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CENTURY RAIN

Alastair Reynolds



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND FURTHER READING

The river flowing sluggishly under Pont de la Concorde was flat and grey, like worn-out linoleum. It was October and the authorities were having one of their periodic crackdowns on contraband. They had set up their customary lightning checkpoint at the far end of the bridge, backing traffic all the way across to the Right Bank.

“One thing I’ve never got straight,” Custine said. “Are we musicians supplementing our income with a little detective work on the side, or is it the other way round?”

Floyd glanced into the rear-view mirror. “Which way round would you like it to be?”

“I think I’d like it best if I had the kind of income that didn’t need supplementing.”

“We were doing all right until recently.”

“Until recently we were a trio. Before that, a quartet. Perhaps it’s just me, but I’m beginning to detect a trend.”

Floyd slipped the Mathis into gear and eased forward as the line advanced. “All we have to do is hold the fort together until she returns.”

“That isn’t going to happen,” Custine said. “She left for good when she got on that train. You keeping a seat free for her in the front of the car isn’t going to change things.”

“It’s her seat.”

“She’s gone.” Custine sighed. “That’s the trouble with recognising talent: sooner or later, someone else recognises it as well.” The big Frenchman rummaged in his jacket pocket. “Here. Show the nice man my papers.”

Floyd took the yellowing documents and placed them next to his own on the dashboard. When they reached the checkpoint, the guard flicked through Floyd’s papers and handed them back wordlessly. He thumbed through Custine’s, then leaned down until he had a good view into the back of the Mathis.

“On business, monsieur?”

“I wish,” Custine said quietly.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means we were looking for work,” Floyd said amiably. “Unfortunately, we didn’t find any.”

“What kind of work?”

“Music,” Floyd said, gesturing around the car. “Hence the instruments.”

The guard jabbed the muzzle of his stamped-metal machine gun towards the soft fabric case of the double bass. “You could get a lot of cigarettes into that. Pull your vehicle over to the inspection area.”

Floyd slipped the old Mathis back into gear and crunched it forward, steering into a bay where the guards performed more detailed searches. To one side was a striped wooden cabin where the guards amused themselves with cards and cheap pornography. A low stone wall overlooked a narrow pebbled quay. An empty chair stood by the wall, next to a large trestle table covered with a cloth.

“Say as little as possible,” Floyd said to Custine.

As the guard with the machine gun returned to his post, another from the inspection area knocked on the roof of the car. “Bring it out. Place it on the table.”

Floyd and Custine worked the case from the rear of the Mathis. It was cumbersome rather than heavy, and had already accumulated enough scuffs and scratches that a few more wouldn’t matter.

“You want me to open it?” Custine asked.

“Of course,” the second guard said. “And remove the instrument, please.”

Custine did as he was told, setting the double bass down gently. There was just enough room for it on the table next to the empty case. “There,” he said. “You’re welcome to examine the case if you think I have the ingenuity to hide something in it other than the instrument.”

“It’s not the case I’m concerned about,” the guard said. He motioned to one of his colleagues, who was sitting on a folding chair next to the striped cabin. The man put down his newspaper and picked up a wooden toolkit—an inspector of some kind, clearly. “I’ve seen these two before,” the guard continued. “They’re back and forth across the river like it’s going out of fashion. Makes you wonder, doesn’t it?”

The inspector narrowed his eyes at Custine. “I know this one,” he said. “Used to be a policeman didn’t you? Some big cheese at Central Headquarters?”

“I felt a change of career would do me good.”

Floyd took a fresh toothpick from his shirt pocket, inserted into his mouth and bit down. The sharp end dug into his mouth, drawing blood.

“Quite a comedown, isn’t it, from high-profile police work to this?” the inspector persisted, setting his toolkit down.

“If you say so,” Custine replied.

The inspector picked up the double bass, shaking it with a look of deep concentration on his face before returning it to the table. “Nothing rattling around,” he said, reaching for his toolkit. “Still, they might have taped something to the inside. We’ll have to take this boy apart.”

Floyd saw Custine draw in a sharp breath and place his hands protectively on the double bass. “You can’t take it apart,” Custine said incredulously. “It’s an instrument. It doesn’t *come* apart.”

“In my experience,” the inspector said, “everything comes apart in the end.”

“Easy,” Floyd said. “Let them have it. It’s just a piece of wood.”

“Listen to your friend,” the guard suggested. “He talks good sense, especially for an American.”

“Take your hands from the instrument, please,” the inspector said.

Custine wasn’t going to do it. Floyd couldn’t blame him, not really. The double bass was the most expensive item Floyd owned, including the Mathis Emyquatre. Short of another investigation dropping into their laps, it was also about the only thing standing between them and penury.

“Let go,” Floyd mouthed. “Not worth it.”

The inspector and Custine began to struggle over the instrument. Drawn by the commotion, the guard with the machine gun who had stopped them originally left his post and began to saunter over to the action. The double bass was now off the table and the two men were yanking it backwards and forwards violently.

The guard with the gun slipped off its safety catch. The struggle intensified, Floyd fearing that the double bass was about to snap in two as the men wrestled with it. Then Custine’s opponent gained the upper hand and pulled the instrument out of Custine’s grasp. For a moment, the inspector froze, and then in a single fluid movement threw the double bass over the low wall on the other side of the examination table. Time dragged: it seemed an eternity before Floyd heard the awful splintering as the double bass hit the cobbled dock below. Custine sagged back into the chair next to the examination table.

Floyd spat out his toothpick, grinding it underfoot like a spent cigarette. He walked slowly to the wall and peered down to inspect the damage. It was ten, twelve metres to the cobbled quay. The bass’s neck was broken in two, the body smashed into myriad jagged pieces radiating away from the point of impact.

A scuffing of booted feet drew Floyd’s attention to his right. The second guard was on his way down to the quay, descending a stone staircase jutting out from the wall. Hearing a moaning sound to his left, Floyd glanced over to see Custine looking over the parapet. His eyes were wide and white as eggs, his pupils shrunken to shocked dots. Eventually his moaning formed into coherent sounds.

“No. No. No.”

“It’s done,” Floyd said. “And the sooner we get out of here, the better off we’ll be.”

“You destroyed history!” Custine shouted at the inspector. “That was Soudieux’s double bass! Django Reinhardt touched that wood!”

Floyd clamped a hand over his friend’s mouth. “He’s just a bit emotional,” he explained. “You’ll have to excuse him. He’s been under a lot of pressure lately, due to some personal difficulties. He apologises unreservedly for the way he has behaved. Don’t you, André?”

Custine said nothing. He just trembled, still fixated on the wreckage of the double bass. He wanted to reverse time, Floyd thought. He wanted to *unhappen* the last few minutes of his life and let them spool forward again. He would be obliging this time, answering the guards’ questions civilly, and perhaps the damage that they would inevitably do to the double bass would not be irreparable.

“Say it,” Floyd whispered.

“I apologise,” Custine said.

“Unreservedly.”

“I apologise unreservedly.”

The inspector looked at him critically, then shrugged. “What’s done is done. In future you might take a leaf from your friend’s book.”

“I’ll do that,” Custine said numbly.

Down below, the guard kicked the remains of the double bass into the river. The bits of wood were soon lost amidst the oozing debris that hugged the banks.

Floyd’s telephone was ringing when he let himself into his office on the third floor of an old building on rue du Dragon. He put down the mail he had just collected from his pigeonhole and snatched the receiver from its cradle.

“Floyd Investigations,” he said, raising his voice above the rumbling passage of a train and pulling the toothpick from his mouth. “How may—”

“Monsieur Floyd? Where have you been?” The voice—it sounded as if it belonged to an elderly man—was curious rather than complaining. “I’ve been calling all afternoon and was about to give up.”

“I’m sorry,” Floyd said. “I’ve been out on investigative work.”

“You might consider investing in a receptionist,” the man said. “Or, failing that, an answering machine. I gather they are very popular with the Orthodox Jews.”

“Receptionists?”

“Answering machines. They employ magnetic tapes. I saw a model for sale in rue des Rosiers only last week.”

“What a fascinating scientific world we live in.” Floyd pulled out his chair and lowered himself into it. “Might I ask—”

“I’m sorry. I should have introduced myself. My name is Blanchard. I am calling from the thirteenth arrondissement. It’s possible that I have a case for you.”

“Go ahead,” Floyd said, half-convinced that he must be dreaming. After everything that had happened lately—Greta walking out, the lack of work, the incident at the checkpoint—a case was the one thing he hadn’t dared hope for.

“I should warn you that it is a serious matter. I do not believe it will be a quick or simple investigation.”

“That’s...not a major problem.” Floyd poured brandy into a waiting shot glass. “What kind of case are we talking about, monsieur?” Mentally, he flipped through the possibilities. Cheating spouses was always a lucrative line of work. Sometimes they had to be tailed for weeks on end. The same went for missing cats.

“It’s murder,” Blanchard said.

Floyd allowed himself a bittersweet sip of the brandy. He felt his spirits plummet just as quickly as they’d risen. “That’s a real shame. We can’t take on a murder case.”

“No?”

“Homicide’s a job for the boys in the bowler hats. The boys from the Quai. They won’t let me touch that kind of work.”

“Ah, but that is precisely the point. The police do not consider the incident to have been murder or ‘homicide’ as you call it.”

“They don’t?”

“They say that it may have been suicide or misadventure, but in either case they are not interested. You know how it is these days—they are far more interested in pursuing their own investigations.”

“I think I get your drift.” An old habit already had him taking notes: *Blanchard, 13th arr., poss. homicide*. It might amount to nothing, but if the conversation was interrupted, he would do his best to contact the caller again. He scribbled the date next to his note and realised that it was six weeks since he had last made an entry on the pad. “Supposing the police *are* wrong, what makes you think it wasn’t suicide or an accident?”

“Because I knew the young lady involved.”

“And you don’t think she was the type who might kill herself?”

“That I can’t say. All I do know is that she did not care for heights—she told me so herself—and yet she fell from a fifth-floor balcony.”

Floyd closed his eyes, wincing. He thought of the smashed double bass, splintered on the cobble. He hated fallers. He hated the idea of fallers, suicidal or otherwise. He sipped the brandy, willing the drink to blast away the image in his mind.

“Where’s the body now?” he asked.

“Dead and buried—cremated, as it happens—as per her wishes. She died three weeks ago, on September the twentieth. There was a post-mortem, I gather, but nothing suspicious came to light.”

“Well, then.” Mentally, Floyd was already preparing to cross out his line of notes, convinced the case was a nonstarter. “Maybe she was sleepwalking. Or maybe she was upset about something. Or maybe the railings on the balcony were loose. Did the police speak to the landlord?”

“They did. As it happens, I was her landlord. I assure you, the railings were perfectly secure.”

It’s nothing, Floyd told himself. It might be worth a day or two of investigative time, but all that would end up doing was reaching the same conclusion as the police. It was better than no case at all, but it was not going to solve Floyd’s deeper financial malaise.

He put down the fountain pen and picked up a letter knife instead. He slit open the first of several envelopes he had collected from his pigeonhole and spilled out a demand from *his* landlord.

“Monsieur Floyd—are you still there?”

“Just thinking,” Floyd said. “It seems to me that it’d be difficult ever to rule out an accident. And without evidence of foul play, there’s not much I can add to the official verdict.”

“Evidence of foul play, Monsieur Floyd, is precisely what I have. Of course, the unimaginative idiots at the Quai didn’t want to know. I expect rather better of you.”

Floyd wadded the rent demand into a ball and flicked it into his wastepaper basket. “Can you tell me about this evidence?”

“In person, yes. I would ask that you visit my apartment. Tonight. Does your schedule permit that?”

“I should be able to slot you in.” Floyd took down Blanchard’s address and telephone number and agreed a time with the landlord. “Just one thing, monsieur. I can understand the Quai not being interested in the woman’s case. But why have you called me?”

“Are you implying that it was a mistake?”

“No, not at all. It’s just that most of my cases come through personal recommendation. I don’t get much work through people finding my name in the telephone book.”

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