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How I Learned that my Gods Had Come Back to Me

By Dianne Hunter

In Shakespeare's play **Antony and Cleopatra**, when Antony learns that his life is ending, the music that had always accompanied him sounds the retreat of his gods. Two years ago, when I read in Lawrence Durrell's **Alexandria Quartet** an allusion to that moment, I reflected that I, too, had been abandoned by my gods.

The next year I went to Paris, where I had the luck to rent a studio apartment in a very good neighborhood on the Seine, near the Pont Marie on the Ile St. Louis. The owner of the studio is a Lacanian psychoanalyst, with the very promising name of Marie Claire Boons-Grafe, whom I had met thanks to our shared interest in the study of hysteria. I regarded her as a friend. To my eyes, she was beautiful, generous, and intelligent, not at all difficult to love. She lives in a large and well-appointed apartment 10 steps away, up a spiral staircase, from her studio, which she lends or rents to psychoanalytic friends from Brazil or the United States. In her own fabulous apartment, books are everywhere. One can find among them numerous psychoanalytic, philosophical, literary and linguistic publications Marie-Claire has collected since her arrival in Paris from Brussels in her twenties. Now a 73-year-old widow who as a result of childhood polio walks with a limp, she surrounds herself with intelligent people of ages, some psychoanalysts, some easily excitable, even manic individuals, including former and present clients. There is also a cat, named Colline, or Monsieur de Colline, found by Marie-Claire on a hill in the Pyrenees. With the cat, the books, the numerous friends and colleagues, the address, and the wonderful proprietaire, the studio appeared to be a perfect place to write, almost my idea of paradise.

In the month of July, having just arrived in Paris, I planned to go to Urbino to give a paper at a Conference on Literature and Psychology. I planned to leave on the evening train, overnight to Florence, from the Gare de Lyon. It was a beautiful, warm, sunny day. Judging from my map of Paris par arrondissements, I thought it would be fine to walk to the station from the lie St. Louis.

Wheeling behind me a small valise and carrying on my back a loaded briefcase that had been fitted with shoulder straps, I set out in late afternoon. My path involved crossing the Pont Sully, at the east end of the island, and then walking along the Seine on the right bank, first along the Quai Henry IV, and then the Quai de la Rapee, from where I would turn left toward the station. I was in a very good mood, looking forward to seeing Italy again, meeting friends and colleagues in Urbino. I liked the paper I planned to give and hoped it would be well received.

After about half an hour, the backpack, in which I had put my paper for the conference, my wallet, my money, my tickets for the train and the couchette, and my passport, as well as a few books and what would ordinarily be the contents of a medicine cabinet, started to feel heavy. I decided to rest my shoulders by attaching the briefcase to the rolling suitcase, which had a plastic clip-on sewn into webbing and brass riveted to the valise under its top handle. This new disposition of luggage made walking easier.

Soon I passed the point on the river where it seemed to me that I should have been parallel to the Gare de Lyon. I had crossed to the side of the road where there were

buildings. There was a lot of traffic, making a lot of noise. I could not see the station, and I regretted exposure to the pollution and noise. The sun was going down. I began to think I might miss the train, and doubted that it had been a good idea to try to go all the way to the station on foot.

To my left, set back from the street, was a large apartment building with a little garden in front of it. I could see the Pont D'Austerlitz, source of major traffic, on the right side of the route. The air was difficult to breathe. I turned into the little garden by opening a small gate in a low, black metal fence, and walked towards another small gate, which opened onto the main artery where traffic roared off the Pont. The noise was worse the closer I got to the bridge. Now in the midst of rush hour at the end of a workday, I felt lost, having apparently missed the left turn to the station.

On the main artery a solitary man was walking toward the bridge. When I hailed him for directions to the station, he shouted, "Go straight on for about 700 meters, and then, to your left, you'll see the clock." I hurried on for about 500 meters and then, looking back to check my luggage, I noticed that the briefcase was missing from the suitcase. I could hardly believe my eyes, for I realized that without that briefcase, I had no passport, no wallet, no money of any kind, no paper to read at the conference, no train ticket, and not even the key to get back into the studio. I looked toward the bridge. The man was no longer there. I said, "Oh, my God! Oh, my God!" and thought, "That man must have taken it!" I turned around and started back. At every step, I said, "Oh, my God!" retracing my path until I had arrived back at the point where I had seen the man who was no longer there.

I then looked toward the garden through which I had taken the shortcut to the main route issuing from Austerlitz Bridge. There, caught on the little gate, was my briefcase, having evidently gotten detached as I passed out of the garden. It was upside-down, but still zipped closed, and all my belongings were intact inside. I picked it up with gratitude. As I walked a few steps along the boulevard, I noticed that a woman had come along through the garden and was now passing through the gate in her turn. I walked the rest of the distance to the station, ate a wonderful dinner at the Cordon Bleu restaurant there, found my train in plenty of time, and slept my way to Florence.

Some morals to this story:

1. As one of the survivors of the Donner party said, "Don't take no shortcuts."
2. Ne mettez jamais votre sac derriere de vous.
3. Recognize your true friends. (The man who gave me directions was a helper, not a thief).
4. It was all bound to happen as it did because I was unconsciously making an important transition in my life and needed to leave some of my excess baggage behind, or decide consciously to take it with me.

Coda:

Having returned from Italy and a cheerful reception of my paper, I wanted to give something to the person through whom many good things seemed to be flowing. Having arranged, I thought, to pay part of the studio rent in cash so Marie-Claire could more easily avoid income taxes if she chose, I phoned her when I had the money ready. She answered the phone in a voice full of irritation. I asked, "is this a good time to call?" She

responded, “No, not really. I am going out.” I said, “I have 1 000 francs for you. I can bring it to your door.” She said, “Very well.” I went up to her door and rang the bell. Receiving no response, I sat down on the steps and waited. Then, feeling ignored, I stomped back down to the studio. Once inside, I immediately heard Marie-Claire outside, evidently in a rush. I opened the door and said, “You are a difficult woman to give money to, Marie Claire.” She stared at me. I handed her an envelope, which she opened to count its contents, to my mild and unstated annoyance. I said, “Don’t spend it all in one place.” She laughed. “Don’t lose it,” I added, “and don’t forget I gave it to you, either.” She said, “I won’t forget.” Then she said, “You’re dressed all in white!” I responded, “Yes, like the walls of the studio, and like a sheet of paper.” She laughed. I said, “Marie-Claire, the most marvelous thing happened to me on my way to Italy.” She frowned. “Come along,” she said, “and tell me. I’m on my way to an appointment for a pedicure. Je suis pressee!” I followed her down the narrow staircase, trying to recount in my halting French the story of the lost and found briefcase. She showed no interest, but proceeded to tell me what a wonderful podiatrist she was going to see. When we arrived at the sidewalk in front of the building, she spotted an empty parking spot close to the door. She said, “Tu tombes bien! Wait here and keep this place for me. I go to Belgium tomorrow and have to load my car in the morning.”

I stood there in my white U.S. Navy deck-hand outfit while Marie-Claire went down the street to get her car, which was not far away on the same street. Feeling like an idiot, I served my purpose by waving away the few cars that came along the Quai. Their drivers were remarkably responsive to my indications that the space had already been claimed. Perhaps my latent identification with Douglas MacArthur served Marie-Claire well. She seemed quite pleased as she emerged from her reparked car. She was wearing stone-colored chinos and golden sandals. She said, “You must try my podiatrist. Il est dans le quartier. J’y vais a pied!”

Her feet, with their red-painted toenails, looked perfect as she hurried away.