

The Red Suitcase: Part 1

by Daniel Harris

He had become an accessory to a murder. He didn't drive the getaway car, didn't arrange the setup, didn't provide the weapon, and didn't know the victim. He had unwittingly provided an alibi for the murderer. And all because of a chance encounter. Out of the blue. It was, he thought, a kismet of the most unusual kind. It happened on a bridge, the Pont Neuf in Paris, on a cold, foggy night.

The provider of this alibi is a cellist. He is a member of the Brooklyn String Quartet, a successful ensemble specializing in complex avant-garde music. The quartet was in Paris to play a series of concerts at IRCAM, the world-famous venue for new music performance and composition. He was staying at the *pied a terre* of a friend on rue de Birague near Place Vosges. The rest of the quartet was housed in a hotel near the Pompidou Center where IRCAM is located.

He was overjoyed to return to the quartet after a six-month hiatus. He had taken a bereavement leave from the quartet after the death of his wife. Since he had been on the road for most of her illness, working to pay her medical bills, the whole ordeal had left him exhausted and demoralized. It had been a grueling slog of false hopes, failed treatments and finally a mercifully short but painful death in a hospice. For the first time in three years, he enjoyed being a full-time musician unencumbered by familial obligation. The quartet, founded when the four musicians were graduate students, had been together for twenty-five years. All the usual anniversary concerts, recordings, and command performances were on their schedule. The critics raved when he returned to the quartet for a command performance at Carnegie Hall. He was back and in top form. Music was exciting again for him.

After the quartet's penultimate Paris concert, he decided to wander the late-night rues and boulevards. The cold and intermittent rain showers kept flâneurs, boulevardiers, and tourists indoors. As his mother's Cornish great-grandfather would say: "A

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winter's fawg will freeze a dawg.” It was a dog freezing night in Paris. He was dressed in a long black leather coat, a two-meter long wool scarf and lined leather gloves. He wore a black beret at a raffish angle on his gray-flecked black hair. The slight yellow tint of his glasses helped him see in the fog.

He didn't remember his route to the Pont Neuf, but he remembered his time on the bridge and what happened afterward. He had crossed over the Seine on another bridge and walked along the Left Bank and then crossed back to the Right Bank on the Pont Neuf. He was alone on the bridge until he crossed Il de la Cite, walking toward the right bank. In the fog, he thought he could make out a lone figure leaning over the railing on the upriver side of the bridge. In the quiet of the night, he heard a splash and saw the figure stand upright. The figure appeared to be a woman. She turned in his direction and sat on a large suitcase.

Approaching her he saw a woman in her mid-thirties dressed expensively: Burberry trench coat, Hermes scarf, a cranberry-colored beret, matching gloves, high-heeled blood-red boots. Now standing opposite her, he saw that she was beautiful: short dark hair, large expressive eyes, strong cheekbones, full lips, solid chin. Looking in her eyes, he could not tell if she was furious or fearful. He smiled and said *bon soir*. Her expression relaxed.

—*Excusez-moi*, he said, *mais je suis perdu* (Excuse me, but I am lost).

The woman looked nervous.

—Will you assist me, please, he continued in tourist French. The apartment where I'm staying is near Place Vosges.

—*Oui*, Of course, yes. I know Place Vosges. If you carry my suitcase, I will show you. There is a little neighborhood bar on the way. You can buy me a drink.

—*Merci beaucoup. Bien sûr*.

—Do you know the name of the rue?

—Rue de Biragk near Saint-Antoine.

—Biragk? Do you mean Birague?

—*Oui*.

—A difficult word for English speakers. Come this way. I know these arrondissements well.

Her suitcase was large and heavy, perhaps forty pounds. At one time, the suitcase had wheels, but they were missing and the handle was broken. Fortunately, he was wearing thick leather gloves. Ultimately, he cradled the suitcase with both arms. He wondered why such a stylishly dressed woman would have such a battered old suitcase. But he kept his counsel and let her guide him.

As they began walking, she took his arm. He could feel her right breast on his left arm. It felt ample and firm through his leather coat. She snuggled against him as if she were cold, though in hindsight, he thought she was intentionally inciting his sexual interest.

They did not speak.

—May I ask what you do? she said when he stopped to rest putting the suitcase on the sidewalk.

The way she phrased the question in French confused him.

—Do you mean, what I do for a *living* or what am I doing *now*?

—What is your vocation?

—I am a cellist and a recent widower.

—Strange coincidence, I am a recent widow.

—I am so sorry.

—Don't be. He was a terrible husband. He beat me and was unfaithful to me, both with men and women. I should be sorry for *you*.

—No, cancer is a death sentence.

—Love can be a death sentence, too, monsieur.

He gave her a surprised look. He wondered where that came from.

—How long have you been a widow, she continued.

—Ten months. When did your husband die?

—Very recently. But now we are only a short walk to the bar I mentioned. Is the suitcase too heavy?

—No, just awkward.

They entered the bar. There was a small lively crowd for a weekday night. Most of the patrons were nattily dressed and well

served. They looked like stockbrokers but may have been furniture salesmen. An acoustic guitar and flute duo provided live music. The music was barely audible above the drunken din of the room.

—This bar seems friendly, he said in French. What may I order for you?

—Your Anglicized French is difficult, monsieur. What did you ask, please?

—What would you like to drink?

—A double whiskey, please. No ice. What are you having?

—The same. When the French say whiskey, they mean Scotch, *oui?*

—*D'accord, monsieur.*

He ordered two doubles, no ice, of the house's best Scotch.

—Not many women like Scotch.

—My late husband drank only Scotch. I learned to like it. He was a sadistic, vicious animal—a modern-day satyr.

Well, that was a conversation stopper. They sat without talking. She looked relieved to be sitting in a warm place, but she didn't remove her coat. She sipped her drink judiciously. Time passed. He ordered a second round. Still, they did not speak.

—After two double whiskeys, do you still want to walk me to my apartment? he asked.

—A deal is a deal.

—Yes, but ...

—I will sleep with you.

—There is only one bed in the apartment.

—There are only two of us. Is there a problem?

They left the bar and continued walking.

—Brrr, she said, gripping his arm tighter.

—In America, we call this post drink cold, the bar chill factor. Drink in a warm bar and then go out into the cold night.

She had no idea what he was talking about. They arrived at his building. He put the suitcase on the sidewalk.

—Excuse me, but I must check the code for the door.

He pulled a piece of paper from his wallet and entered the code for the pedestrian door in the big gate. Inside the gate was a

handsome square surrounded by four separate buildings. A fountain bubbled in the center of the square. Once inside the gate, he entered the code for the entryway to the building where he was staying. In a darkened window, the concierge's large cat watched them. The man waved at the cat. The cat did not blink.

The tiny elevator operated in the middle of the circular staircase. The elevator was so small they were pressed against each other. He could feel the heat of her body escaping her coat. Her pheromones excited him. When the elevator arrived at his floor, he unlocked the apartment door, reached in and turned on the light. He held the door open and she entered the apartment. They walked into a small dining area. A tiny kitchen and bathroom with toilet and shower filled one end of the room. The dining area had a cheap table with three chairs. A closet full of clothes occupied one wall. The larger room in the apartment was the bedroom, which housed a double bed, a small desk with a computer, a book case, a vibraphone and his cello in its case. He returned to the first floor to retrieve her red suitcase. He tapped on the door before entering. The woman had removed her coat and boots. She was combing her hair before the mirror on the closet door. She wore a tailored crimson wool suit and a cream-colored blouse with French cuffs. He saw that she was a stunner with a full figure. Heroic in the German or Scandinavian mold of a well-proportioned woman. In her stocking feet, she was nearly as tall as his six feet.

He was tired after teaching two master classes and performing a long taxing concert. This strange woman didn't seem friendly, yet, she was offering to sleep with him. It was awkward. As desirable as she was, he wasn't sure of her motives.

- Do you intend to stay the night?
- But, of course. Why do you think I am here?
- So how do we do this? We haven't even kissed. Barely talked.
- We undress and get into bed.
- But my head is so confused.
- Forget your head. Do you have a toothbrush?
- I have a new toothbrush still in the box.

—*Merci beaucoup.*

—The only sink is in the kitchen. There is toothpaste on the counter.

This strange woman had a heavy suitcase, but no toothbrush? Unusual, but nothing so far about their encounter was usual.

—I would like to shower, she said. Is there a clean towel?

—Yes. Take this blue one. I will go to bed.

—No, when I finish showering, you must shower. I insist.

—Okay, but there is no door or curtain for the bathroom. For your privacy, I will use the computer in the bedroom.

When she came into the bedroom after her shower, she was wrapped in the blue towel. She used the towel to cover her full breasts, but she was naked from the navel down. He liked what he saw. What he saw was that her dark pubic hair was trimmed very short. A life-like bulbous black spider tattoo guarded her mons.

—Are you sure you want me to shower?

—Yes, I want you clean and fresh.

He showered, but the vision of her body gave him a stout erection. He toweled off and strode rampant into the bedroom.

—Turn off the lights, she said.

—I'll leave this reading light on. I want to enjoy your figure.

He enjoyed the visual feast. She was a voluptuary. He gorged himself on her body. He left nothing untasted or probed. She moaned, growled, gasped, whimpered. She devoured all he could serve her. He was master of her, and she knew just how and where to satisfy all his desires. They fell asleep sated, her head nestled on his shoulder.

In the morning, she brought coffee, a sliced apple and goat cheese to the bed. Her nude body glowed in the early oblique sunlight. She sat cross-legged opposite him, her spider nestled in the valley between her lush thighs. He was becoming aroused.

—What is your name?

—Call me Ishmael.

—You're joking. That's from an American novel. If you are Ishmael, then I must be Queequeg.

—Ten points for you. What is your real name?

—Call me Claudia.

She pronounced her name Cloud-ia, not Clawed-ia.

—Claudia, he said, copying her pronunciation. A beautiful name.

—It means lame.

—You're joking.

—Check it out, as you Americans say.

—You know we did everything but kiss on the lips. May I kiss your lips?

—No. If you kiss my mouth, you will love me. I don't want you to love me.

—But after last night...

—Silly, man. I used you.

—What? How?

—I murdered my husband. You are now my alibi.

All his desire for a morning romp evaporated with her words: *I murdered my husband.*

To be continued.

