Nights of Time

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"Nights of Time" is one of fifteen short stories about Harry Drake, Sam Michel's redoubtable anti-hero, and will appear in a collection, *Under the Light*, forthcoming from Knopf. While Harry's point of view may be objectionable, it is by no means particular to either Harry or his class; the spirit of the sixties seems to have eroded considerably as we enter the nineties. In this light, the fiction editor hopes the reader will see beyond Harry's slurs and aspersions to the insightful and eloquent unveiling of a mechanics of power structures and desire that are the heart of Harry's misadventures.

NFO's they call them: Niggers from Oakland. Harry made them change, the NFO's. In yellow threaded letters stitched against the black vest on his back it was printed: CHANGE. Each night he caught a holler on his ear and a finger on his shoulder, some colored face or other come up to ask it: change. And Harry made it: change. It was his job to make it. He paid rent making it. White faces, yellow faces, red, brown, and black, Harry made them all, excepting the one, change.

She was an NFO, that one expected. With a whitewashed row of picket fence teeth and the full moon curve of a horsewoman's rump, she was to Harry's eye as fine a female prospect as a searching person might expect. She packaged it fine. She was a fine package. Harry would see her, the way she was all dolled up in a sheer slip of something clung to the curve of her horsewoman's rump, sliding her package through the midnight tables. The blackjack playing eyes of rough men and highbrow alike raised up off the cards to see her saunter, their adam's-appled throats swallowed hard above their slack white collars. She parted her lips for those men. Harry saw her part the full fleshed meat of her lips and show those men that whitewashed row of her picket fence teeth.

She had, Harry knew, herself a career going here. She
did not squander one ounce of her God-hung talents. It was the highbrow men Harry saw that looked longer than the rough.

But highbrow or not, Harry knew by nights of watching while paying out change, that horses, picket fence, and white-wash did not play in any way in the world this sister lived. This sister, she was an NFO, strictly a Nigger from Oakland, and she had by now somehow put Harry smack in the pants he would never pick to stand in.

Harry, after all, had heard the talk. He knew the score. Harry had heard what passed as fact from the mouths of the workers in the employees' lounge. He heard it from all the other change jockeys dressed just like he was dressed. He heard it from cocktail waitresses and keno runners. He heard it from the dealers. He heard it from the pit boss, even.

From every race and every creed it came the same: they never tipped, the NFO's. They were worse than the Canadians, that way. And they got drunk, and were rude, worse than the Japanese. And, worse than the Mexicans, they were crooks--hookers, pimps, and thieves, welfare panhandlers come to Reno on the Fun Bus to spend their checks and make it big on one lucky shot and no work: something, anything, for nothing.

It came the same, just like that. It never changed, and Harry guessed he was no different than the rest. No month of Sundays passing before he caught himself red-handed on a Saturday night wishing the Fun Bus would take out an entire load of those NFO's on a one-way plunge down the California side.

Excepting her.

Good God! Good Grief!

How many nights? How many times in any single night had he stood waiting among the rows and columns of coin-clanging machines, ear-plugged against what he rightly pegged as Bizet's Carmen toreador song singing out winners in that machine-bleating video voice? How many times had he moved to the edge of the rows and columns to mark her face from among the wild-eyed arrivals coming in fresh off the Fun Bus? And this: the number of times, too many to
count, that he had turned his back to the rows and columns of women who played those machines--because it was almost mostly always women who played the machines, old women, mostly, veinated, skinny-wristed, peroxided women, women wearing plastic baggies rubber-banded at their skinny wrists to cover up their bony hands, this, they would say, on account of the filth, on account of the filth, they would say and ask Harry did he have any of those new, clean coins; could he make them spotless change, these women would ask on coming up from behind those countless times, those old machine-playing women tapping him square like that between the yellow threaded letters to ask it again and again, and again to ask--Change? Change please? Can you make me change, boy?

Excepting her, who Harry was waiting for. She never asked for change. She never played the machines. She played the tables, Harry saw, the highbrows at the tables.

If he had a quarter, Harry thought, for every shark-eyed, zipper-headed Jap that passed in through those double doors; if he had a dime for every tight-assed Canadian hyuk-hyuk-hyukking his flat-footed way to the two-dollar tables; if he had even a lousy wooden nickel for every l-gots-the-fever shrieking NFO blowing off that fucking Fun Bus--if somebody, anybody, could spot him a stake, get Harry into the kind of game he knew she liked, he would take her: rump, teeth, and lips; breasts, legs, and belly--he would take her, every pound and inch of her, up to one of the highbrow rooms above. Hook, line, and sinker Harry would take her all the way down.

Not only for that. There was that for sure, that what Harry saw was always moving just below the surface, a skin’s-width beneath the clinging slip of something she would always wear--something white, something red, something gold and precious seeming--and the jewelried parts, too, the glint-and-glitter rings slid down onto her fingers, the great dangled hoops pierced into her ears, and the stacked silver bracelets running up her fine-boned wrists, the pearl strand of necklace hung down to meet her breast--that, sure, yes, but more.

Harry had seen what more. Standing at his cash box while stocking up his change, Harry could see the part of her he knew she would never knowingly show. He would see
her there, in the corner, where the light was dim and the ceiling was low, her sitting there so still. Harry would watch, take his time changing bills back into coins, and he could see the way that nothing of her moved now; could see the way that nothing of her glinted, nothing even curved. He could see the strange, flat, rounding out of her as she sat heel-hooked on that stool.

Harry would stock his belt then, with the big silver-dollars, the quarters, dimes, and nickels, feeling the weight of change there growing on his waist. He would shut the box, lock the lock, and see her press her fingers to the low place, the place some way lower than a man's, that a woman calls her belly. She would press--glintless rings on her curveless dress--her eyes then shutting closed, her lips then parting open, and she would slowly, oddly, begin to rock.

Harry watched her on the nights she came and sat and rocked like that, and he would move nearer to her, away from his box, away from the machines and the clang of the coins, and he would take out those rubber lugs that plugged his ears, and listen--straining to hear the song she rocked to. And he would hear it, sometimes: The low moaning sound that began in the belly where she pressed. A sound not made to sell, Harry guessed, but a sound already bought and paid for: the after sound, the during sound. The sound he figured the highbrows heard in the highbrow rooms so high above. Sounds sometimes he, Harry, would hear, coming up from so far deep inside her, then out right between her teeth--before the old machine-playing women would come back on to him, high-pitched and hollering for change, tapping his back, tugging his sleeve, asking for coins for cash.

"Quarters!" one might say. "Got a hot one that's fixin' to bust. Oh, I know it, all right. You better believe. I feel it way down here. It's a gut thing with me. Give us quarters and we'll show you. Fixin' to bust, that one is."

Or this: "Say! Say, change-boy! This here machine over there won't pay. Say I hit it, it does. Royal Flush on the progressive poker. I swear it to you truly. Can you come see, maybe tell me what's what over here, maybe fix it, make it pay?"
Or: "Change! Change! Cocktails, change!"

And Harry would make the rounds—the black vest on his back, the coin filled belt bumping up against his legs—doing the work that paid the rent: changing out quarters for the paper bills clutched in plastic-baggied fists; showing that no, that’s a club, not a spade, you need a spade to make that flush royal; and explaining how a person had to play the machines to get the drinks, they aren’t really free, see? you can’t just sit on that stool expecting something for a nothing, Jack.

Each night Harry made the rounds. He heard the talk. He washed his hands. He saw the old women going over in old-women-sprints to check out winners. Harry pushed the rubber plugs deeper in his ears. He breathed other people’s cigarette smoke. He changed a quarter into five nickels, five pennies into one nickel. Harry saw a man go out in handcuffs. He heard the old women complain about how they had played that machine just two scant weeks ago. Harry smelled the mix of fried food and booze. He saw the old women wipe their sweating hands onto their wrinkled cotton skirts. He heard the Carmen toreador song as he made his light-waisted way back to his cash box to change the bills back again into coins.

Sometimes Harry saw her, there from his cash box, sometimes sitting on the stool in the dim, low-ceilinged corner, rocking her rock, sounding her down-low sound, her fingers pressed into her belly.

Sometimes not.

On the not times Harry knew to look to the tables, the highbrow tables where the high-stakes chips piled up in stacks too tall to count. Not the blue-chip tables where the Canadians and her own kind played, but the tables with the black and the red and the yellow stacked chips, where the fine-suited men with the manicured hands fingered their fancy wagers on the crush green felt, and where the well-healed dealers were all thoroughbred beauties, and the cocktail waitresses would come around quick showing plenty of leg and orthodontic smiles.

Harry had seen her on the times he saw her, saddling up from behind the fine-suited men; leaning in close without ever
touching, her pearl strand of necklace hung down into their highbrow game. Harry saw her put her face near to their face, saw the perfume softening of the men’s cheek, eyes, and jowls. Harry saw her make her own fancy wager in her own high-stakes color, draw her cards and play her hand. Harry watched then the way she walked away, the firm-fleshed twitch and ripple of her weight always just a skin’s-width beneath her clinging slip. Harry saw, too, the elbows, bumps, and nudges between the men after she had left, and the glances and looks snuck from under their highbrow eyebrows that followed her over to the next high-stakes table she went to.

And sometimes Harry would see some one of those highbrow men follow her over with more than just his eyes, taking his whole highbrow self over after her to get what Harry figured that one man would not—could not—have ever really known. That man, Harry figured, could not have known she was an NFO come up on the Fun Bus, could not have known how high the price of the deal she would strike in the rooms up above. Neither could that man have known the stiff, hair-product feel of the hair on her head, nor the pillowcase stain left the next day after. Nor never could that man have known the full-mooned curve of her rump in his palm, nor the glistening pink slit of her easy parting. Never ever, Harry figured, could that man even have imagined in a million years the strange black stink that would be his own burning urine!

But that man, Harry knew, that one man who sent himself over, paying his cash, getting the goods, would soon find out all of the parts that Harry had known more than once on this breed of girl—rump, teeth, and lips; breasts, legs, and belly—that, sure, and the part on her alone that was more.

Harry would watch, thinking of the part of her that had been bought and paid for, the part Harry had wished and prayed for, praying since first he had seen her from there at his cash box, doing the work to make the rent, hearing again and again the call spelled out right there on the black vest he wore on his back: CHANGE.

Harry heard change. He heard losers. He heard winners. He heard Bizet’s Carmen toreador song. On the
bloodless lips of the bony old women and the video voice of
the metal machines, Harry heard all of what the rubber lugs
that plugged his ears could not keep him from hearing.

"Hey!" he heard. "Say!" he heard. "What're you deaf?
I've been calling you, change-boy. Can you help me please?
I've a condition, see, a female thing. Got to go upstairs to
the toilet to fix it. I'll be back in a flash. Can you, change-
boy, please, please, please watch my machine?"

Harry would hear these old women, see their sweating
hands on their wrinkled skirts, and he would do as they said
so as to keep his work. At least once in each night Harry
stood watch over those machines; the old women's plastic
baggies rubber-banded now to the one-armed knobs--this
just in case--and the half-full, half-gone cups of coins, the
coins in the trays, and the unclaimed credits on the video
machine screen.

Harry stood watch, watching, too, the tables, trying to
keep an eye out through the rows and columns of the
peroxided women; looking to see if he might see her working
the highbrows, melting those men the way that she did with
the way of her walk and the constant promise of secrets.

Harry would watch--hearing the tin-sounding music for
bullfighting men and hot-blooded women--waiting.

He began to steal, waiting.

From the old woman's half-full, half-gone cups Harry
would take on this night maybe a scraping of quarters, on
that night maybe a fistful of nickels. He might take from time
to time a dollar or two from the big silver-dollar racks. Harry
began as he made his rounds through the rows and columns
to punch the buttons and collect the credits. He picked up
dropped coins from the carpet, scooped tips from bartops.
Harry got bold, slipped bills from his cash box to his pocket.
Harry got good, lifted billfolds from the old women's partway
opened purses.

It took time, Harry's raising the stakes that way, nickel
and diming his way up.

How much time? Nights of time.

It had taken nights of time and the patience of a saint for
Harry to get to this place to stake his claim, to shed his vest,
leave his belt in that box, to follow them up, to wait his turn
to take her down.

And how did it feel, trailing the two? How many steps on those stairs? How much higher?

What was it like, this highbrow room the two of them had shut themselves into?

Should he have waited?

Should he have left?

And what should Harry have done when at last she did show, coming out of that room alone by herself, closing the door then behind herself—the glint gone, the curve gone, her teeth now hidden behind her lips?

Which way should he have finally moved, standing there with the hard green cash gripped in his coin-soiled hands, the money gotten to buy the secret, the answer one more time not what Harry would have bought, the same tired, unchanged answer weighing now on Harry’s heart as low and old as the whole world was.