River Secret

By Anne Swardson

She took one tiny step toward me. Another—then hesitated. Her mother leaned down and murmured a few words in her ear. Reassured, the girl toddled forward more confidently, then, halfway to where I was playing, stopped again.

She wore a white wool coat that reached almost to her knees. A few strands of curly brown hair escaped from the fur around her hood, which had been carefully tied at the neck. By her sleek-haired mother, probably. Those dimpled hands were too little to tie anything.

Fortunately for me, they could hold a two-euro coin.

The child looked at her mother again. It was time to reel her in. I ended "Sous le Ciel de Paris" a verse early—kids never went for the melancholy material—and put the accordion down on its stand with a click. The girl turned her eyes back to me. I transitioned into 2/4 rhythm with the foot pedal on the bass drum. Picking up the trombone, I launched into the "Bayrische Polka," keeping the oompah with the drum, adding a cymbal stroke to each downbeat with my other foot, and bobbing forward each time the slide came out with a wailing *mwaa-mwaa*.

A big smile appeared on the little girl's face. She walked confidently to the beret lying

upside down on the bricks in front of me and dropped in the coin. I grinned too and gave her another duck, almost a half bow, with a forward slide of the trombone. The girl looked amused, then beckoned her mother to come as she held out her hand for another coin.

"Maman!"

A few more spectators peeled off from the stream of Paris tourists who were coming down the steps of the Solférino footbridge, over the Seine, on their way to the Tuileries Garden. They joined the gaggle of Americans in tracksuits around me and my drums, horns, and stands, attracted by the polka lilt and by the exquisite little girl standing before me.

My location, at the entrance to the underground passage between the bridge over the Seine and the stairs up to the gardens, was the best in the business. When I blew a long note on the trumpet, the tones reverberated off the rounded tunnel ceiling. The cymbals were sharper, the drums crisper because of those acoustics. The river's flowing water gave a sense of space and openness. And with my back to the passage wall, I could spot the oncoming Italians in high-heeled sandals, the rotund British, and the tall Dutch wearing backpacks and then adjust the musical selection accordingly.

Still, each day I needed something special to get an audience going, something to lure a real crowd around me. I needed that more than most, since I never sang, only played. The more people, the more likely I could pass the hat at the end of a set. It was always more lucrative than just waiting for the coins to drop in one by one.

If I was lucky, that moment had arrived.

But Maman wasn't about to chip in another coin. She was distracted by a squat woman wearing a kerchief over her hair. In her grimy fingers, the woman held out a dull gold-looking ring as she sidled closer to her target.

"*Mais, madame, see voo play, madame, madame*…" The woman didn't pronounce the words properly. Half her teeth were missing. Even though it was March, she was wearing only sandals, without socks, along with a moth-eaten sweater and a long skirt with faded yellow flowers.

"Leave us alone, you disgusting thing! We're just trying to enjoy the music!" Maman held up a forbidding hand as the beggar took a step closer, waving the ring and laying a sidelong glance in the direction of the lady's Hermès handbag.

The mother tossed her head, cinched the tie of her cashmere coat, put one hand firmly around the clasp of her purse, and held out the other to her daughter. "Come, Marie-Christine. Let's go watch the boys sail the boats in the basin." The little girl ran to her, and without another look at me, they were gone, up the steps and into the gardens. I tried to save the day by playing "Hello, Dolly," replete with more slides and bass thumps, but it didn't help. The crowd melted away. There was silence.

Only the kerchiefed woman was left standing there. She looked at me like a whipped dog, her head down, barely meeting my eyes. I stared angrily. I didn't speak, because I never did. I didn't cross my arms or shake my finger at her, as I had sometimes done before. But she knew she had driven away my clientele, and she knew I was angry. It was one of our agreements. She'd do her job, and I'd do mine.

She twisted her hands in her skirt and sighed.

"I'm sorry, Baptiste. I thought I could help. Top us up a little."

Why I had decided to extend a hand to Tatiana I will never know. I had everything I wanted: a city license to play my one-man setup in a rainproof location that sucked in half the tourists in Paris; enough money to pay for my tiny studio in the Eighteenth Arrondissement and

the frozen dinners I bought each night at the Picard store. There was enough to send back to my family in the South too, back when I used to do that. Back when I talked to them. Back when I talked. Before my memory told me I should speak no longer.

I nodded firmly toward the gardens and she knew what I meant: Leave my customers alone. If people pay you for those stupid rings, they won't pay me for my music. And they certainly won't put money in my beret if they find their wallets missing.

She shuffled off slowly, cowering as she went. I turned back to my instruments, my anger passing. She needed the money more than I did, and every coin she picked in the park reduced the number I felt compelled to slip her at the end of the day.

Maybe I shared with Tatiana because no one else would. Gypsies are human rats, I'd heard the policemen say after they'd chased the beggars, pickpockets, and scamsters from the gardens. Send them back where they came from. Don't touch them; they're dirty. Even American tourists, the most gullible of all the nationalities that walked by me each day, eyed the rings the Gypsies proffered with suspicion, then turned their backs and patted their wallets.

So Tatiana got a few coins from me each day, coupled with a warning that if she ever stole from me she'd never see another centime. She understood everything from my face, my gestures. I'd give her a shake of the head when I wanted her elsewhere, a tilt when a potential mark walked by. I'd bring her the odd bit of *poulet rôti* from my previous night's dinner, a thin blanket when I had bought a new one.

What Tatiana mostly got from me was something no one else gave her: an ear. As I packed up each night, she'd come by and tell me in broken French about her life: growing up in a camp outside Plovdiv, making her way with others of her kind in a series of ragtag caravans from Bulgaria, across Hungary, over the Austrian Alps, then here. Camping, stealing, camping. Along

the way there had been a man, and a child or two. She didn't know where they were now.

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I saw the little girl again not long after that. It was warmer, but she still wore the white coat. She was with her mother, and so was a handsome black-haired young man—younger than the woman. His arm was wrapped around the waist of his companion. His eyes were on the woman's face, his hand was atop the little girl's head, stroking her hair.

I wasted no time in pulling out the trombone and starting up the polka.

"Maman!"

The girl pointed to me and made an excited little jump. The Mother—what else could I call her?—reached for her purse, but the man pushed her hand away. Fishing in his pocket, he pulled out a pink ten-euro note and inserted it in the little girl's fist. He took her other hand in a firm grip, plastered a big smile on his face, and started walking with her across the paving stones toward my waiting beret. I kept up the beat. Tatiana, happily, was nowhere to be seen.

The child lost enthusiasm with each step. The farther she got from her mother, the more her feet dragged behind, the more she tried to turn back. Her face twisted into a pout. The beret was forgotten. The man kept the smile fixed in place and continued forward, pulling on her hand, trying to ignore her reluctance. The tourists were nudging each other and pointing.

The conflict ended when the girl stopped moving her feet entirely and collapsed on the ground, wailing. The man bent over her, ostentatiously trying to pick her up and get her pointed toward me, wrapping his arms around her chest and lifting. But she pulled away, dropped the money and darted toward the Mother. When she got there she buried her face in the cashmere

coat. The woman made a gesture of resignation and picked up the sobbing girl, draping her over her shoulder as the man picked up the bill and rejoined them. They walked up the steps, side by side, the ten-euro note still in the man's hand. I had warned Tatiana away from the Mother, but I wished she were nearby now so that I could nod my head toward that prey.

She came to my stand late that day, as I was breaking down the equipment. Business had been good, she said. Yes, it had. My pockets dragged with change, from yellow fifty-centime pieces to two-euro coins. I even had a few bills. As we sometimes did, we dragged my drum case and horn bags around the corner and sat on one of the concrete benches overlooking the Seine.

We often ended the day like that when the weather was good and the cops didn't chase us away. The setting sun shone pinkly on the cream-colored stone buildings across the river: the Beaux Arts rail-station structure of the Musée d'Orsay; next to it the squat headquarters of the Légion d'honneur. To the left, upriver, we looked at the towers of Notre-Dame; to the right, the glass-paned cavernous roof of the Grand Palais, French flag flying atop.

The river itself was a sight to see. At this time of year, the Seine was fed by runoff from the mountains. A deep and viscous brown, the water was almost level with the cobbled walkway along the banks. The current slurped against the bridge's pilings and pushed against the prows of the Bateaux Mouches as they slid up and down the waterway with their cargoes of tourists.

"Look at this," Tatiana said, lifting her skirt and taking her earnings out of a pocket sewn inside. "There was a guy waving a ten-euro bill around, and when he put it in his pocket, he left a corner hanging out. He never even saw me."

I clapped her on the back.

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The Mother, the man—I'd named him Romeo—and the little girl came by on their way to the gardens often in the month that followed. They, at least child and her mother, probably lived in the Seventh Arrondissement, on the other side of the footbridge, in one of those apartment buildings with ten-foot ceilings. People in those apartments wore cashmere coats and dressed their little girls in clothing from Tartine et Chocolat, the fancy children's store on the Boulevard Saint-Germain.

Romeo must have learned his lesson, because he never again tried to bring the girl to the beret. She did let him hold her hand across the bridge, the Mother alongside. Then she always walked up to me alone. I'd play the polka and do my bobbing routine. It got to be a game: She'd smile at me, and I'd respond with a couple of little dance steps and a trombone wail. More steps toward me and I'd twirl around. The girl would laugh and put a coin in. I felt like laughing myself, for the first time in years. Unlike my older fans, who seemed almost ashamed to be giving money to a beggar, albeit a musical one, the child looked straight into my face. Her expression, a kind of puckery smile with a flash of her blue eyes, made me imagine that she knew how much those coins meant to me.

On a gray day in April, I was just finishing a set with "La Vie en Rose" when I saw that the child was there, standing a bit in front of the usual bunch of tourists. Next to her was Romeo. No sign of the Mother. His hair was slicked back from his forehead in an expensive cut. I had my audience with me; they had clapped to the theme from *Can-Can* and laughed when I swayed during the refrain of "I Love Paris." I'd lose them if I played the polka. Instead I just winked at the child, and she smiled at me. She seemed unperturbed that her mother wasn't there. One hand held onto the hand of the man, who looked down at her as if he couldn't believe he'd won her

over. The other fiddled with a heart-shaped locket that hung around her neck from a chain, one I'd never seen before and that I could tell was gold.

The girl gave me a bill this time, another ten-euro note from Romeo, and then they walked into the gardens and up the stairs. As they moved out of view, the man picked her up and whispered something in her ear.

The money flowed in that day. No sooner had one group left after a set than another would form around me, sometimes even before I'd started playing again. By late afternoon, I must have had forty people watching. I treated them to a jazz improv on the trombone, with only the cymbal tracking. I didn't try that often, but the crowd was with me.

Suddenly, sirens wailed from the gardens. A voice thundered from the public-address system; I couldn't make out the words. The *pah-paw* of police cars and fire trucks could be heard in the distance, then on the road above the tunnel. Two uniformed cops raced in from the bridge and rushed up the tunnel stairs, taking them two at a time as the tourists gawked. Just after they entered, the great grilled gates, the ones that closed the park off from the bridge each evening, began sliding shut.

The tourists scattered in confusion. I could still hear noise from the gardens, but it was a muffled rumble. I was locked outside. This was not convenient: I'd have to drag my stuff along the quay and around the west side of the Tuileries to get to the Métro if I couldn't cross the park. Where was Tatiana? I had never before seen the gates close early. I began packing up.

There was a rat-a-tat, and one more set of racing footsteps sounded from the bridge. I turned and saw that they weren't made by a late cop. The Mother, her face streaked with tears, coat hanging open, lipstick smeared, a cell phone in one hand, ran across the cobblestones in high heels and threw herself against the barred gate.

“My baby! My baby!” It was more a howl than a scream, a noise like no sound I had ever heard. “Let me in!” She hung on the bars as if without them she would melt to the ground.

Two uniformed policemen trotted down the stairs on the other side of the gate and came toward her. I could hear more shouts; someone was ordering that the gates be opened. The cops reached out through the grill and touched her hands. And I could hear some of the words they said to her:

“So terribly sorry.”

“He says he only looked away for a second.”

“We will find the villain who did this, Madame.”

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Music was the only thing that ever filled me up inside. Even before the memories from my childhood came back and stopped my voice, even before the stairs and the tunnel and the broad river became my only horizons, nothing but music touched the hollow core inside me. That’s why I learned so many instruments. Each one—not just my one-man band ensemble, but the violin, the piano, the plaintive oboe—gave me a different facet of what others get from normal life. When I played, I felt complete.

But on this day, the day after the child, the day after the Mother stopped being a mother, I was just blowing air and whacking drums. The voice my instruments gave me was an ugly, blaring thing.

I had gone back to the bridge to work. What else was there to do? I played the most melancholy of my Édith Piaf repertoire. No polkas. I didn’t even touch the trombone. It seemed

unfair that the park was open as usual, and that the beret filled up, even though I wasn't twirling, or bobbing, or smiling. How could those tourists be unaware that my music was crying, not singing? But I couldn't leave, couldn't go away from the last place where I had seen her.

Around midday, a hard thin man with steel-gray hair stepped up to where I was playing. He wore an impeccably pressed navy suit, with a tiny yellow square of silk handkerchief poking from the jacket pocket. With him were a chubby sergeant in uniform and a thuggish lieutenant in a leather jacket. The small crowd around me dissipated as soon as he approached.

"I am Commander Bassin," the suited man said. "Are you acquainted with a Tatiana Plevneliev?" He pronounced the name as if his lips had never had to speak such horrible syllables before.

I had assumed the police would question me about the child. But why were they asking about Tatiana?

He got a nod of a head. It was tempting to deny our acquaintance, but the park cops had seen us together too many times.

"How does she make her living?"

I held out my hand, palm upward.

Bassin raised an eyebrow. The sergeant murmured something in his ear.

"They say you don't speak."

I shook my head.

"Are you physically incapable of speech, or do you choose not to?"

I shrugged.

"I have to tell you, Monsieur…Baptiste, this is a very serious matter."

I put my arm to my side, palm out flat.

“Yes, it’s about the child. Did you ever see her with Madame Plevneliev?”

Enthusiastic shake no. It was true. There was nothing in children’s pockets to pick. Tatiana would have focused only on Romeo.

“When did you last see her?”

When was it? Had she come by yesterday morning? I shrugged and jerked my thumb over my shoulder in an a-while-ago gesture.

“Monsieur Baptiste, I have to tell you, you must search your memory. We know she was in the park yesterday. We want to know if she came this way.”

Bassin was standing motionless, looking straight at me as the sergeant took notes. I wondered what you wrote down if the person being interrogated doesn’t speak.

Raising both hands, I shook my head again. Yesterday was filled with the child. I had no recollection of anything else. All I could see in my mind’s eye was the white-coated figure in the arms of the man as he carried her into the park.

“Have you ever seen the Gypsy with children?”

Children? My heart turned cold. I could see where he was heading, and it was very bad. No, I hadn’t. I tried to shake my head as definitively as I could.

But I had a question. I clasped one hand in the other, one elbow high, the other low, then made a gesture straight back from my forehead. Bassin looked puzzled for a second, then the sergeant whispered again.

“It’s not something you need to know,” Bassin told me. “But yes, Monsieur de Marigny says he saw her near the child.” That wasn’t quite what I was asking. But it sounded like the police had found Monsieur Romeo de Marigny to be a very helpful witness.

Bassin left without a look behind him, his entourage trailing along.

It was another two days before a park cop told me what had happened. The child had been strangled, and her body had been found in one of the service closets dug into the high walls enclosing the Tuileries. Romeo had alerted the park police that she had vanished when his attention was briefly distracted by a Gypsy. The girl's gold locket was gone. And when the cops searched every Gypsy in the park, which was of course the first thing they did, they found the necklace. In the pocket that Tatiana had sewn into the inside of her skirt. Which Tatiana was wearing.

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I didn't visit her in prison, even though I was sure she was innocent. Like anyone who makes a living on the streets of Paris, Gypsies lied, scammed, cheated, robbed, maybe even roughed people up a bit. I had known dozens during my years by the river. They didn't kill.

But even had I been able to tear myself off the tracks that marked my life—home, river, home—to make the one-hour trip to her holding center in Fontainebleau, there was nothing I could have done. Tatiana had no more chance of escaping this charge than she did of growing new teeth. No anti-discrimination group would speak up for her. No well-meaning citizen would collect signatures on a petition for her. No politician would stand up in the parliament building across the river and rail against the false charges. When Tatiana told her questioners about finding the necklace on one of the park's pathways, even she probably knew they wouldn't believe her.

I could imagine her in her pretrial appearances before the judges, looking nowhere but at the floor, twisting her skirt in her hands. Had they given her clean clothes to wear? Did she try to

speak? Did her lawyer even make an effort? The front pages of crumpled newspapers that the wind blew up on the embankment showed her photo more days than not, climbing into a police van, surrounded by hard-faced policewomen who seemed to be shoving a little too hard.

Until one day the front-page photo was of only her face, and the article said she had died.

A brain aneurysm in the middle of the night. The authorities said she had gotten the best of care and the case was now closed. I put the newspaper into the yellow recycling can on the other side of the tunnel and turned and walked back to my stand and took the trumpet and played something or other for the rest of the day.

It wasn't long after that that I saw the Mother—the Woman now, I guess. She was standing on the bridge, looking east toward Notre-Dame. She was alone, and silent, and thin. Spring had come and gone; it was July. The sun glittered on the river; it was one of those rare days when the water looked almost blue. The faint chatter of the tourists wafted down to me from the bridge. She paid no attention.

I picked up the trombone and began the "Bayrische Polka," looking straight up at her in the distance, ignoring the crowd of camera-pointing Chinese and sounding the notes as loud as I could. At first, it seemed as if the music didn't reach her. Then she turned her head toward me slowly and stared motionless for a long time. It was not until the last chorus that she lifted her hand slowly and gave me a gentle wave.

Romeo turned up too a week or so after that. I didn't see him at first. He was hanging back behind the crowd a bit, as if he was trying to stay out of sight. As I played, I could feel, rather than see, him circling around behind the watching tourists, coming to rest behind a family of what must have been Americans. A smile was forming on his lips. They had two children, an elementary-age boy and a smaller girl. She had blond curly hair and looked like she might have

been in kindergarten.

That was enough.

Right in the middle of "Les rues de Paris," I put down the trumpet and rose from my stool. I walked through the ranks of astonished tourists, parting them with my hands and breaking through the back of the crowd. I stood in front of him.

He tried to push by me, but I moved sideways and he stopped, the river on his other side.

I opened my mouth. Breathed in. Made a little cough, breathed again.

"M…M…Monsieur." My voice rasped. "I…I have some information that I think you need to hear about the little g-girl in the white coat."

If I had had any doubt, his face dispelled it.

"I don't know what you mean."

The tourists were staring at us as intently as if I were playing my trombone from the bell end. I said nothing. Stared at him. He shifted on his feet.

"The suspect died in prison."

I lowered my voice. "Monsieur, I think it would be better if you heard what I have to say. Better that I tell it to you than…"

"All right, what do you want?" No smile now. His arms were folded, his head cocked, but his body was rigid with tension.

"Return tonight, at midnight. I will be here."

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He came not across the bridge but from the quay, skulking past the long line of moored houseboats, one behind another, the tables and flowerpots on their decks ghostly in the moonlight. I stood with my back to my instruments.

"I've seen men like you before," I said. "I know what you did."

"Is it money you want?"

"I want to know the truth."

"Truth? I don't know what that is. I loved her. Maybe a little too much, is that what you're asking? I only wanted to touch her for a second. Nothing bad. But if she'd told her mother… Anyway, what will it take for you not to squeal?"

He put his hand into the pocket of the loose jacket he was wearing. As he looked down, I made my move, even before I saw that he was pulling out a knife, not money.

And if someday a body surfaces far downriver from where I still ply my trade, or if they drag the river for some poor drowned child or missing teenager and turn up the corpse of a man instead, I hope they notice that the victim is not just another casualty of the muddy waters.

I hope they see that on the left side of his head, just above his ear, is a deep, slanted indentation made with such force that it sliced, rather than cracked, his skull. A wound struck with the force of love, and pain, and decades of pent-up silence.

I hope whoever finds him will know what went into that blow.

And every day now, the tourists who gather around and see me play and bow and bob can witness the other consequence of that force. My polka renditions are a little tinny, a little off-key. The music just doesn't sound the same now that the bell end of my trombone is bent so badly.

But the notes that come out are still haunting.

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He’s a one-man band adored by tourists visiting Paris. But he never speaks—until tragedy strikes a child who danced to his tunes and a friend is unjustly accused. Then he finds his voice.