

From *Laugh Track*

All Cretans

His fifth day in Greece, seeking a refuge from the whitened bones of history, Harriman left the palace of Knossos tour early and seated himself at a *kafenion*, ordering an ouzo because it seemed appropriate. As a rising attorney on the run from a decaying relationship with a younger man named Ben who thought the world of his own cheekbones, Harriman had booked the Grecian tour in a hurry, eager merely to put distance between himself and the subject of his affections. In Athens, admiring a row of caryatids, he became grateful for the adage “You can’t take it with you.” On the ferry from Piraeus to Iráklío, he imagined he saw dolphins in the wine-dark sea.

But the alabaster statues of Greek youths stirred him, and he found himself reaching out mentally to cup the chin of a Ganymede type. A javelin thrower, frozen in mid-thrust, had Ben’s supposedly unique facial structure. Where was the deceit behind the brow? he wondered—the malleable jaw that shaped itself around so many easy-sounding phrases like “Me, too” and “Yes, let’s.”

Duplicity, he decided, as he took the first sip of his overpriced drink, was a constant. Just one of the paradoxes of life. At eleven in the morning, few people were at the *kafenion*, which was half-tucked into an alley but blossomed onto the street in a bouquet of tiny tables. His unhandsome waiter—why were all waiters in Greece called Stavros?—had glided away a moment ago, bearing a tray of improbably dirty glasses. He took a large gulp of ouzo, which tasted like a licorice whip immersed in alcohol. Ah, well. When in Greece, and so forth.

As he stretched his legs onto the adjoining seat at his table, Harriman caught sight of a shabby figure stalking toward him. The man looked like some mountain fighter from the Greek war of independence, dressed in a fustanella and walking with a slight limp. Sensing some sort of hustle, Harriman instinctively turned away. Too late. Adopting the proximal Mediterranean stance that had made Harriman uneasy since the start of his trip, the man stopped at his table. They communed a moment in the light breeze from the agora. Up close, he looked more like a beggar. Does he want some drachma? wondered Harriman warily, his hand straying towards his zipped-up fanny pack. The Greek stared at him steadily, as if from the wellhole of centuries. His cheeks were shadowed with stubble and soot. After a while he leaned over and said in words that weren’t quite English, “I am a Cretan.” He smiled, showing a few yellow teeth, and added in a stage whisper, “All Cretans are liars.”

Harriman started backwards. His reaction included a half-recalled memory of the famous paradox as it was recited to him at NYU Law. Had it been Kliegler in Contracts? He saw

Kliegler in his habitual gray suit, lecturing with his arms thrust forward as if delivering a large and awkward gift. A Cretan declares in a court of law that all Cretans are liars. If he's telling the truth, then he's lying, and vice versa.

Or maybe it had been earlier. In college, a favorite course of his had been History of Western Thought, taught by a ferociously bearded humanist named Albin. The syllabus ran from Plato to Wittgenstein, with a general acknowledgement that something frightening had happened after the Enlightenment. Something to do with logic and God. As a lawyer, Harriman steered clear of paradox, preferring to impale defendants on the cusp of their own words, but something about the Cretan in front of him suggested the invitingly dark mouth of the Minoan labyrinth. Or maybe it was simply the ouzo on an empty stomach. Slightly drunk and more than ordinarily explorative, he felt like prosecuting this man.

Harriman considered the case before him. If the Cretan were telling the truth, then his words were a lie. On the other hand, if he were lying, then he also couldn't be making that statement. What now? He tried to attract Stavros's attention for a witness, but he was on the far side of the *kafenion*, clearing saucers from one of the tables no larger than a dirty doily. Meanwhile the Cretan, a goat's breath away, was waiting for a response. In his soiled white kilt and fez, he could have been a busker who'd hitched a ferry ride from Athens—or a *klepht* fighting the Turks alongside Byron in Missolonghi.

Never mind, thought Harriman, never mind. His thoughts were rolling around in his head like a fleet of overturned barrels. He had a sudden vision of Albin, topped by Ben's head, emphasizing a point on the blackboard with the *tic-tac* of his chalk stub. From some recess of his mind, perhaps the one marked "cross-examination," he mentally removed a sheaf and scanned it quickly. He tilted his head up abruptly, the Cretan watching him warily. "That's easy for you to say," he finally retorted. He rose triumphantly, almost knocking over his doily table in the process and incidentally making the Cretan move a step. He spread his arms Kliegler-style, forcing the Cretan backwards into a nearby chair. "Maybe Cretans sometimes tell the truth and sometimes lie."

The Cretan stared furrily at him, his aneloid lips moving soundlessly as if sight-reading Harriman's words. Warming to his case, Harriman continued. "When you say that all Cretans are liars, you're lying"—now he gestured like an umpire declaring a foul—"but that's just in this boxed-up logic of yours. You could be telling the truth tomorrow." He made as if to check his watch. "You can fib or you can be honest. Just like anyone else."

This resolution of an age-old paradox didn't sit well with the Cretan, who scowled as if a miniature cyclone had twisted his face. He clearly treasured his uniqueness as much as he relished his role in logic textbooks. Rising to his full height (more a matter of presence than physicality, since he turned out to be short and scrawny), he snarled some indecipherable Greek imprecation and stomped away. His fustanella swished back and forth like the flounce of a dress. He eventually disappeared around the corner of a stucco building in a sepia cloud of dust. Harriman mopped his brow, resettled his tumbler of ouzo, and took a sip. For some reason, the liqueur now tasted better, less like candy dropped into resin and more like a proper drink. Perhaps he'd have another.

He did so, and since it was now lunchtime, he also ordered a hummus-and-pita concoction that came with a border of stuffed grape leaves. A crowd began to gather at the *kafenion*, including a few members of the tour who looked at him with vague resentment, the way faithful students regard a kid playing hooky. He smiled blandly, too drowsy to mind. After Stavros cleared away the dishes and returned with a white thimble of coffee, Harriman fell into a doze. His one dream was concerned with a living statue that took off its toga to reveal the words “CRETAN” tattooed on one buttock and “LIAR” on the other.

Harriman awoke with a jump as Stavros clattered some plates nearby. He squinted into the sun, trying to estimate how much time had gone by. Perhaps an hour, perhaps an hour and a day—how could he tell? He sat and drank his now-cold coffee, which revived him minimally. This time of year, the locust trees spread their branches like supplicants, the Dikti mountains looming behind everywhere. The afternoon shadows lengthened until the image of the *kafenion* on the pavement was a forest of heads from one table imprisoned in the latticework chairs from another. Harriman doodled a bit on his red paper napkin: a mazelike diagram but without a minotaur at the center. He thought about the palace of Knossos from this morning: the intricate design of so many little rooms, from the courtyard to the sanctuary. In the museum of Heraklion, a fresco showed an acrobat leaping a stylized bull, and one of the hand-seals was decorated with a gorgeous frieze of two goats copulating. How Greek, he thought, suffused with feeling for a race that so easily combined sex and art. One of the women in the tour had made a silly joke, and he’d left soon after. What the hell—he’d catch up with them at tonight’s hotel.

He sipped his coffee, alone if not entirely free, trying to make the moment last.

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Harriman got up to visit the filthy toilet adjoining the *kafenion*, ending up back at his seat as if pulled by an elastic string. All during the afternoon, people and objects had moved by him, from an old man bent over a bicycle to a flock of birds dark against the sky. He would move on, too, eventually. Meanwhile he felt oddly impelled to remain right where he was, as if his table had become the center of the universe. He contemplated sending a postcard back to Ben, but couldn’t think of anything to say. “Wish you were here” was a cliché as well as a lie. Ben always caught him at that, though Ben freely lied himself, as he often confessed. The problem was one of trust, or maybe just the trickiness of words.

He ordered another coffee and, while he was waiting for it, saw a familiar figure approaching. The man nearing Harriman in the slanted light looked like another Cretan. He could have been the brother of the Cretan who’d accosted him before, though he appeared more purposeful and older, or simply timeless. This man looked like a Cretan from antiquity, in begrimed toga and sandals. The *kafenion* by now had emptied out, and there was nowhere to hide. Stavros the waiter was impossibly still clearing away cracked saucers from the same table as before.

The Cretan headed straight for Harriman. He laid a hand on the braided wire arm of Harriman’s metal seat. Here we go again, thought Harriman.

“*Ena*,” the man intoned, and from somewhere in the blue-eyed sky came a thunderous voice: “ALL CRETANS ARE LIARS.” The tone was apodictic, like the *Fiat lux* from Genesis.

Harriman said nothing. Awed as he was, he was also waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“*Dhi-o*,” remarked the Cretan, and the celestial voice-over, that which cannot be argued with, boomed down again like rain on the unlucky, “THIS MAN IS A CRETAN.”

The Cretan smiled and executed a delicate little bow, indicating polite insolence as much as “at your service.”

“*Tria...*” he whispered, leaning forward so that his forearm brushed Harriman’s in the hirsute approximation of an eyelash kiss. His breath stunk of old loaves and olive piss. “*I am a liar.*”

A beat of a pause. Harriman opened his mouth, started to say something, and paused again. If Cretans were liars and this man was a Cretan, then he couldn’t have said what he just had. This contract was more binding. Where was Kliegler when he needed him?

Another beat.

The immanent pressure of a headache came from within his skull, radiating outward in almost visible waves of pain. This was not the same situation as before. Someone above had switched the rules on him. He turned his head sideways, his best thinking posture, but nothing occurred. Given the set-up, he could find no way out. The Cretan’s arm snaked around the rim of the chair, moving toward Harriman’s second thimble of coffee, which was still half-full or already half-empty. The hairy fingers were almost at the saucer.

“But wait,” Harriman protested. Think, think, he thought—as the history of Western logic raced by him. He saw Albin yanking at his beard, pounding the chalk into the board so hard that the piece broke in two. “The only way out,” he recalled Albin concluding one lecture, “is the exit.”

And there it was. He shook his head as he rose. “I never agreed to the premises.” Though his left leg had fallen asleep, he tried to stand, staggering a bit. “Who knows that all Cretans are liars? In fact, who says that you’re a Cretan?” Pawing clumsily at the man’s toga, he parted the clothing to reveal a modern belt buckle in the shape of a bugle, and a designer logo on a pair of cutoff jeans. A light push backwards, and the man crashed into a nearby table. As the proprietor rushed forward from somewhere in the bowels of the *kafenion*, the exposed pretender stumbled away, muttering angrily. The hem of his garment brushed the cobblestones like a cross between a besom and a shroud.

The proprietor offered a cursory apology as Harriman returned to his seat. Despite his apparent contrition, his manner suggested that Harriman order something. An ouzo, then. Stavros was dispatched to fetch it.

Harriman sat back in his chair, his gaze fixed on the horizon where the locust trees merged into one continuous gray smudge. Flapping toward him was a feeling of finality, of having wrestled something, but to a standstill rather than victory. Had he really escaped? From Ben in New York, or a Cretan in Greece? What, after all, did travel accomplish?

He swiveled in his chair, but since his chair didn't turn with him, he merely pinched his legs against the backing. Had he really left at all? If a man shot an arrow at one of those trees, how would it arrive at its destination? Zeno's paradox, courtesy of Albin again. At instant one, the arrow is *here*. At instant two, the arrow is *there*. Then so much farther, and so on. So at any given moment, the arrow is motionless, yet it moves. How does it progress at all through a series of static frames? Is time a fluid medium or a series of discrete points? Cretans are bad enough. "To hell with Zeno," he muttered, as he waited for his drink. "God damn all Greeks."

But the problem wouldn't go away. This was a far deeper dilemma than the man who accosted Harriman a short while ago, or the earlier man, unless he was the same man simply removed in time. Would he, Harriman, be the same attorney boarding Olympic Airways for New York next week? Would Ben be the same terribly attractive, damnably annoying beardless youth?

His ouzo arrived in a badly washed tumbler remarkably like the first. Stavros or his twin turned his back on Harriman and walked away. In that time, an endless procession of men could pick up a myriad of tumblers in an infinity of bars. One had already broken up with Ben, another had just proposed that they move in together, and a third had never met the man in question. The fourth started toward Ben but never reached him. The fifth embraced the sixth, while the seventh stretched out his empty hand toward infinity.

One, thought Harriman, I am an American. Two, all Americans are dreamers. Three? He picked up the glass almost absently but stopped just a moment, pausing at the precipice, the landscape blurring into the distance, his hand close to shaking, before taking the first sip.