

# What Goes Around, or My Suitcase Fiasco in Spain

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“moi aussi, j’etais stupide”

Anonymous

## I

A philosophical friend of mine likes to invoke the optimistic slogan that “the universe bends toward justice.” My skeptical reaction is that if we listen to the news or look at the historical record, it certainly does not appear that way. Quite the contrary: many of history’s greatest malefactors, with the biggest victim counts, seem to get off mostly scot-free. Didn’t Stalin, Franco, and Chairman Mao die in bed, surrounded by doctors and doting sycophants? As for Hitler, the Jack the Ripper of twentieth-century war and genocide, didn’t he put an end to himself in his bunker in Berlin before the Allies could get their hands on him and make him the chief exhibit of the Nuremberg war crime trials? But perhaps justice only applies to lesser mortals, like Richard Nixon, forced out of the White House in ignominy in the wake of the Watergate scandal, and Bill Clinton, having to deal with the humiliation of his affair with a White House intern broadcast across the nation and around the world in all its tawdry details. His infamous entanglement with Monica Lewinsky

will no doubt remain as a stain on his place in American history. And then there's the current forked- and twisted-tongue occupant of the White House, who blithely took the country to war on empty xenophobic rhetoric and patent lies boldly proclaimed to the world (those fictional WMDs). Surely Nixon's and Clinton's offenses are minor when compared with those of President George W. Bush, under whose watch and authority suspected enemy prisoners have been tortured and sexually humiliated, and whose administration has, with the Patriot Act, been actively undermining the Constitution that presidents are sworn to uphold when they take the oath of office.

Still, we want to believe that there is some principle of justice at work in our lives and in our world, something that is part of the nature of things, a constitutive feature of the way the universe is at its core. Something that rights wrongs, or at least exacts punishment and demands penance or regret or compensation. A balancing principle or equation. An eye for an eye, or a yin for a yang. We are all born with an innate sense of justice, I think, that makes us wish for or want to believe in such a cosmic moral principle or element. Popular wisdom is often a digest of abiding truths, and the saying cited in the title of this essay points to one of these: there is a moral equilibrium by which wrongs will be righted and wrongdoers will be punished in the here and now, forced to suffer their own abuse or mistreatment of others. *What goes around comes around.*

And sometimes it really does, although perhaps only in relatively minor matters. The big evildoers are apparently, and for whatever reason, mostly immune to it, as I've said, but the rest of us, ordinary humans—and all too human—may occasionally encounter it in different ways and differing contexts in our lives. I've certainly experienced it in mine, and will cite one striking, albeit rather absurd, version of my having to pay a poetically just price for having wronged someone in an act of youthful hubris and ill temper. My moral comeuppance—the *comes around* element—occurred on a ferry to the island of Majorca for a misdeed I had committed on a night train from Madrid to Barcelona in the summer of 1971. My punishment took the Dantesque form of ascending a seemingly endless spiral staircase in a very hot and confined space. It was what I like to think of now as my Hauling the Suitcases from Hell punishment.

## II

My wife, Elsje, and I took an extended European vacation that summer—she from her job at the Harvard Health Center, where she worked for the last three years of my career as a graduate student at the same university—and I from settling down to write my doctoral dissertation on a nineteenth-century English poet, the final rite of passage I was going to tackle after the end of our trip and en route to a Ph.D.—which I was awarded in May 1972 when, as it turns out, the academic job market in my field had pretty much collapsed. But there was no shadowy hint of that when with a joyful sense of sunbright liberation we winged off to Paris from Logan Airport in Boston early that summer in what looked like a brand new Boeing 747, the weeks stretching ahead of us redolent with the promise of eternal youth, leisure, adventure, and discovery. Once in Europe, our magic carpet was a Eurail pass that allowed unlimited first-class travel in Western Europe, whisking us through France, Spain, Austria, Germany, Holland, and Italy. I relished the luxury, ease, and exclusiveness of the first-class compartments, especially on the night trains if we had the space to ourselves (as we did on occasion), and could actually stretch out and sleep—or watch the lights of town and country silently flash by. On one such night journey, we were rudely broken in upon by a middle-aged Swiss couple with a small boy, whose presence forced us to sit up and endure the bright lights of the compartment that we had shut off. Only much later, toward dawn, when a conductor stopped in to check tickets, did it turn out that the brash intruders were not entitled to be in the compartment because they in fact did not have first-class tickets. But after the conductor left, they stayed on with perfect effrontery. During the night, they had conversed sporadically in French, assuming that their young American fellow passengers could not understand their language. Because I resented their nocturnal intrusion, I did not speak to them, but could not help overhearing some of their conversation. At one point we became its focus, as they boldly speculated that we were an unmarried couple and had been having sex in the compartment. The wife also commented on the pimples on my face. I saved my revenge until morning, when we had to get off the train (I think it was in Basel) to connect to another express train to Austria. As I left the compartment, I said something in good French to the young boy, and was delighted to see his mother's obvious embarrassment in her

realization that I knew the language and had thus understood their derogatory comments about us.

For a change of pace from the exhilarating but exhausting round of touring Paris, Amsterdam, Vienna, Rome, and Madrid, we had decided on a week-long stay on the fabled vacation island of Majorca as the relaxing high point of our extended trip. And so it was, with a charming hotel room in Palma looking out at the bay, and our own private little breakfast patio: all this for something like seven dollars a day. The hotel's outdoor swimming pool was charming as well, with a swim-up bar where drinks were to be had for the equivalent of twenty-five cents. What was not so charming was the water of the bay, a broad expanse not blue or green but an alarming gray, the effluvium of waste and pollution from the city and tourist hotels spreading far out into the Mediterranean like an epic stain. Because we decided that going for a swim at the beaches in Palma would be a serious health hazard, we ended up renting a motor scooter and driving on dangerously winding roads above the sea to a secluded beach that we found about twenty kilometers out of town that had pristine water and sand, and not too many bathers, to boot. Managing the serpentine turns winding through the steep hills on the blue Vespa was a serious challenge, what with buses and trucks to watch out for, and with the occasional remains of wrecked scooters littering the slopes below to remind us we were risking life and limb. At one point I failed to negotiate one of the sharp turns and ended up on the opposite side of the road, feeling both shaken and lucky for not having crashed into oncoming truck traffic. If I was shaken, my wife seated behind me was probably terrified and livid all at once. Ah, men's driving. . . . On that same motor scooter we also made a day trip to the other side of the island, to a picturesque fishing village with a long lunch of the best *paella* and *sangria* I've ever had.

Before our stay in Majorca, we had spent several days in Madrid, where Elsje, who had begun classical guitar lessons in Cambridge, bought a beautiful instrument in the Ramirez shop renowned among cognoscenti for the fine craftsmanship of its handmade guitars. She finally settled for one that sold for around a hundred and fifty dollars, though she also looked at a top-of-the-line model, which was four hundred and some and clearly beyond our financial reach. My wife was allowed to handle that exquisite beauty, but when I wanted to and was asked if I could play it, and said no, I was not even allowed to put my hands on it. For the rest of our European trip, the Ramirez in its felt-lined and leather-bound

wooden case made a heavy addition to our two suitcases. More than three decades later, it sits in a basement closet in our house, with a crack in its neck, untunable.

The procedure for getting seats on the major European express trains was to make reservations ahead at the train station from which one was departing. This had been a relatively smooth process in other European cities, but in Madrid we discovered (luckily ahead of time) that getting such reservations would entail having to stand in line for a long time. Even though our train for Barcelona was not leaving until five or six p.m., we checked out of our breakfast pension (chosen from Arthur Frommer's *Europe on [I think by then it was] Ten Dollars a Day*) by noon and made our way to the crowded main train station, joining one of several long parallel lines to the ticket counters. It was a hot day, and of course there was no air conditioning, so by the time we got to the head of the line after four endless hours of standing, we were pretty well wilted and wasted. We jostled our weary way through the bustling station with our two suitcases and guitar and found the departure track for our waiting train, which we were happy to board in order to collapse with great relief into our reserved seats in what turned out to be a fully occupied first-class compartment. After all that standing and waiting, it was a real delight to sit in the plushly cushioned seats and to sense the express train's slowly gathering momentum as it rolled out of the station. As it picked up speed and left the city for the countryside, we began to settle in for a long night journey. My only regret was that we were not able to get window seats.

One of the passengers seated across from us was a smartly dressed, pleasant looking, middle-aged Spanish woman. I have a vague recollection of helping her heft her suitcase up on the overhead rack. As we sat, we exchanged friendly smiles, but did not venture into speech because of the language barrier. At some point early on after the train left the station, a pasty-faced Spanish man in a gray suit entered the compartment and tried to claim the Spanish lady's seat as his own. Even though I hardly knew any Spanish, I could make out that she said she had reserved the seat, and that he made the same claim. There was no conductor anywhere in sight to adjudicate the matter, so things were at an impasse, with her remaining seated, and he standing in the compartment with his suitcase at his side. The other passengers in the compartment, including us, played the role of silent observers, uncertain about what to do or how this little drama would play out. In any event, I had taken something of a proprietary interest in the Spanish lady and was convinced that

the pasty male was an interloper who was trying to force his way in when in fact he did not have a reservation. The impasse was broken when the man took down the lady's suitcase and put his in the overhead rack above her where I had put hers. At this point, my temper flared into a fit of righteous indignation, and I stood up, forcefully grabbed his suitcase from the rack, and literally threw it out of the compartment into the train corridor. When he went after it to retrieve it, I slammed the compartment door shut. Defeated in his efforts to claim a seat in our inner sanctum, he remained seated on his suitcase on the other side of the door the rest of the long night, looking sadly crestfallen. But I was not receptive to the pathos of his ignominious defeat, for justice had triumphed, and I had been its agent. I had tilted at windmills, or rather a pushy man's suitcase, with unqualified success. The interloper was banished from the compartment, relegated to the uncertain netherworld of a train corridor, inconvenienced by passengers going to the bathroom or the dining car, and by vendors with their carts. Serves him right, I thought, as I gloried in the glow of having come to the rescue of a damsel in distress.

At some point far into the night, a train conductor finally appeared to check tickets and reservations. It turned out that the Spanish lady did not have one for the seat she occupied, and that the hapless suitcase squatter in the corridor did. But for some reason beyond my comprehension, that little discovery changed nothing, for she stayed seated in the compartment, and he on his suitcase. So far from being the noble Spanish Don fighting injustice, I had been acting as the deluded and proverbial ugly American, rudely ejecting the legitimate placeholder, sticking my nose in where it didn't belong. I suppose what I should have done to make matters right is to get up and apologize to the Spanish man in the corridor and offer him my seat. Of course, I did nothing of the sort; indeed, I think I disliked him even more after the discovery of his legitimacy because of course we don't like people who show us up and put us in the wrong. I would have probably felt better if I could have thrown him and his suitcase off the train altogether, as opposed to having to behold the pathetic figure as the living if silent reminder of my thoughtless and deluded act of ill-tempered interference and crass injustice. If he became a rabid anti-American from that night on, I would be the last to blame him.

By the time we made our way from the Barcelona train station to the ferry dock the next morning, we were pretty sweaty and exhausted. I had splurged by purchasing a cabin as opposed to a deck

passage. As we walked onto the luxurious-looking ferry resplendent all in white, an attendant who checked our tickets asked whether we preferred to take our luggage with us to the cabin, or have it checked. Without much thought, I picked the latter option. In hindsight, this impulsive decision was a distinctly unwise one. The cabin, as we discovered, had a shower, a delightful prospect after the sweaty ordeal of the train station and the long night on the train. The only problem was that we now had no change of clothing. When I went up on deck to check out the ship, I heard that in an hour there would be a reception there with free snacks and drinks for the embarking passengers. Since we had not had time for breakfast in Barcelona, and since it was now almost noon, this prospect sounded downright Elysian. When I returned to our cabin and informed my wife of the impending happy hour, she reminded me that we were too ripe and travel worn to appear at the reception without a shower and change of clothes. Not wanting to miss out on the festivities, the only solution was for me to find an attendant and ask for our stowed suitcases to be retrieved.

As it turned out, this was easier said than done. Once I found an attendant and explained to him our dilemma, he said that after having checked our luggage, the staff could not now retrieve it: however, if I really wanted the suitcases, I could get them myself. The man's explanation seemed reasonable, and my fetching the luggage seemed the perfect solution. The attendant took me down deep into the hold of the ship to the luggage storage area, and I did not have too much trouble locating our two suitcases and guitar. I hadn't paid much attention to our descent into the bowels of the ship, but after the attendant left, I was on my own to make my way back up the spiral staircase. Only now, as I picked up the two suitcases and the guitar and started up the narrow metal staircase, did I notice how infernally hot and humid it was. I don't recall how many floors or levels I had to climb up, claustrophobically dragging my multiple burdens and negotiating the tight turns, but after a time it seemed an infinite and debilitating progress to nowhere. When I finally made it back to our cabin wet with sweat and feeling ripe, more dead than alive, I was desperate for a refreshing shower before proceeding to a well-deserved happy hour with a cool gin and tonic as the reward for my spiral tribulations. However, dragging the suitcases from the hold, taking a shower and putting on a fresh set of clothes must have taken longer than we thought, for by the time we were ready to make our way up on deck, eager to eat, drink, and mingle with the other passengers, we realized that the allotted time for the reception had

passed. We were now showered and freshly dressed, with no reception to go to. In the hindsight of many years, this disappointment seems trivial and frivolous, but at the time, after the infernal ordeal of the unending stairs, I experienced it with keen mortification and anger, like the weary pilgrim in the desert who discovers the oasis he had glimpsed in the distance is only a mirage when he gets closer to it, and instead of water in his hand, there was only sand. As my wife reminds me, that proverbial sand includes a fight between us to culminate a disastrous morning. No doubt brought on by my foul mood, I'd managed to forget or repress that part of our fiasco until reminded all these years later by my innocent partner in crime and punishment.

I don't recall exactly when the exquisite irony and poetic justice inherent in my Hauling the Suitcases from Hell ordeal finally hit home for me. Certainly not until years later. In an act of perfectly calibrated and near-divine justice, the thoughtless and self-righteous young man who had ejected the Spanish gentleman's suitcase from the train compartment in an angry fit was forced to drag his and his wife's up a Piranesian staircase, and, as a consequence, miss out on an eagerly anticipated reward. Less than twelve hours later, the abused, defeated, and dejected Spaniard had been granted not only his vindication, but his revenge. Only he didn't know about it: and now, as I write this, I wish that he did. This adventure of the suitcases is, objectively speaking, only a minor episode in my life, but it is one where a wrongdoing on my part was almost immediately punished by the demons or furies of random circumstance—and the punishment was richly deserved and entirely appropriate. I earned what I got that day, and my little experience in Spain more than three decades ago proves, though only in a very minor key, the truth of the cliché of my title.

### III

But I am also prompted to ask the philosophical friend I mentioned at the outset of this essay if, indeed, the universe does bend toward justice, and if minor if not insignificant infractions such as mine can find such immediate, appropriate, and deserved punishment, then what about all the Big Crimes that we read about in the newspapers and see on our television screens as our daily fare (such as terrorist bombs killing innocent victims by the score and acts of genocide connived at or ignored by complicit governments)? Who or what will punish their perpetrators, and what sort of perfectly



calibrated punishment do they deserve? We all wait for the universe to bend: we have waited for millennia, but rarely does it appear to do so, and then, as my little story may suggest, only in very small matters or minor ways—and only, it seems, by accident. The moral universe, like the physical, appears to be haphazard. Unless it somehow does bend after all, and on a proportional scale, but one that is invisible or indiscernible to us, locked into our unfeeling material world. And how would we truly ever know if and when it does bend, or if that's only a poetic conceit or wishful thinking?

I suppose the question I am asking rather teasingly is a matter of faith—or the lack of it. Here another image from that long-ago summer trip comes back to haunt me: two young and rather attractive Spanish nuns in their trim habits, sitting in the train compartment across from my wife and me (on another trans-European express that rocketed us to Madrid), who cross themselves in unison as the train pulls out of the station in the south of France. My wife and I look at each other, and then immediately look away from each other, because we have a hard time not cracking up. How rude that would have been! We had a hard time repressing our laughter, however, because somehow their crossing themselves in tandem and on cue seemed so delightfully comical. As I look back on that loaded memory, it takes on almost too many meanings to be explicable, but let me emphasize only two radically opposed ones. Part of what was amusing was that the founder of their religion is legendary for having ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey, but here were the nuns riding in a first-class train compartment, courtesy, I seem to think, of the Spanish government (still Franco's at the time). So their presence and gesture also said something about the Church in which I'd been raised as a historical and political institution complicit with the frequently corrupt or at least severely morally compromised institutional forces that govern our world, political and otherwise.

But the synchronized gesture of the charming duo also bespoke a touching innocence, a belief that a divine dispensation would protect and keep them from harm as they hurtled down the gleaming tracks. The simple and ancient ritual of the fresh-faced nuns signaled a goodness that was as plain as day. It also spoke of a faith I could no longer share, one that reminded me—and reminds me now—of that of my childhood and the wonder of First Communion—gleaming candle in my hand, resplendent in a new suit, attending to the miracle and mystery of the immaculate white host in the solemn priest's hand. Now a skeptical and (at least chronologically speaking) very seasoned adult who has nevertheless managed to hang on

to a number of childish traits, I have little faith that, in truly important matters of justice and equity, the principle “what goes around comes around” really obtains in this warped world or in any dispensations of divine or cosmic justice. And if I don’t cross myself any more, like those angelic young nuns, I still cross my fingers, and hope for The Best. But when I read the newspapers or watch the evening news these days, I sometimes can’t help but agree with what I heard a French commentator recently proclaim on the radio with a certain relish: “only two things are infinite as far as we know: the universe, and human stupidity. And we are not so sure about the universe.” My little suitcase fiasco in Spain in the summer of 1971 would seem to make for a good fit with the ironic spirit of this Voltairean witticism.