



Minor Chords



Both sets of deceased grandparents stood on either side of his bed, the spouses oddly mis-matched, and all four took turns poking his ribs and giggling. There was bamboo music in the warming room, and outside, Helios peeled back the zinc roof to let the morning pour into the *cabina* that Jack had calculated to be beneath the radar. He awakened to the marimba ring tone of his new I-phone, sheepish to be in bed still, but at least well rested.

“Uh oh,” he told the room. It was Harry. Against dreams and gods there was no recourse, but against mere mortals you could always turn your cell phone off. Too late, now.

“Hey Hare,” he answered. “A bit early for you, isn’t it. . . ?”

But it wasn’t Harry at all. It was a Tico paramedic calling from Harry’s phone.

“What’s up? My name is Jack Stone. Where’s Harry?”

“Nothing broken, no apparent internal injuries; he’s been in a car wreck, but he’s okay.”

“Anyone else hurt?”

“No, he ran off the road is all. Nobody else involved.”

“May I speak with him?”

There was a long pause and background noises of grunts and chattering and cicadas.

“I’d rather not. He’s incoherent anyway. We have him tied down in the ambulance. He has no ID, so I’m calling trying to learn who he is, and make his family aware. You say his name is Harry?” The man’s accent made it sound like the Indian pronunciation of *hare* Krishna and *hare rama*, and he figured Harry would surely abide.

Jack got up to pace the room.

“Yes, Harry Trayne; he’s my friend. Did you say you have him *tied down*?”

“Does Señor Trayne have any mental conditions that I need to be made aware of . . . ? He is delirious, you see, not just from the accident, or not entirely, anyway.”

“*Mas o menos*,” Jack replied. “*Harry es un adicto a la cocaína.*”

“I thought, perhaps. He is sweating profusely. And out of his mind.”

"I am sorry for your trouble."

"It is not trouble. He went off the road, you see, a few hundred meters west of *Restaurante Los Chorros* . . ." the voice pressed on. "You know it?"

Jack knew it. Steep and deep. Couldn't pick a worse part of the Perez highway to run off the road. "Really?"

"Straight." The paramedic chuckled. "Every once in a while, you get a miracle . . . hey, the traffic cop wants to speak with you."

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Jack arrived an hour later and backed his truck up a driveway to leave a rolling start. The *tráfico* was in one of their tow trucks, a coincidence obviously; Harry's truck was certainly not hooked on the back of it. There was a window in the tall grass lining the highway where Harry had gone off, and the sky poured through it. From a little rise in the tarmac a hundred feet to the east, a single set of skid marks drifted gently off the road and into that grass window. The vibrant wall of hallucinogenic green to either side of Harry's swath swayed in the breeze with the infectious humor of grass. Low clouds passed by the window, white whales in an ocean of sky, and they viewed the scene with tiny sky-whale eyes, and Jack grew dizzy and was relieved when the *tráfico* ambled over and saved him from the immediacy of the walk up to throw himself off the edge of the *guindo*.

Jack was a reluctant practicante of the art of talking to cops, though his own negative experiences in this regard paled beside those of Harry, a world-class cop magnet. Jack put his sheep face on as the officer approached, ready to eat crow over this and get as hung dog as the occasion might require, contrite and compliant, ready to take one on the chin for the occasional excrescences of friendship and country.

"You can fill me in on his passport number and full name, Señor Stone; that is very genial; saves me work and your friend further worry." Jack had promised this information over the phone, and had transcribed it from his computer, where it was on file for this sort of thing. "But please, Señor Stone . . . don't you first want to look?" The smile was roly-poly benevolence, officious, a waving-over friendliness that was not to be declined, and Jack allowed himself to be cajoled over to the edge where three hundred feet down the Blue Dream was wedged against a green mat, the living shoulder of the *guindo* shorn down to the rich brown soil by God's own weed whacker. He gagged but kept from vomiting.

"Looks like your friend cheated death, Señor Stone . . . ?"



Jack closed his eyes to listen to the grass rustle and choked down the vertigo. The wind tickled his shaved scalp and whistled in his ear as it swept up from the Pacific while the sun beat gaily upon the mountainside. The highway was oddly quiet, but the cicadas down in the valley were lively and loud. The few neighbors stood around and gawked but did not talk, and into the void descended the distant plaintive call of kites from their hunt up on the banks of thermals high above. The landscape danced as the Pacific moved up the rising flank of the coastal range, and Jack felt like he was tripping.

“He told me that he was injecting cocaine.” The officer said this matter-of-factly to then look out over the valley and grasp his hands behind his back.

Jack looked beyond the uniform into the officer’s face, where he did not find any suggestions of threat or malice. Contrarily, he seemed to look into the face of civil service, in which he was not about to be the external part of the problem but admitted into the mechanisms of a solution, despite being a foreign national, an alien as it were. Then he thought, ‘nah; this is surely an elaborate trap . . .’

“I know he is all mixed up in it,” Jack said, looking out over the valley and clasping his own hands behind his back. “Smoking the rock, even. This is the first I hear of syringes.”

They looked out across the valley, secure at last on its lip, their hands clapped behind their backs and admired the beautiful morning.

"I bet Harry is in some big trouble over this," Jack speculated after the silence began to grow awkward.

"There's no traffic violation, all his car papers are in order. I could hold him for not having personal identification, but I'm sure he can come up with that before he's finished getting checked out at the hospital, especially with you here now. Anyway, he seems to have problems enough without me citing him for silly time-wasting things. And I am damned sure not going to hike down into that *guindo* to look for his dope. That's his problem, not ours." The officer chuckled, looking out over the edge theatrically to admire the *guindo* and wiggle his eyebrows at Señor Stone. The sunglasses fell from their repose upon his forehead to snap onto his aquiline nose, restoring a more typical suggestion of menace and sadism to his otherwise jovial bushy mustache.

Officer Rojas shook his head and handed Jack the package of vehicle documents and a place to sign. "Poor guy," he said. "I hope he can straighten himself out. Good luck with that."

They shook hands, and the policeman backed the lumbering truck out onto the highway and headed off toward Pérez, leaving Jack with the rubberneckers that stepped closer but still did not speak and the hypnotic grass swaying. He wandered back across the highway to peer again into the *guindo*, the by-standers now chattering about the great luck of surviving such a wreck, and Jack stared for a long and apparently final time at the roughly treated Blue Dream down there wedged against a wall of shorn vegetation.

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Jack followed a progressive descent into ever greater madness in the Pérez Zeledón public hospital. He did not ask and found his way by intuition through the maze of corridors to where he figured he was headed, where the injured throngs sprawled, where dribbling of bodily fluids had some degree of frequency, where the presumption to the privacy of suffering was lampooned by the grey reality, into deeper and more circumspect innards. He was not challenged by the harried medical staff of many scrub colors hustling back and forth and between the same hospital wings that Jack wound his way through, knowing his buddy was at the other end. Patients in the halls watched him pass through leaded eyes. Winks and thumbs up were out of the question. He walked outside of his body, beyond is native environment through some fantasy land within the real physical world. The emergency room was all the way at the other side of the hospital complex, and its supplicants spilled out the corridor leading to it and into the foyer beyond the hallway, an area unintended for patient care but clearly impressed into such service today, perhaps every day.

Most of those suffering had the decency to suppress their moans, and there were no major trauma cases in evidence. Harry was deep inside the corridor toward the actual emergency room itself, lain out on a gurney, his arms tied to the rails with terry-cloth robe belts. He had his head turned to the wall and engaged it in a heated monologue with some entity that appeared to reside within the wall.

“Hey.”

“Jack!”

Harry beamed at Jack, and he was clearly gone, but through the fog of drugs he saw in his buddy’s eyes the full-spectrum Harry and not today’s particular flavor.

“Thank God!” The hare exclaimed. “Wow, man! How did you find out? And how so fast? Or am I losing track of time? That’s probably it, isn’t it? I have lost time.”

“Not at all, I was just in the neighborhood,” Jack smiled.

“Wow. Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

Harry’s pupils were dilated, his forehead was bruised, and he had cuts on his face. He was tense in his bondage but neither sweating nor trembling, and though his clothes stank and his hair was matted, Harry himself was soft and pliant, not the hard Harry with shit-kicking motorcycle boots, but the bespectacled academic, clutching a sheaf of poetry. He was clearly unhurt, just still tweaking. And you could tell that he was going with it at this point, letting the system work out its kinks, even on him if it had to. Having no choice, and there was little doubt that he surely deserved far worst, Harry Trayne was at least being big about it, or so it seemed to Jack as he worked the angles.

“No worries, dude. It’s eleven a.m. It’s been like three hours since you ran off the road.”

The grass window’s clouds seemed to pass by in Harry’s eyes, and the muscles of his face hardened in the silent pause that ensued.

“Look at how they have me,” he grimaced, jutting his chin at the bindings. “Help me get untied.”

“Hold on, Cowboy. They have you trussed up for a reason, Hare.”

“Jack, look at me. They can’t tie me down. I got rights.”

“You was probably pinching nurses asses and shit,” Jack said.

“Give me a fucking break, and get those assholes over to untie me if you won’t do it yourself, I got rights. They can’t tie me down!”

“Shut the fuck up, Donnie,” Jack deadpanned, getting a smile from his tied-up prostrate, freedom-fighting friend. “In case you ain’t noticed we’re guests in this country, Hare. Aliens, and you probably an illegal one at that. Almost certainly, under the circumstances. You got no rights—none you can’t defend anyway—and I ain’t gonna stick my neck for you over this. So play nice, bro, and chill a bit and let’s figure out how to get you outta here. You dig?”

“I was a bit rowdy,” Harry allowed at length. “And I did try to break out through a bathroom window . . .” He chuckled. “Turns out I ain’t no Houdini.”

“What happened, Harry?”

“They forced me off the road, Chaco.”

“Who did?”

“They were following me, and I thought I had them when I topped the pass but then they just swooped down right after Los Chorros and tossed me off the mountain like a rag doll.”

“Who, Harry? Who was following you? Who tossed you off the road?”

“They must’ve seen me score and followed me, ‘cause when I pulled over at the pass to cook up they swooped on me right as I finished taking my shot. It wasn’t five minutes later I was scrambling around down in that *guindo*.”

“So, are these the same Panamanians that chased you around down on the Osa?”

Harry looked up. “The skid marks will show that I was forced off the road, Jack.”

“But are they the same Panamanians that followed you back from the border that time? And that have been following you around since . . . and fucking with you?”

“I didn’t see their faces.”

“But, what do you think?”

“I don’t think it was the Panamanians this time.”

“Who you think it was, then?”

“I’m not ready to say, yet.”

Jack let this statement rest for a good long while and then said: "We need to see about getting you outta here, Harry."

"You don't believe me, do you?"

Jack looked down and frowned. "I believe that you believe it, Hare. But you hallucinate. You know that. I've seen you do it. Scares me, you wanna know the truth of it. What you see and hear is often not there, Harry, 'specially right after you take a big hit or shot or something."

Harry looked away and thought about this and let it hang. "What kind of trouble you think I'm in?"

"None. You're going to skate again, luck sack. And your truck didn't even roll, so with your big wad, you can fix it up new again. In a few weeks you'll be as lethal as ever."

"If I make it," Harry smiled. "If those goddamned Panamanians don't get me first."

A nurse came to wheel Harry away and motioned for Jack to come along. A doctor followed them into the room, and the nurse and doctor looked down at the patient and then over at Jack.

"There's no need to try to escape," the doctor told Harry in English.

"You're not in trouble and you're free to go anytime, but it's my job to examine you to make sure you are not hurt in some way that we can't see from the surface. I need you to cooperate with me on this. It's for your own well-being. Please be nice when I remove these restraints."



The doctor looked down at Harry, then over at Jack, and Jack and Hare looked at one another, and Jack and the doctor looked at the nurse's tits, and by consensual looking they all agreed without further spoken words upon their collective expectations for Harry's comportment and his implicit eye contract. The doctor untied one side and the nurse the other, leaning over a bit to anaesthetize Harry with the roll of her cleavage as she worried with the knot. When they had the bindings off, she turned on her heel and carried the robe belts from the examining room as the doctor raised Harry up to a sitting position, his legs swinging off to the side and went through some poking and prying and listening and tapping. He asked questions, and Harry held the stainless steel edges tight and answered with lurid, unswerving honesty.

"There's a spot on your liver," the doctor said at last, jamming the ultrasound image up into the light box, putting his finger on the spot. "It could be nothing, but it could be internal bleeding. We have no way to be sure without holding you for observation overnight. I regret this, Señor Trayne, as our accommodations are not particularly inviting, but I need for your own health for you to stick with us here on this."

The news did not rock Harry's world too bad. He was reasonably expecting a lot worse than a night under medical observation. Jack imagined him doing numbers in his head, wondering why he was not headed to jail over this or some other even

worse institution, or getting summarily deported. Something. Yeah, one night under observation was pretty light, all things considered.

"You need to quit drugs and may need to seek treatment to do so," the doctor advised. "I assume you already know this."

"I am struggling a bit with this one," Harry owned up.

"I am sorry that we don't have any private rooms available, so the nurse will get you a gurney and a towel and soap to clean up with. I'll authorize something for anxiety around bedtime and will look in on you first thing in the morning." The young doctor smiled and closed the case file to give Harry his full attention. "Costa Rica has a few good rehabilitation clinics if you decide to take the cure."

Jack was unable to talk him out of first retrieving his wad. It was \$1200, a month's pay for the traffic cop or the paramedics. Here in the emergency room, Jack was sure it would be stolen during the course of the night, but Harry wouldn't have it any other way, his way of letting Jack know that he was not planning to stay the night.

"It might really be internal bleeding," Jack said.

"We'll see," Harry replied. "As much as I put my body through, I do need its basic parts working, that's for sure!"

By the time Jack left, Harry's pupils were back to normal, and his speech had lost its clipped urgency to resume its cognitive and measured cadence. He was transformed from a raving madman into an everyday gringo; with a shower and a shave he would be incompatible with hypodermic syringes and smoking rocks and chopping lines and all that stuff, but as suddenly as mister clean formed in Jack's mind it fell into the constituent pieces of possibility madly across the tile floor to break even further, and Jack looked around upon the quietly suffering throng in line for their turn.

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It took him thirty minutes to reach the Jardin Tropical Lodge from the hospital, up over the pass and down toward the coast to the hotel driveway a couple miles past Platanillo. He pulled over at the Tinamastes *guindo* and backed up this morning's driveway to this time ratchet the hand brake and leave Silver idling to cross the highway and have another look over the edge. But the tow truck he called had already come and extracted the Blue Dream and taken it away. All that was left was the swath of its destruction and a new billing cycle for the white hare.

"We had to pack his things," the manager explained. "We had other guests reserved for tonight, prepaid, and we're all full, and Señor Trayne knew this . . ."

The man lifted his palms and eyebrows in hopeless inevitability. “When he did not return by noon checkout, we had no choice but to pack his things.”

“Señor Trayne is very sorry for the inconvenience.”

“We heard he ran off the road by Los Chorros.” The manager gulped. “Bad place to go off the road; I hope he will be okay.”

“Anything unusual about Harry’s things?”

“We had complaints from guests last night. Apparently your friend left his room several times and walked around the grounds last night. All night long, pretty much.”

Damned Panamanians.

“We found a broken neck of a wine bottle near the entrance; apparently he was walking around armed in this way. It is a little unsettling, don’t you think?”

“Oh come on,” Jack objected, waving it off.

“No, it’s true! We sold him the wine earlier from the restaurant, opened it for him and everything, and he took it to his *cabina*. There is no doubt but that it is the same bottle; it was our most expensive wine, so it stood out to our staff.”

“Well, my friend has some ‘issues’ at the moment, and I am very sorry for your trouble. Please tell me what he owes,” Jack insisted, “and I’ll pay and be off with his things and trouble you no more.”

“Oh no, Señor Stone,” the manager would hear none of it. “Señor Trayne was fully paid. No trouble at all. I am just glad that he was not killed in that *guindo* and hope that he can work through his ‘issues.’ In person he was very well-mannered.”



Harry's sister reached Jack while he was still in the hotel driveway, pulling up to the main road, debating which way to turn. She had just gotten off the phone with Harry. He pulled off on the slope and cut the engine and told her what he thought he knew.

"He told me that he was pushed off the road by aliens," she said. "Picked up and tossed is actually how he put it . . . *like a rag doll*."

"Aliens . . . ?"

"Yeah, like extraterrestrials."

They were silent for a while as that sank in.

"When I left him he was rational," Jack reasoned. "He was all calm, good old Hare, no crazy talk."

"Yeah," she agreed. "He sounded perfectly normal to me, Jack, no hint of being on anything . . . until he, you know, starts talking about the aliens."

“He told me he was forced off the road,” Jack reported, “but he left out the whole extraterrestrial part. He refused to say who it was.”

“I know he would not lie to me, Jack.”

Harry was a lot of things, but a liar was not one of them. He told the truth when he had to speak at all—even to police—and as long as his wad had held he had paid hotel damages promptly wherever he stayed, so he was not just honest, but responsible as well. Of course, it was still within his financial means to be responsible and who knows how long that was going to last.

Still, Harry had occluded the part about extraterrestrials in his version to Jack, who shuddered at the omission.

“I’m afraid to say this, Jack, but I think he actually believes it.”

They said their good-byes and before he started his truck and decided which way to turn, the marimba monster was off to the races again, and it was Harry this time, and Jack looked at the phone with the same trepidation he had looked at it that morning. Whatever Harry would be pitching, Jack was not in the market. He declined the call and roll-started his truck and turned right away from the trouble and toward Dominical. He’d sort it out in the morning and Hare could take care of himself tonight. Jack was going to buy a Cuban cigar at the junction and a bottle of Malbec at the Corona and take it to the Toucan Hotel and get back to his own universe for the evening in quiet Uvita and might even manage an arm-waving appearance at the project tomorrow before heading off to Perez to get out from under Harry’s things and learn of the new adventures that tonight would likely bevisit his errant friend afoot and alone in the gentle Pérez night.

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Nobody tried to stop him, and they had even washed and dried his clothes, so when Harry walked out of the hospital around six, right after dark, he had to admit that all things considered this had not worked out all that bad. He was not dead, he was not injured—apparently; he was sure the “spot on the liver” was just a doctor’s ploy to put him through a night of hell. And here he was pounding the streets of a familiar city in clean clothes in his own loafers with a fat wad in his pocket. It was sure a bummer about the Blue Dream. That was going to run him at least four grand, maybe more. What a pain in the ass to be on foot; he’d have to rent a car in the morning, no walking around like this for too long . . . but he frowned at the uncertainty of how much to mentally allocate for the repairs, and he imagined applying the savings of a car not rented toward the final bill. It was a reflexive thought, a Pavlovian consequence of being Harry Trayne. Of course so long as there was money and his synapses were firing in syncopation with the cocaine universe, he would finally do whatever felt best at the time, knowing in the end it would all work itself out the way it was going to anyway, with all the machinations fallen to the side tested or not.

After tippling Cabernet and enjoying a rare rib eye at Bazooka's, he went to the *Cascada* to check out the scene and had a few drinks. He figured if he could find a reasonable booze groove he could bribe himself with a \$50 room at the *Diamante* to give him at least a day's rest from the white lady. Instead he took a taxi to score some rocks and got an air-con room at the *Amaneli* and rounded up not just one but two hookers and looked on it all as a consolation for being put on foot by the nimble adversary, and it was pretty much okay until he began to suspect one of the hookers of being in league with the Panamanians and ran them both ceremoniously from the room. He smoked the last hit and trashed the bathroom to reveal the lurker behind the shower screen, and when neither managers, pimps, nor cops burst in on him, he fall back on the shaky bed to listen and watch as the aliens scratched around in the dark outside to lay their claws in the seams and crevices overhead to peel back the roof to get at him.

