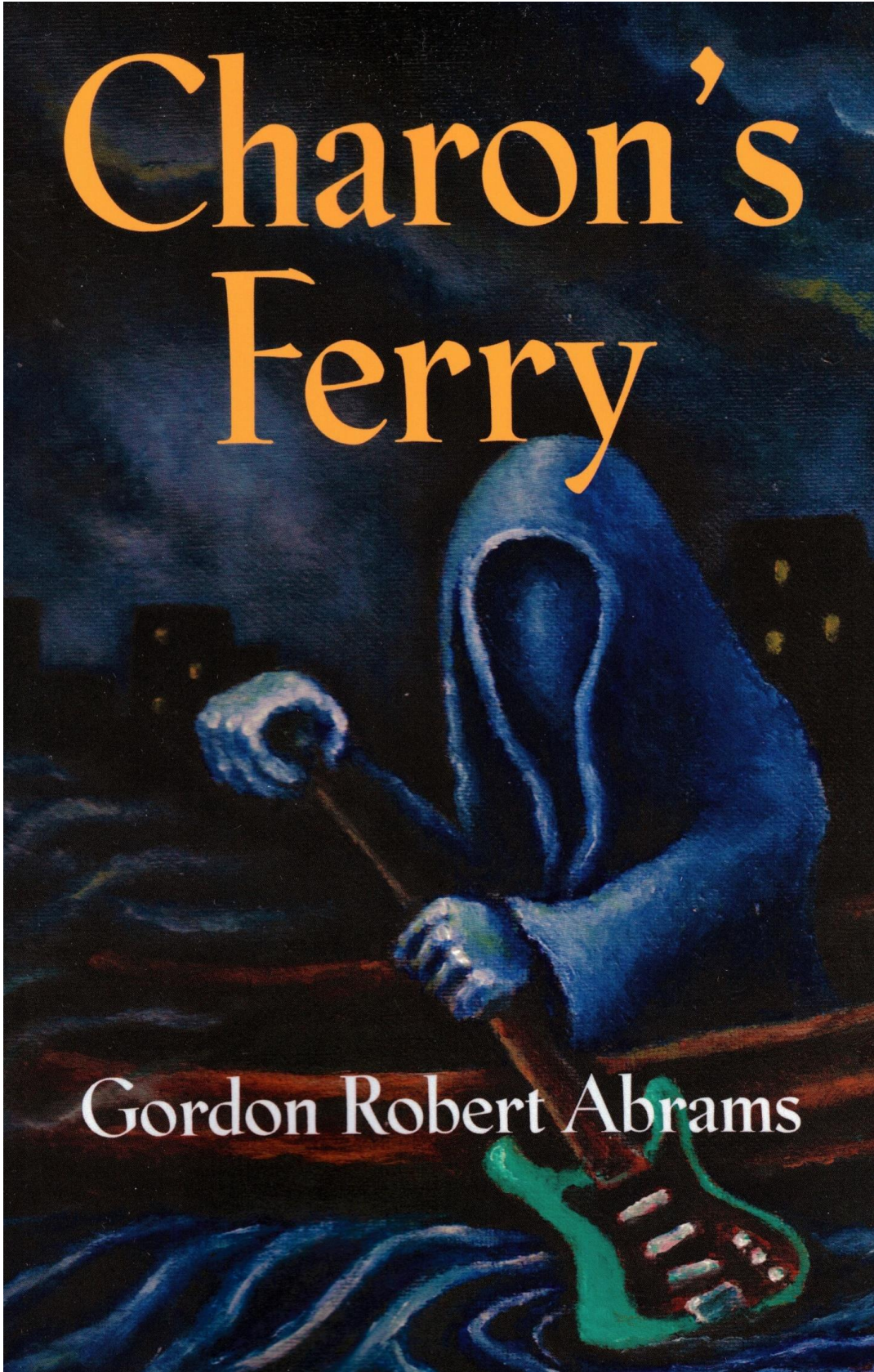


Charon's Ferry

Gordon Robert Abrams



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Tomorrow's Comin' Soon

When I climbed the subway stairwell, I was pretty sure I knew what year it was. Even after a few drinks and a token drag on a proffered joint, I could still name the current president. If I thought about it hard enough, I probably knew which team was favored to win the World Series, and I'm not much of a sports guy.

I certainly knew how long it had been since I recorded and released my debut solo album, *Chance Martin*.

The album came out more than twelve years ago. Nineteen eighty-three, to be exact, and there was only one hit song on it: "Tomorrow's Comin' Soon". Not my best song, necessarily, but it was a pretty big hit, anyway. I ascended the stairs to rejoin the drizzly city night. The irony of the song's title was completely lost on me.

Instead, something an old acquaintance named Larry said to me on the previous subway platform kept running through my mind. The weird Irish pipes were on his lap and his fingers had silently tapped the upright wooden chanter on his knee like a disembodied erection. The Larry I knew hadn't played the Irish pipes, and his hair was now gray. The irises surrounding his dilated pupils were a different color from the Larry I used to know, too, and that fact alone should have given me pause.

"Sooner or later, Chance," he said, "we all ride Charon's Ferry."

He must have meant the band we were in together years ago. *Charon's Ferry*. What else could he have meant? But it had been a long night, I was several drinks to the wind, and maybe I wasn't thinking clearly.

Guitar strapped to my back, heavy gym bag in hand, I climbed the cold cement staircase and emerged from underground. It was no longer raining, but there was a mist. A familiar street sign revealed itself in the mist, slightly askew. Fischer Lane, it read. Fischer curved to my left, a short residential one-way street lined with modified brownstones. Old trees lined the narrow roadway and their bare limbs dripped from the recent deluge. Shiny Toyotas and Saabs were parked bumper to bumper along the uneven sidewalk, separated by trash and fallen leaves. My apartment was on the third floor of a five floor walkup, halfway down Fischer Lane. I pulled my keys from my jeans pocket and jingled them, reassured by the sound.

Number Forty-Seven was right where I'd left it.

Once a single private home for the wealthy, the late-nineteenth century brownstone had been reconfigured to house no less than eight sizeable apartments, roughly two apartments per floor. Ordinarily, the marble steps leading to the iron and glass door were worn unevenly. One broken step near the bottom was jarringly replaced with a mismatched and shaky granite slab. Only five years ago, Manny the Super told me the entire staircase

was due for a major overhaul. He also told me the Kennedy assassination was a hoax. Jack, he said, was alive and well and living in Bermuda with yet another mistress.

I didn't take much stock in his assurances about future staircase renovations.

I placed a weary foot on the bottom step and found the granite slab had, in fact, been replaced with matching marble. Above the new step, the older marble showed minimal wear. I looked more closely, blinking like a rudely awoken hibernating bear. They had all been replaced.

When had Manny fixed the staircase?

I reconsidered; maybe Jack Kennedy *was* alive and living in Bermuda.

Nonplussed, I climbed the remaining steps and paused at the top to stretch. Beneath illumination softly cast by twin lanterns on either side of the door, my jingling keys chimed and scraped against the formidable brass lock.

I knew the front door key did not fit before I tried to insert it. The lock aperture was wrong. Not new, or recently changed, just different, made to accommodate another sort of key altogether. I tried every other key on my keychain, too, but it was a futile exercise, like patting pockets in your coat to find reading glasses you know you left at home. The key I possessed was the one I used to open my front door. The lock was not its mate.

It was not quite dawn. Cindy and Trotsky were surely sound asleep, but the key didn't fit the lock and I couldn't get into the building without a new one. Reluctantly, I pressed the button to my apartment and waited. After two long and insistent pushes, Cindy's sleepy voice came through the tinny box speaker.

"Yeah?" was all she said.

While I could have been a burglar or an axe murderer, I was pretty sure she knew it was me. I had forgotten my keys before, or lost them in dark clubs and taxi cabs.

"It's me," I told the box. I gripped the door handle and waited longer than I felt was necessary. She didn't buzz me in. I pressed my forehead against the callbox.

"Cindy?"

"Chance?" she asked after an unnecessarily long wait.

"Yeah," I said. "It's me. My key doesn't work."

I leaned against the door's ornate metal bars, designed to look classy and still keep the bad guys out. "Buzz me in," I told her.

"Your key doesn't work?"

"That's right. Buzz me in."

There was no immediate reply through the speaker.

"Cindy?"

There was another long pause. Had we fought earlier? I considered the possibility that Manny had changed the lock on purpose, that Cindy finally decided I should live somewhere else from now on. In the silence, I convinced myself everything was all right and that a new key waited for me upstairs.

"Cin?"

"You're not Chance," she stated slowly. I pictured Cindy in her nightgown, hair tousled, her thumb on the button in the hallway, its pad a bloodless white. Trotsky was undoubtedly on alert by her side.

"I'm not?"

"You can't be."

I stared down at the relatively new marble staircase. "So, who am I then?"

No answer. I pushed the button again, knowing that the buzzer in the apartment hallway was too abrasive to ignore.

“Look, Cindy,” I said into the callbox. “Whatever I did, I apologize. Really. I’m wet and I’m tired and my guitar is getting heavy.”

A moment later, the outer door buzzed. I pulled the door aside and scrambled through the foyer.

Of course, if Cindy had intentionally changed the locks, then she was very angry about something I had done, something extraordinary, even for me. Not that changing the locks made any sense. Other people lived in the building. They wouldn’t agree to a new lock.

Unless, of course, they were *all* mad at me.

I mounted the stairs methodically. The steps inside were white marble, too, but unlike the outside stairs, they were worn in the center, their edges buffed smooth. I had no idea what I was about to encounter upstairs. The guitar on my back gained more weight as I reached the first floor. The gym bag filled with microphones, cables, and assorted stomp boxes felt heavier than they had earlier. I switched hands and adjusted the guitar case straps across my shoulders. As I ascended the second flight, I heard locks release on the floor above me and canine toenails clicked across the tile.

I turned the corner and trudged up the third and final staircase. Trotsky waited on the landing, his little face trembling with excitement. As I neared the top, his enthusiastic wiggle stimulated tiny urine trails around his capering paws.

At least someone was glad to see me.

His wispy tail waved emphatically and I spotted a blue reflective haze in his eyes. Were cataracts normal for a dog his age? I didn’t think so. Trotsky was only eight.

Cindy appeared behind Trotsky almost exactly as I imagined her. Her hair was disheveled in sexy disarray and her narrow feet were encased in furry slippers. Her customary pink nighty was only partially hidden beneath a terrycloth robe, thrown on for added warmth. I didn’t recognize the robe and her expression was odd. Not relieved, not angry, just odd. Her brow was not furrowed, as I expected, and tears filled her hazel eyes and coursed down her cheeks.

Her expression was as unfamiliar and perplexing to me as the altered lock on the front door.

Trotsky’s joy at my arrival was a treat, though. I stood three steps down from the landing and ran my fingers through the dog’s oily hair. He needed a shampoo, big time. Extra kibble, too. Through his coarse fur, I could almost feel his bones.

“It’s not that late,” I began.

“Not late?” she said, my words repeated in the form of a question.

Bad apology; I was expected to call and I hadn’t. The apology should’ve begun with *I’m sorry*. When was I going to learn that simple rule?

In my defense, I didn’t own a cell phone and there were very few pay phones left that worked in this town.

Also, calling hadn’t occurred to me.

Okay. So I knew why she was pissed. But why were we having this conversation on the staircase and not inside the apartment?

“You’re right,” I admitted. “It’s late.” I checked my watch. “Shit. It’s very late. Or it’s very early, depending on your point of view.”

She didn't smile. I climbed one step closer to the landing, one step closer to Cindy, unsure why my presence hadn't mollified her in the least. Instead, the odd expression only deepened and the tears continued, spotting her new robe's collar.

I ignored the unusual expression and her tears. Denial usually worked well for me.

"Kenny offered me a ride," I said, "but I decided to walk home instead. I got caught in the rain and grabbed the V at Mason."

"The V?"

"Yeah, the V. When did they change the name of the lines? One minute it's the J train and now it's a V? What's up with that?"

She didn't answer, so I blundered on.

"Well, anyway, you know how fucked up the subways are at this hour."

She didn't correct me, so I figured she already knew how fucked up the subways were at that hour. She held her arms out to me and I stepped forward, climbing the last few steps quickly.

Careful not to land on Trotsky or his tiny pee puddles, I gratefully accepted Cindy's strangely dramatic embrace. Her arms encircled my waist, effortlessly slipping between the Stratocaster case and my jacket. She buried her face against my chest and the tears continued quietly.

Several seconds passed before she looked up again. When she did, she examined my features as if she had never seen them before.

"Where the hell have you been?" she asked softly.

The question confused me. "Where have I been? I walked home. When it started to rain, I took the subway from Mason."

Well, that wasn't strictly true. I probably would have walked the whole way if someone hadn't taken a shot at me in Enfield Park. In fact, the bullet just missed my head. But I figured she didn't want to hear about that right now.

She held me tightly in her arms, as if afraid to let me go. Whatever she was angry about, whatever I had done earlier, no longer seemed important to her. I did what came naturally and changed the subject.

"Hey, you won't believe who I saw in the train station just now. Do you remember Larry?" "Larry?" she repeated.

"Yeah, Larry. Charon's Ferry Larry? You must remember him. He has a brother named Tom."

She looked doubtful, so I continued quickly.

"Well, anyway, I'm heading for the train and I hear this guy playing the pipes, you know? Those weird Irish pipes you play sitting down?"

Cindy dropped her arms and stepped away from me.

"Chance," she said. "Not tonight. Where the hell have you been for the past ten years?"

I heard her words, but frankly, the question didn't make a whole lot of sense. Of course, Larry playing the pipes hadn't made much sense either, so I waited for her to clarify.

"Ten years," she repeated. "Missing. Gone. The police couldn't find you. The F.B.I. was baffled. After the first year, they said you were dead."

"Dead?"

"We had a memorial concert in your honor. Mark put it together. All your old friends came and performed. They jammed on 'Tomorrow's Comin' Soon'."

I placed my gym bag on the floor away from Trotsky's pale yellow puddles and leaned my shoulder against the wall.

None of this made sense. A few hours ago, I was at The Rocky Time Café. Not a packed house, but we played well enough. Harvey and I shared a joint while he paid me for the gig with a wad of bills from the cash register. I still had the money in my pocket. I watched Kenny drive away in his station wagon, my amp and Les Paul wedged in beside his drum kit. He had offered me a ride, but I turned him down. There was a cold mist in the air, but I had already decided to walk home. Kenny was an awful driver.

After someone took a shot at me in Enfield Park and the rain decided to get serious, I grabbed the nearest subway home.

Sure, the train lines had different letters and there was a new lock on the front door that didn't look new at all. And, yes, the outside staircase was fixed and Larry didn't look much like the Larry I used to know—he was playing Irish pipes instead of an acoustic guitar and his eyes were definitely the wrong color.

Ten years might explain some of those changes, but nothing else did.

I glared at my open apartment. A man I had never seen before appeared in the threshold, yawning. He wore plaid boxers, an off-white tee, and plush slippers. His beard was well-trimmed and elegantly gray, his hair rumpled. I turned back to Cindy.

Her eyes were not merely puffy from sleep and tears. She was significantly older than the last time I had seen her, which, as far as I knew, was just this morning.

Cindy waited for me to say something. I tried to focus, but my brain was having none of it.

“You held a memorial concert for me?” I asked.

Trotsky wagged his tail and Cindy's tired eyes blinked.

“Unbelievable,” she said.

I could see her point, so I tried to explain. “No. All I meant was; did anyone important show up?”

Clapping her hand over her forehead, she glanced at the man in the doorway. The stranger shrugged his bony shoulders and tried unsuccessfully to smooth down his rumpled hair with his fingers.

Feeling misunderstood, I looked at Trotsky for some moral support, but my little dog was apparently preoccupied with other things. He was tentatively sniffing his own urine puddles as if he had no idea who had left them there.

All things considered, I knew exactly how he felt.