um, understand she used to work for you," Lee added awkwardly, trying to sound casual. He fumbled with his hands and smiled nervously.

Harry nodded and looked back at May. She looked at him with an expression of pride and mild defiance, and he had to admit that this ex-minimum wage waitress had come a long way. At that moment she certainly appeared to be better off than he was.

Harry smiled at her. "Hi May. Nice to see you again."

"Hello" she replied coolly, with a facial expression that looked slightly dismissive.

Lee walked over behind the lunch counter and motioned for Harry to join him. "Harry, we'll be on our way, but first, let me talk to you in private."

Harry wanted to hear Lee admit that he had used May to get the better of him. He could handle this shitty deal a lot better if the little man just spat it out right then and there.

"Go ahead Paul. I'm listening"

"My new wife doesn't want me to wait until we do all the renovations before opening the cafe. She wants me to open it on Monday."

"So open on Monday. What the hell's that got to do with me?"

"No, but I mean we can't do the sale price we agreed on."

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God damn it! Now what was it? Was Lee trying to pressure him down again? Harry felt numb.

"What? I don't understand. What on earth are you talking about?"

"I mean that we'll pay you the full price."

Harry couldn't believe his ears. "I... I don't get it. What's going on here?"

"May didn't want the cafe to be closed for so long. She didn't want it closed on Thursday morning."

"Thursday morning? What..." Harry looked over at May, who was leaning against the edge of the small table against the south wall. She was looking up at the wall humming something to herself, and absent-mindedly wrapping a napkin around a fork handle.

Lee continued speaking low, in an almost whisper. "She just told me that I had to be open on Thursday morning, because her old teacher was one of the regular customers and she wanted to be here to greet her."

Two weeks later, Harry returned from a brief trip over to Vancouver Island where he had enjoyed a long-overdue visit with his estranged daughter. The time away from the usual routine had been good for him, as if his batteries had needed a recharge.

The noon sun was shining brightly and felt warm on his face as Harry glided up to the curb in front of the Sugar Shack in his aged Mercedes Benz. He had to admit that he felt better than he had in many weeks.

He walked through the front door and saw May Wei dressed casually in street clothes and a white apron, chatting warmly with some customers whom Harry had not seen in many moons.

May was a little surprised to see him at first, and seemed to not know how to greet him. Her mouth froze partially open and her eyes darted across his face and down to the plastic bag in his hands.

Harry just smiled at her, placed a fresh apple pie and a pound of Columbian roast coffee on the lunch counter, and wished her a nice day.