

The Red Suitcase: (Conclusion)

by Daniel Harris

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

- You must be joking, he laughed.
- No. It is not a joke. I murdered my husband.
- So, are you going to kill *me*?
- Never.
- Will we be lovers?
- Maybe. Life can have strange turns 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 thirty 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 sapien buffet. A dining room of sexual cannibals ate everything. Like black widow spiders, they ate their mate. They became him. You are after all, what you eat. A piece of my husband lives in the bodies of thirty of his favorites.

He stared at her in disbelief.

—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 feast. 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 bridge.

—Where did you murder your accomplice?

—I shot him before you came on the bridge. The fish are eating him now. Before you helped me, he carried my suitcase.

This woman is a cold-blooded murderess and a sexual cannibal thought the man. Or she tells a good though improbable story. He rose to dress for work. She walked to him and put his hands on her bare breasts. She fondled him. It worked. The morning sex was as good as last night's.

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

—Maybe.

—I will call about dinner arrangements. If you leave, make sure the door is locked. Here is my mobile telephone number. Call me. I want to see you tonight.

He gathered his cello. She gave him three air kisses pressing her breasts into his body and then hugged him flicking her tongue in his ear.

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

After a post-concert party, he returned to the apartment on Rue de Birague. Claudia was not there. She had tidied the apartment and washed the dishes. The only vestige of her having been in the apartment was the faint whiff of her perfume and her 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 quartet departed on the TGV to Amsterdam from Gare du Nord. There was an afternoon rehearsal

with the composer of a new quartet. Tide, time and trains wait for no man.

He woke from a sound sleep after two hours. He had to find out 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 down the four numbers that were displayed. He remembered that Claudia was left-handed so she probably would move the left most dial one digit higher or lower. He moved 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. All the bloody bones, except the head, were packed in one vacuum-sealed plastic bag. Some of the long bones were sawn in half to fit in the plastic bag. The ribcage was separated at the sternum and the ribs broken and torn from the spine. The head was tightly wrapped in a separate plastic vacuum bag. The head retained the skin, eyes and hair. The flesh had a greenish cast underneath the tight plastic wrap. The bulging eyes were visible in the eye-slits of a masquerade mask. A brass-studded choke collar circled the severed neck. The mouth was open in what looked like an arrested scream, or the last failed gasp for air of a suffocating man. He could see where the roof of the mouth had been punctured to suck out the brain. There was no odor or hint of decay. It was a fresh corpse. Cuffs, chains, whips, prods, and collars were packed around the bags of bones. He felt nauseous, he had not breathed since opening the suitcase.

He slammed the suitcase shut, ran to the bathroom and retched. When he had recovered, and cleaned his face, he found a bottle of brandy in the kitchen. He took two long pulls and sat on a chair staring at the suitcase. He fully expected to hear a voice.

If these were her husband's bones, did Claudia kill him as she claimed? Did she murder him while he was bound in some sex game? Could he believe that she served his body to her husband's mistresses and lovers? What an ironic revenge. He tried to imagine

Claudia making an aspic of 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 probably still carried *his* seed in *her* body from this morning's tryst. 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 to wash off her dried secretions and scent. The woman was a murderess and a psychopath. But then how perverted and deviant was the man whose bones were in the suitcase? Maybe Claudia and her husband were *both* deviants? Did she kill her husband as just desserts for years of torture and abuse? Nothing in *their* love-making indicated a desire for pain or torture. She was a compliant lover, willingly engaging in all forms of sexual pleasure. 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 closely were murder and sex related? 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 in his chest. He panicked.

It suddenly dawned on him that he had a worse problem than a one night stand with a murderess. Now he had to dispose of the red suitcase and its grisly cargo. He couldn't leave it here. He couldn't take it with him. He was trapped. 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 anonymously 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. Whether the police would discover the identity of the man was another question. But that was Claudia's problem, not his.

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 trunk carried the resonator tubes. It would be an awkward chore dragging the wheeled trunk four or five blocks to a Metro station. He best reconnoiter the neighborhood.

When he stepped out of the building and turned down rue de Birague toward rue Saint-Antoine, he saw the solution. There on the corner was a public toilet. He would put Claudia's suitcase in his friend's trunk. Drag it to the corner, enter the toilet, remove Claudia's suitcase, leave the toilet 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. He put on his leather gloves, wiped the metronome of fingerprints. He put the metronome on 60 ticks per minute, loaded it in the suitcase, relocked Claudia's suitcase, and packed it in the black trunk. He put the trunk in the elevator, sent it to the ground floor. He walked down the stairs and met the trunk. He saw no one on his trip to or from the public toilet. Well, I guess I *am* Ishmael now, he thought. I've slept with a Queequeg and her satchel of bones.

When the man Claudia called Ishmael returned to the apartment, he stowed the black trunk and packed his carry-on suitcase. He could not fit in the elevator with his cello case, so he took the stairs down to the entrance. He was not prepared for what he found.

Half the building's residents were gathered by the open outer door of the building. 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 truck. As soon as the truck left the scene, the gendarmes let 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.

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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 suitcase from the pay toilet and then, later, blowing it up in a field outside of the city. The newscaster said that Paris police, after the destruction of the suitcase, reported there was a body in the suitcase. Police suspected the corpse was probably 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 name was 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.

