

OUT OF TUNE

by

David Hodgson, M.D., P. Eng

PGY-2 Diagnostic Radiology, Dalhousie University

David.Hodgson@dal.ca

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Harry turned the key, and the engine sputtered.

“Not again!” He punched the steering wheel—forgetting, too late, about the horn. For decades, this car had gotten him to the hospital every morning. It could not quit now. Not before he did.

Next week would mark his fortieth anniversary working as a self-described sanitation specialist. His job description might have labeled him as the janitor, but he was more than a single word.

He could play the piano with the grace of Chopin, yet was too shy to share his gift with anyone except his dog, Wallace. Those gifted hands played the most prolific melodies through Wallace’s scraggly, wiener-dogged fur any chance they got—a symphony of scratches, and that was more than enough.

He lit a cigarette and took a drag, his eyes gazing up toward a god he never fully understood but wanted more than anything to believe in. He turned the key again. With labored breath, the engine sprang to life.

By 6:35 a.m., he arrived at the hospital, where he had his pick of parking spots. He parked his rusted, ‘83 Civic at the very back, hoping that a couple of extra steps might balance out a lifetime of smoking. At this small, rural hospital, he also figured there were nannies and poppies with only a few steps left in life. They should not have to waste them walking through parking lots.

While Harry hummed a piano concerto, tapping a pencil over a steaming cup of black coffee, Dr. Finley was trying to find the courage to open his eyes.

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On the second floor of one of the biggest houses in town, Dr. Finley lay alone in a king-sized bed bought for two, with bedding that had not seen a washer for weeks. He slammed his hand onto the alarm, silencing it for the fourth and final time. Dragging himself out of bed, he fished a pair of scrubs from the nearest pile of clothes.

He stared into the mirror lifelessly, gargling a sip of mouthwash in lieu of brushing. With an egregious spit, he was ready for his shift at the emergency department.

As he picked up his keys, his eyes caught the papers on the counter. Maybe it was a dream.

Not this time.

NOTICE OF DIVORCE

For the hundredth time, he could not get past the first three words before rushing through the porch door and slamming it so hard it sent shivers down the foundation.

He set his thermos in the cupholder, pushed the start button, and after some monotonous banter on the radio, somehow made it to work. He sauntered through the staff door and into the emergency department, where his empty stare received handover.

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Harry was rolling down the hallway at a blistering 3 km/h on a ride-on auto floor scrubber, with only one floor left before his designated 15-minute break. He preferred the old-fashioned mop and bucket—said it kept him limber—but efficiency was the name of the game now. Nothing was the way it used to be.

A smile grew on his face as he entered the maternity ward. The soft wails of newborns, the rhythmic beeping of monitors—here, life was just beginning. He closed his eyes momentarily, soaking in one of his favorite parts of the day.

But today was different.

For the first time in his life, the melody in his head—his constant, guiding rhythm—faltered. His usual whistling suddenly lost its tune. His fingers slowly became numb, and his coffee cup slipped through them, shattering on the floor that he worked so hard to keep clean. His body veered, the scrubber drifting into a nearby wall before coming to a stop. The hum of the machine continued, grumbling without its master’s hand guiding the way.

Harry shook his head, convinced he had accidentally poured a cup of decaf. Everything slowed—his thoughts, the familiar sounds, even the fluorescent lighting became dull and unrecognizable.

His heart pounded relentlessly, trying to escape. Each breath was forced and foreign, as if someone else’s lungs were in his chest.

He tried to lift his hand to slap some life back into himself, but his body was in mutiny. It refused. He could see his own hand resting on the steering wheel—lifeless, unresponsive.

He tried to stand. His balance failed him.

He crumbled to the floor.

The hum of the scrubber faded into the muffled wails of newborns. His vision tunneled. His life flashed. His first piano lesson. The first time Wallace returned the ball in a game of fetch. His first love. Nothing.

This is it.

“Sixty-four-year-old, unwitnessed fall, unresponsive. I recognize him—he’s one of the custodians.” A paramedic relayed the limited information they had on Harry as he was wheeled into the emergency department.

“Smells like my grandmother’s curtains,” Dr. Finley grumbled, turning away from the pungent odor of cigarettes. He half-listened, wanting nothing more than to climb back into bed.

“Anything else?”

The paramedic shook their head.

Dr. Finley scrawled a couple orders—maintenance fluids, a toxicological screen, a head CT.

Before calling neurology, his phone vibrated.

Did you sign the papers?

He winced, as if the words leapt from the screen and stabbed him in the chest.

“I’ll be right back,” he muttered.

He wandered to the staff room, absentmindedly carrying Harry’s chart with him. He sat, staring at the message, wondering what he could say to fix things. Wondering how, after a life dedicated to saving others, no one had given him a guideline to save himself.

It was not until the next shift that someone realized Harry had never received his CT scan. No one had called neurology.

His chart sat forgotten in the staff room.

By then, Dr. Finley was gone.

Harry had a stroke, and with each passing minute, he lost more of himself.

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In a small town, word travels like the wind.

Amidst the rumors, amidst the judgment, Dr. Finley searched desperately for himself. He no longer recognized the accolades, newspaper clippings from his heyday running track in university, the crooked degree on the wall above a solid oak desk—where he had sat only once after he bought it.

And the dusty grand piano.

Silent for years.

What were these, but inanimate objects?

A piece of paper in an expensive frame, protected behind a pane of glass, seemed no different than the one draped over a cardboard tube next to the toilet. The difference is and will always be, what a person does with it.

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Two years passed.

Two years of rumors.

Two years of loss and grief.

Two years of Harry learning how to live in his new body.

Ever devoted, little Wallace brought him the ball again and again. And Harry would stare, deeply, into eyes that would never understand why he no longer threw it.

It was a Sunday afternoon when he saw him again—Dr. Finley, standing in soiled scrubs looking like he had aged a lifetime, was banging on a vending machine, yelling profanities.

Harry watched, silently and alone from the other side of the cafeteria.

Dr. Finley turned, a defeated look on his face.

Their eyes met.

Before Harry could blink, Dr. Finley's hand shot violently to his chest, the guilt strangling his heart from within.

His face twisted in pain. He collapsed to his knees as if in slow motion, then slid to the floor.

A cold rush of panic flooded Harry.

He scanned the room, eyes darting wildly. There was no one.

Years of resentment flashed through his mind. How many times had he wished something bad would happen—to make things *right*.

But this? This did not feel right.

Sweat poured down Harry's brow. *Think, Harry! Think! Do something!*

"Help!" He cried out, but his voice was weak.

Nothing.

There was no one around, and by some twisted fate, it seemed no one was coming.

As he bowed his head in defeat, a familiar red box caught the corner of his eye.

He rocked back and forth in his wheelchair rhythmically, like a soldier.

Left. Right. Left. Right.

His breathing became uncontrollable, and his muscles shook, feeling an unbearable strain.

Dr. Finley gasped for air, motionless, desperate and alone.

Not this time. Not again. Thought Harry, fingers trembling as they squeezed the armrest with a strength he did not recognize.

Left. Right. Left. Right.

Just a little more—he fought the urge to give up. With one final push, the chair tipped. As he fell, his finger stretched toward the fire alarm.

His head struck the floor.

The last thing he saw was Dr. Finley's eyes staring back at him.

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Harry did not remember what happened next.

As Chopin's Ballade No.1 played on vinyl, he heard a squeaky wheelchair roll into his room.

"One of my favorites," said Dr. Finley who now donned a ragged hospital gown instead of scrubs.

He pulled out a small box from his pocket, slid out two cigarettes, and lit one for each of them.

Harry watched enviously as the wisps of smoke floated freely through the partially opened windowpane.

"You should have let me die," Dr. Finley murmured, a cigarette perched on his bottom lip.

Harry sighed, knowing that for at least a moment, he had the same thought.

"I—couldn't live with myself," said Harry.

"I owe you my life," Dr. Finley said, his voice tight with emotion.

"No," Harry said, taking a deep breath and staring out the window. "You owe me *my* life."

Dr. Finley sank into his chair, took a long drag, exhaling as he stared ahead, his gaze unfocused, drifting as if searching for something that was not there. His grip on the cigarette tightened and he fought the urge to crush it.

"You're right." He tapped the ash into the trash can. "I wish I could go back, you know? Ever since this happened, I've been falling apart." Dr. Finley hesitated, feeling almost embarrassed—his problems seemed to pale in comparison to Harry's. "Maybe that's karma. The world's way of evening things out. Justice."

Harry shook his head with pursed lips. "Justice." He lifted a trembling finger toward Dr. Finley. "You... you should have saved—" His voice cracked. He swallowed the rest of the sentence, taking a slow, deliberate drag. The embers flared, casting deep shadows under his weary eyes.

He did not need to say the words.

Dr. Finley already knew how it ended.

For the first time, the calming melodies playing from the record player felt deafening as the two sat, trying to find the right words. When Harry felt he found them, he spoke.

"It's not too late," Harry said, urgency threading through his voice. "You're a good person," he said softly. He believed it—though admitting it out loud almost hurt. "Don't let anyone convince you all is lost. Especially not yourself."

"You still have a choice," Harry continued, glancing down at the bruises on his legs and lingering on them for a moment. "To put yourself back together."

Harry tapped the arm of his chair to the rhythm, watching the cigarette smoke drift out the window—wishing, more than anything, that he could drift away with it. "Make it worth it."

Harry exhaled, slow and measured, then met Dr. Finley's gaze. He watched the troubled stare looking back at him shift—something breaking the surface, a man who had been drowning finally coming up for air.

Purpose.

"For both our sakes," Harry said, voice steady now, "let's make sure the best is yet to come."

They both sat, in silent understanding. The cigarettes burned low.

The record played on.

For the first time in a long time, the notes started to sound right again.