

## A BOOT WALKS INTO A STORY

### *how it began*



A few months ago, somewhere in Paris, a boot-on-the-move slipped uninvited into my camera.

I came across the image one evening back at our flat. I was sipping wine, sore feet at rest on the coffee table. Himself was reading the newspaper, feet next to mine, malt whiskey at hand. I was scrolling through the smart phone camera, deleting, saving. Sip, save, delete. Delete delete delete. Really now, how many Seine river barge photos does a person need? How many corner cafés laying claim to Hemingway or Kiki?

But wait. I sat up, put my wine glass down.

Did you take this photo of a boot? I asked, pushing the camera at him over the top of his paper. Nope, he replies without looking.

How intriguing, I muttered, leaning back as he continued reading.

What strange intimacy was this? A boot, on its way somewhere. Me and a captured boot, out together on the streets of Paris, parting finally in one random flash of light.

To whom was the foot in the boot attached? Why was one high stepping stranger suspended, ghost-like, in the upper corner of a camera frame on my smart phone?

Possibilities stir.

*episode one*

*Paris my city  
is wounded  
arteries are blocked  
the heart  
hurts*

So much has happened.

No doubt it's a while since you wondered about that photo, the one of a boot-on-the-move that showed up on your camera. Perhaps by now, the story of how it got there will be of no significance.

Still, I should tell you



We're pretty sure, Genevieve and I, that this is my boot. Me in it.

It was only last week that Genevieve noticed the photo on twitter. Someone had tweeted it with a quote from your popular Paris blog. It had been retweeted. And retweeted. And retweeted. And so on. Check for yourself. Hashtag #whosebootwalks.

Cast your mind back. November 2012. Sundays at Café Odessa? The bustle of Edgar Quinet? Often we'd be seated next you, elbow to elbow facing the square, pretending to ignore each other. You'd be scribbling notes, fingers walking over maps, smartphone camera clicking at absolutely nothing. As far I could tell.

There was that one Sunday:

Genevieve and I are sharing our usual wine and charcuterie. Our smoke floats your way, annoying you. You cough pointedly, and quip to your greybeard man. 'ah of course, the smoke, the wine, the charcuterie'. You are shake your head. 'All that fat. Fat meat, thin people. Why?'

Genevieve and I laugh out loud, startling us all out of our assumptions about language. You smile, look away quickly. Your phone drops to the sidewalk. Genevieve points.

Merci, you say with a nod, and lean over to pick it up.

That was the moment.

I stand up to leave, I step out onto the sidewalk. I hear the click.

So there you have it.

My boot walks into your story.

.....

And now, a year later, everything has changed. As you can imagine, we're reluctant these days to linger at our favourite cafés.

At least we've begun to venture out again; mostly we're on the move. Always alert.

Today we're walking, me in my boots, to Place de la Republique, where everyone is gathering.

It's surprising to all of us who gathered around Genevieve, that she is willing to return to the Eleventh so soon, to find herself that close to the Bataclan.

"Of course I'm going", she insists, "I'm leaving my shoes next to the Pope's."

And so we will go.

On the way, we'll stop for a coffee at the fountain. I expect you've been there. Fontaine Stravinsky. A place of magic!

Magic. Genevieve's longing. This will be the third day she's walked to the fountain. She likes to sit on the edge of the pool, facing her fantastical sculptures. She sips her coffee slowly, in silence.

I worry when G goes quiet like this. Of course she's been seeing a counsellor. They all do, I mean those closest to the attacks: the bloodied, the loved ones of the dead and the wounded, the first responders.

It was too close. G was too close. We all were. Are.

Yesterday, she looked up at her beloved Firebird, her 'l'oiseau de feu', and whispered... 'phoenix rising'. She says that a lot. It sounds hopeful don't you think?

Later today, I'll take a picture at Place de la Republique, and send it to you. I would like you to see Genevieve's shoes, my boots (one right boot that walked into your camera). They will be as close as possible to the Pope's.

Good company I'd say, as together we search for the magic to save our planet.

**episode two**

*When the Firebird  
sings  
pearls drop to earth  
from its beak.*



Progress. We're already here at Fontaine Stravinsky.

People are milling about restlessly, turning their faces, as we do, to the unexpected warmth of the sun.

"I need coffee," I announce to Genevieve once we're settled with our back packs at the edge of the pool.

She nods her head, up and down, up and down, in time to a complex of gears that turn one of the sculptures on the surface of the water.

"Café crème? Espresso?" I lean closer to G to get her attention, but she's lost to the mechanical motion, captivated by one giant disembodied mouth, the movement of grotesque ruby lips.

'*L'Amour*'? I follow her line of vision to the lips.

We laugh, enjoying an irony we've always assumed was intended by the sculptor.

For a moment I watch the red lips tilt back, then forward, sending out sexless spurts of water, tantalizing the observer, again and again, with a parodic icon of love.



I walk away in the direction of the café, holding on to an uneasy tension in the shifting fantasy around me.

I glance back at Genevieve.

She is so achingly unfamiliar, standing there in her grief.

At least today, I reassure myself as I wait in line, our fountain is a festival of magic, at its best as a jazzy, provocative, total Stravinsky composition. All its swooshes and splashes, its ingenious rotations of form and colour, its brilliantly prosaic machinery, offer the purest celebration, a dance for the composer, his dance for us.

Today all feeling seems heightened, and in this strange harmony, in this uneasy joy, life seems to rise refreshed, up from a pool of humanity's deadliest contradictions.

Through the café window, I watch the Firebird turning slowly, its colours startling in the sunlight, its noble limbs, its golden sunburst head, spraying high.

In legend, a Firebird's wings, with flaming feathers of silver and gold, light up the land in the night. The Firebird holds the ancient power to cast spells, to destroy the oppressor, to liberate the oppressed, to release the captive feminine in us all.

I wait, lingering while I stir too much sugar into our cafés crèmes; I listen in on the couple behind me, they joke about Ste. Genevieve, patron saint of Paris, how she must surely be tempted to drop in on us from heaven, and save our city once again.

Not a bad idea, I quip over my shoulder, and we laugh together as I head back outside.

I make my way slowly to our spot at the far end of the fountain. In my mind, I hold an image of Ste. Genevieve, returning to earth, like a pearl from the Firebird's song.



I must remind G of her namesake, how in ancient times, Ste Genevieve had led a marathon of prayer, turning Atilla's Huns away from the outskirts of the city, inspiring the citizens of Paris to pray, rather than flee the city in fear.

The Genevieve I'm approaching at this moment is no saint, much to her mother's regret.

Sometimes, at our Friday night gatherings at the bistro after work, G will regale us with tales of her mother's latest lament about a daughter who bears so little resemblance to her divine namesake. Usually the lament has to do with one of Genevieve's lovers, the latest of whom may well be sitting beside her, smiling wickedly into his beer.

Now, as I approach our spot, I look around wondering where she's got to. I see she's moved to the corner of the pool. She has her back to me. She is talking to some strange man.

Why are they laughing?

### episode three

*forever spiralling  
forever denied  
the reach of heaven*



That Snake.

Up and up and up it swirls, That Snake, forever spiralling, forever denied the reach of heaven.

That Snake is no killer, I say aloud to no one as I edge along the pool toward Genevieve.

That is not the once Imagined Snake slipping through ancient grasses, the one poised to speak its warning to mankind, or even (more likely to my mind), some recent snake poised to sink venomous fangs into tiny fingers.

Nor is it the Real Snake, that monstrous slug of a serpent, the one that lay in wait one warm afternoon on a family's ill-advised trip to Africa.

This now cheerful snake would elicit no mother's fear, no shriek while fleeing with one child dangling under each arm.

What shall we make of our legendary myth maker now, what of its fearsome rise through exotic chakras, its sacred transformations from creator to destroyer; what of its biblical trickery, the serpent tempter specializing in apples and fig leaves.

I reach the corner of the pool at the moment Genevieve steps away from the stranger. She is laughing, but nervously, watching him intently.



He is raising both arms to shoulder height. He holds steady in the stance of a shooter taking aim, his white hair falling over one eye, his head cocked to the side. The other eye lines up the sights on his phantom rifle. His forefinger curls around a trigger.



“BOOM!” His voice resonates, soft and loud at the same time.

Genevieve jumps.

Passersby turn in alarm.

“That’s not very funny at a time like this,” one of them grimaces in alarm as she walks by.

I nod.

Genevieve and her stranger huddle together. He turns the pages of a magazine, his fingers brushing hers as he points.

I move closer. I glimpse the cover of a catalogue: ‘Niki de Saint-Phalle, Série des Tirs’.

“Killing her own art...”? Genevieve smiles faintly as she reads the quote. “Not quite the joyous expression I’d expect of her.”

“No. But as an artist and a woman, Niki knew exactly what she was doing.”



“Which was?”

“Which was,” he hesitates, “ which was releasing her rage against a father who violated her. Freeing herself of the fury.”

“So. This collage,” she points, ‘Death of the Patriarch’.

“Yes.”

“Death of her father.”

“Yes her father. Many fathers. Abusive patriarchal power.”

“That’s a real rifle? It shot some sort of paint ball?”

“No, bullets. Live ammunition. She was a good shot. This was high drama. Performance. She took aim, striking precisely at pouches of paint, red, yellow, green, blue, that she’d hung behind the plastered sculptures.”

“...colours explode...bleed out onto to this torso...”

“Exactly. She was thought by critics to be in an inspired state of...”

“...insanity.”

“Perhaps.”

“Well look, here’s this bleeding, shot up torso, these brutal tools of war embedded in a body...a female torso,” Genevieve studies the illustration more closely, “...and see here, and here, the tanks, guns, invading...and a war plane...raping. She’s insane, our beautiful artist with a rifle.”

“Our beautiful artist with a rifle. Well that’s the point isn’t it.” The man waits, his eyes on Genevieve’s face. “I spent long hours standing guard at the Tir exhibition; I read the catalogue cover to cover. As I walked around the gallery, keeping watch over Niki’s art, I began to feel it personally, to feel her need ‘to kill’—to use her words—‘without hurting anyone’. Arising from of the death of her art, she insisted, there would be birth. A new creation. And here it is: a death, and a birth, at the same time, just as she said.”

“A death and a birth.” Genevieve’s eyes are suddenly brimming with tears. “At the same time.” She turns away from the man and looks out over the fountain.

“Firebird,” she whispers to the magnificent bird as it sends its festive blessings cascading out into the pool. “Phoenix rising.”

Genevieve doesn't see his gentle smile as he closes the catalogue and presses it into her hands, but she follows his figure as he walks away. She doesn't move until he has disappeared through a side door of the Pompidou.

At last, she turns to me, reaches for her coffee from my hand.

“Who was that?” I ask.

Genevieve sips slowly without replying.

“So?” I repeat.

“I don’t know his name. He works in security over there.” She points toward the Pompidou. “He was just sitting here you know, he was on a coffee break.”

“Fine, so why the tears?”

“Because.”

“Come on G!”

“Because as soon as he saw me he went to his office to find this catalogue. Because we recognized each other immediately.”

“From where?”

“The Bataclan.”

I wait. Genevieve hugs the catalogue to her chest.

“I’ve told you about him.” She wipes her eyes with the back of a hand.

“He shielded me from the gunman. He’s the one who got me out of there.”

*epilogue*

*they offer to the future  
their boots their shoes  
their longings  
the sad hopeful  
pieces of their hearts*

Light fades from the square at Place de la Republique. The day has turned damp and grey.



They lean into each other, the two friends, they gaze out over an expansive mosaic of shoes, sandals, boots.

In the powerful absence of thousands, they speak softly.

What a confusing day for a saint, one observes with a wistful reverence.

The other one smiles. What prayer could Ste Genevieve possibly offer up today?

To which divinity?

For which invader?

Which victim.

In the drizzly evening light, they turn away, and join the dwindling lineup in front of a pastry wagon at the edge of the square.

Soon they are comforted by the warm aroma of coffee, by the first bite into freshly baked palmiers dripping with chocolate.

They eat in silence on the long walk home.

Delicate buttery crumbs float to the sidewalk.

*(Paris, 2016)*