

The Red Suitcase by D. R. Harris

He had become an accessory to murder. He didn't drive the getaway car, didn't arrange the setup, didn't procure the weapon, and didn't know the victim. He provided an alibi for the murderer. All because of a chance encounter. Out of the blue. A kismet of sheer happenstance. It began on a bridge, the Pont Neuf in Paris, on a cold, foggy night.

A cellist will supply the alibi. He is a member of the Brooklyn String Quartet, an esteemed 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-à-terre* of a friend on rue de Birague near Place des Vosges in the same arrondissement as IRCAM. The other members of the quartet lodged in a nearby hotel.

He rejoined the ensemble after a six-month hiatus. He had taken a bereavement leave from the quartet after the death of his wife. 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 and failed treatments, ending in a short but painful death in a hospice. Now after three years, he enjoyed being a full-time musician unencumbered by familial obligation. The string 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 performance at Carnegie Hall. He was back, in top form. Music was exciting again.

After the quartet's penultimate Paris concert, he decided to explore 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 winter's fawg will freeze a dawg." It was a dog-freezing night in Paris. He wore an ankle-length black leather coat, a two-meter-long wool scarf, and lined leather gloves. A black beret sat at a raffish angle on his gray-flecked dark hair. The slight yellow tint of his glasses aided his vision in the fog.

It was on the Pont Neuf where his involvement in murder began. 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. At that late cold hour, he was alone on the bridge until he left Île de la Cité, walking toward the Right Bank. In the fog, he thought he saw a person leaning over the railing on the upriver side of the bridge. He heard a splash and saw the figure stand upright. It appeared to be a woman. She turned in his direction, then sat on a large red suitcase.

As he approached her, he beheld an expensively attired woman, perhaps mid-thirties. When he stopped to address her, he saw she was a beautiful woman with short dark hair, large expressive

eyes, pronounced cheekbones, full lips, and a solid chin. From her expression, he could not tell if she was furious or fearful. He smiled and said, "*Bon soir.*" She gave him a tight smile.

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

The woman looked nervous.

—Will you help 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 take you there. We pass by a neighborhood bar on the way. You can buy me a drink.

—*Merci beaucoup. Bien sûr.*

—What is the name of the rue?

—Rue de Biragk near Saint-Antoine.

—Biragk? Do you mean Birague?

—*Oui.*

—A challenging word for English speakers. Come this way. I know the fourth arrondissement well.

On end, the red suitcase reached his waist. At one time, the luggage had wheels, but now they were missing, and the handle broken. When he lifted it, it seemed to weigh over forty pounds. He was glad for his thick leather gloves. Ultimately, he cradled the suitcase with both arms. He wondered why a chic woman would have such battered luggage. But he kept his counsel and let her guide him.

As they walked, she clutched his coat sleeve. Her right breast warmed his left arm. It felt ample and firm through his leather coat. She snuggled against him as if she were cold.

They did not speak.

At Rue de Rivoli, he put the suitcase on the sidewalk to rest his arms.

—May I ask what you do?

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'm a cellist and a recent widower.

—Strange coincidence, I'm a recent widow.

—I'm sorry.

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

—No. Cancer is a death sentence.

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

He shot her a startled look. He'd never considered love a death sentence.

—How long have you been a widower?

—Ten months. When did your husband die?

—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. For a weekday night, there was a lively crowd. Most of the patrons wore business suits. They looked like stockbrokers but may have been furniture salesmen. They spoke in the flamboyant bravado of the inebriated. The drunken din in the room overwhelmed an acoustic guitar and flute duo playing on a small platform behind the bar.

- Seems like a regular saloon, he said in English. What may I order for you?
- Your American English is difficult, monsieur. What did you ask, please?
- What would you like to drink?
- A 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 of the house's best Scotch, no ice.

- Few women drink Scotch.
- My late husband drank only Scotch. I learned to like it. He was a sadistic, vicious animal, a 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 leaving a crimson crescent of lipstick on her glass. Time passed. He ordered a second round. They did not speak.

- After two whiskeys, do you still want to walk me to my apartment?
- A deal is a deal.
- Yes, but.
- I will sleep with you.
- There is only one bed in the flat.
- There are just two of us. Is there a problem?

They left the bar and continued walking.

- The night has teeth, she said, gripping his arm tighter.
- In America, we call this post drink cold, the bar chill factor. Outside is cold after a warm bar. It seems colder than it is.

She did not understand what he said. He wasn't sure he said in French what he was thinking in English. 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 was a cobblestone yard surrounded by four separate buildings. Steam rose from the fountain burbling in the center of the square. Once inside the gate, he entered the code for his entryway. In a darkened window, the concierge's large cat watched them. The man waved at the cat. The cat did not blink.

A tiny elevator operated in the middle of the circular staircase. The elevator was so small they stood belly to belly to fit inside. The perfume escaping from Claudia's coat aroused him. When the elevator arrived at his floor, he unlocked the apartment door, reached in and turned on the light. He held the door for her. They entered a dining area. A tiny kitchen and a bathroom with toilet and shower filled one end of the room. The dining space had a cheap table with three chairs, a candle, half a bottle of pastis and a basket with three apples. A closet full of clothes occupied one wall. The other chamber in the apartment was the bedroom which housed a double bed, a small desk with a computer, a bookcase, a vibraphone and his cello in its case. He left to retrieve her red suitcase on the ground floor.

When he returned, he tapped on the door before entering. The woman had removed her coat and boots. She stood before the full-length mirror brushing her hair. She wore a tailored crimson wool suit and a cream-colored blouse with French cuffs. When she removed her suit jacket, he saw that the woman was a stunner with a full figure. She did not wear a brassiere; her still-youthful breasts did not need one. She was a heroic woman in the German or Scandinavian mold. In her stocking feet, she was almost as tall as his six feet.

After teaching two master classes and performing a long taxing concert that day, he wondered what he would do with this exquisite woman. She 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. Would she want money? With her looks and figure, it could cost a bundle.

—Do you intend to stay the night?

—*Mais oui, bien sûr.* Why do you think I am here?

—I don't know you. We haven't kissed or spoken. So how do we do this?

—We undress and get into bed.

—But, I'm confused.

—Don't be. Do you have a toothbrush?

—I have a toothbrush still in the package.

—*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 about this woman had been usual.

—I would like to shower. 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. The bathroom doesn't have a door. For your privacy, I will use the computer in the bedroom.

When she came into the bedroom after her shower, she had wrapped the blue towel to cover her full breasts, but she was naked from the navel down. The cellist liked what he saw. What he saw was her dark pubic hair trimmed short. A lifelike bulbous black spider tattoo graced her mons.

—Are you sure you want me to shower?

—Yes, I want you clean and fresh.

He showered, but the anticipation of making love to 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 on this reading light. I want to enjoy your figure.

He enjoyed the visual feast. The woman was a voluptuary. He gorged himself on her body. He left no part of her untasted or probed. She devoured all he gave her. He played her body like his 1623 Amati cello; and she responded with moans, growls, gasps, whimpers and finally a low C-string purr. Sated, they fell asleep, her head nestled on his shoulder.

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

—You're joking, he laughed.

—No. It is not a joke. I murdered my husband.

—Are you going to kill me?

—Never.

—Will we be lovers?

—Perhaps. Life can have strange twists of fate.

—I must dress and go to a rehearsal and a master class.

She pouted and combed her hair with her fingers. Her raised arms showed off her breasts to good effect. She could tell from his expression that she aroused him.

—Do you know how I disposed of my husband's body?

—No, tell me. I'm all ears.

—I held a grand dinner party for sixty of his girlfriends and lovers. He was a sex addict. He would boast: "Eight to eighty, two legs or four, I fuck them all." All those former lovers consumed his flesh in soups, antipasti, pasta, roasts, stews, aspics, and meat pies. A grand homo sapiens buffet. I served his minced testicles in an aspic. I stuffed his flayed penis with his chopped liver, onion, garlic, and spices, then sliced it into coins and served them on crackers topped with caviar as *hors d'oeuvres*. A dining room of elegantly attired debauches feasted on his flesh. Like sexual cannibals, they ate their mate. They became him. You are, after all, what you eat. The flesh of my late husband lives in the bodies of sixty of his favorites. His tissue reincarnate in them.

He stared at her in disbelief.

—Ah, come on. That's mythical. I think you're lying. Your story is preposterous. I can't believe you had a husband, or even that you murdered him. It's a good story, Claudia, but I don't buy it.

—Last night I shot the man who butchered my husband's body and prepared the menu for that gala. My husband had accidentally emasculated him in a bondage game. He wanted revenge worse than I did. You saw me drop the gun in the Seine. I can't believe I didn't see you walk onto the Pont Neuf.

—When did you murder your accomplice?

—I shot him before you crossed Île de la Cité. The fish are eating him now.

The cellist studied Claudia's face. She was disgusting and dangerous. A cold-blooded murderess and sexual cannibal. Or she tells a good, though improbable, story. But she is desirable. She offers her body, but there must be strings attached. What are they?

He rose to dress. Claudia walked to him and put his hands on her bare breasts. She fondled him. It worked. The morning sex was better than the previous night.

—Will you be here when I return tonight? I want to hear more of your fabulous story.

—Perhaps.

—I will call about dinner arrangements. If you leave, you must lock the door. Here is my mobile telephone number. Call me. I want to see you again.

He gathered his cello. Claudia gave him three air kisses pressing her breasts against his body and then reaching into his trousers, she cupped his stones.

—I may have a surprise for you tonight, she said, closing the door behind him.

At five that afternoon, he telephoned the apartment to invite her to dinner. She didn't answer, even after he yelled, "Claudia, pickup!" into the answering machine.

After his concert, he returned to the flat on Rue de Birague. Claudia was not there. She had tidied the apartment and washed the dishes. The only vestige of her having spent the night was the faint whiff of her perfume and her red suitcase under the dining table.

She left a note: *Ishmael, dinner in Manhattoes in two weeks. Queequeg*

He undressed and went to bed. The sheets were heavy with the musk of their ruts. His dreams were erotic. He reminded himself that in the morning, he would have to pay the concierge to launder the bedding and towels. Tomorrow, the ensemble departed on the 9 a.m. TGV to Amsterdam from Gare du Nord. The quartet had an afternoon rehearsal with the composer of a new string quartet. Tide, time and trains wait for no man.

He woke from a sound sleep after an hour. What was in Claudia's suitcase? It closed by zippers whose tabs inserted into a tiny combination lock. He knew people were lazy about spinning the dials on these types of locks, so he wrote the four numbers on a notepad. He remembered that Claudia was left-handed. Most likely she would move the leftmost dial one digit higher or lower. He rotated the dial from 2 to 3. The lock opened.

He unzipped the suitcase hoping to find some identifying documents or papers. Instead, he gasped and stepped back. Inside was a skeleton. Someone had packed all the bones, except the head in one vacuum-sealed plastic bag. They had sawn or broken the long bones to fit in the plastic bag. The slaughterer had separated the ribcage at the sternum and broken and torn the ribs from the spine. The killer had wrapped the decapitated head in a separate plastic vacuum bag retaining the flesh and hair. The skin had a greenish cast underneath the tight plastic wrap. The bulging eyes were visible in the eye-slits of a masquerade mask. A studded choke collar circled the severed neck. The mouth was agape from an arrested scream, or panicked last failed gasp for air. In the open mouth, he could see that the tongue had been torn out and there was a hole in the roof of the mouth where the butcher had removed the brain. He couldn't smell any odor of decay or death. It was a fresh corpse. Cuffs, chains, whips, prods, and collars surrounded the bags of bones. He had not breathed since opening the suitcase.

Overcome by nausea, he slammed the suitcase shut, ran to the bathroom and retched. When he had recovered and cleaned his face, he took two long pulls from the bottle of pastis and sat on a chair staring at the suitcase. He expected to hear a scream. The frozen terror on the face of the corpse gave him chills.

If these were her husband's bones, did Claudia kill him as she claimed? Did she murder him during a dangerous sex game? Could he believe that she served his body to her husband's mistresses and lovers? What ironic revenge. He tried to imagine Claudia making an aspic with her husband's testicles. He wondered what the guests thought they were eating. How long had she planned the murder? Was he the next victim? She still carried his seed in her body from their trysts. Would Claudia one day mince his testicles for an aspic? He found it hard to believe that this sophisticated woman was not only capable of mariticide but also of staging a Grand Guignol cannibalistic dinner party. Sick as the whole affair was, it showed imagination, humor ... even dash.

He felt betrayed and dirty. This morning he didn't shower because he wanted to keep Claudia's scents on his body as a reminder of the pleasures they had given each other. Now he wanted no trace of their encounter. The woman was a murderess. A dangerous psychopath. How perverted and deviant was the man whose bones were in the suitcase? Were Claudia and her husband both deviants? Did she kill her husband as just desserts for years of debasement and abuse? Nothing in *their* love-making showed a desire for pain or torture. She was a compliant lover, lustful, engaging and responsive. The more he thought about it, the more confused he became. As horrible as her crime was, he still desired her. The memory of her uninhibited sexuality clouded his thoughts. Just how related are murder and sex? He collapsed on the bed confused by desire and horror. He fell asleep and dreamt of a choking death at the height of orgasm. The nightmare and his ejaculation woke him gasping for air. His heart pounded. He panicked.

He had a worse problem than a one night stand with a murderess. Now he had to dispose of the red suitcase and its bloody bones. He couldn't leave it here. He couldn't take it with him. He was an accessory to murder, trapped by the oldest feminine guile. Whatever possessed him to talk to Claudia on the Pont Neuf?

He took a shower, made coffee, and watched the clock move closer and closer to his departure time. There had to be a way of disposing of this macabre package without leaving any clues the police could use to trace the red suitcase back to him or Claudia. He had to do it before Paris awoke. If the Paris police discovered the identity of the dead man what would it mean for Claudia or him? If the *flics* arrested Claudia, he would be an accessory to murder.

He paced the apartment. His eyes fell on his friend's battery powered metronome.

—Eureka! he said aloud. He would put a ticking metronome in the suitcase and abandon it in the nearest metro station. The police will impound it and blow it up thinking it was a time bomb. But what if someone sees me carrying the suitcase? Or I'm captured on a surveillance camera?

He searched the apartment. On a shelf, high above the bed, was a large black trunk. When his friend traveled with his vibraphone, this case carried the resonator tubes. It would be an awkward chore dragging the wheeled trunk four or five blocks to a Metro station. He better reconnoiter the neighborhood.

When he stepped out of the building and turned down rue de Biraque toward rue Saint-Antoine, he saw the solution. On the corner was a public toilet. He would put Claudia's suitcase in his friend's trunk. Drag it into the toilet, remove the suitcase, return to the apartment with the now empty trunk. The self-cleaning toilet room would blast-wash the suitcase erasing any fingerprints. He returned to the apartment and put the plan into action. Donning his leather gloves, he wiped all fingerprints off the metronome. He put the metronome on 60 ticks per minute, loaded it in the suitcase, locked Claudia's suitcase, and packed it in the black trunk. He put the trunk in the elevator, sent it to the ground floor, descended the stairs and met the trunk. He saw no one on his trip to or from the public toilet. Well, I guess I *must be* Ishmael now, he thought. I've slept with a Queequeg and a decapitated head.

When the cellist returned to the apartment, he made coffee, took another shower and packed his carry-on suitcase. He left for the train at 7 a.m. He could not fit in the elevator with his cello and backpack, so he took the stairs down to the entrance. There he saw a crowd of the building's residents gathered by the open outer door of the main entrance. Gendarmes were everywhere. He found Madame Concierge and handed over the key to his friend's apartment and gave her twenty euros to wash the towels and bedding. He watched a robot remove the red suitcase from the toilet and place it in a bomb-proof box on an armored police truck. As soon as the vehicle left the scene, the gendarmes allowed people onto the street. He found his taxi. The driver raced to Gare du Nord. He boarded the Amsterdam TVG minutes before it pulled out of the station.

Passing by a television in the lobby of his Amsterdam hotel, he stopped and watched a CNN video clip of the Paris bomb squad robot removing Claudia's red suitcase from the public toilet and then, later, blowing it up in a field outside of the city. The newscaster reported that, after destroying the luggage with the ticking bomb, the police found the dismembered remains of a male body. Police suspected the corpse was the victim of a gang feud.

The man called Ishmael smiled and walked into the hotel bar. He ordered a double Scotch from the bartender whose uniform badge identified her as Rachel.

—To Queequeg, he said to himself.

He downed his drink in one gulp and quit the bar.

In two weeks, he would dine with Claudia. Was she Queequeg—an innocent savage? Ahab—evil incarnate? Or, perhaps, Moby Dick triumphing over evil? He tried to remember a professor's lectures.
