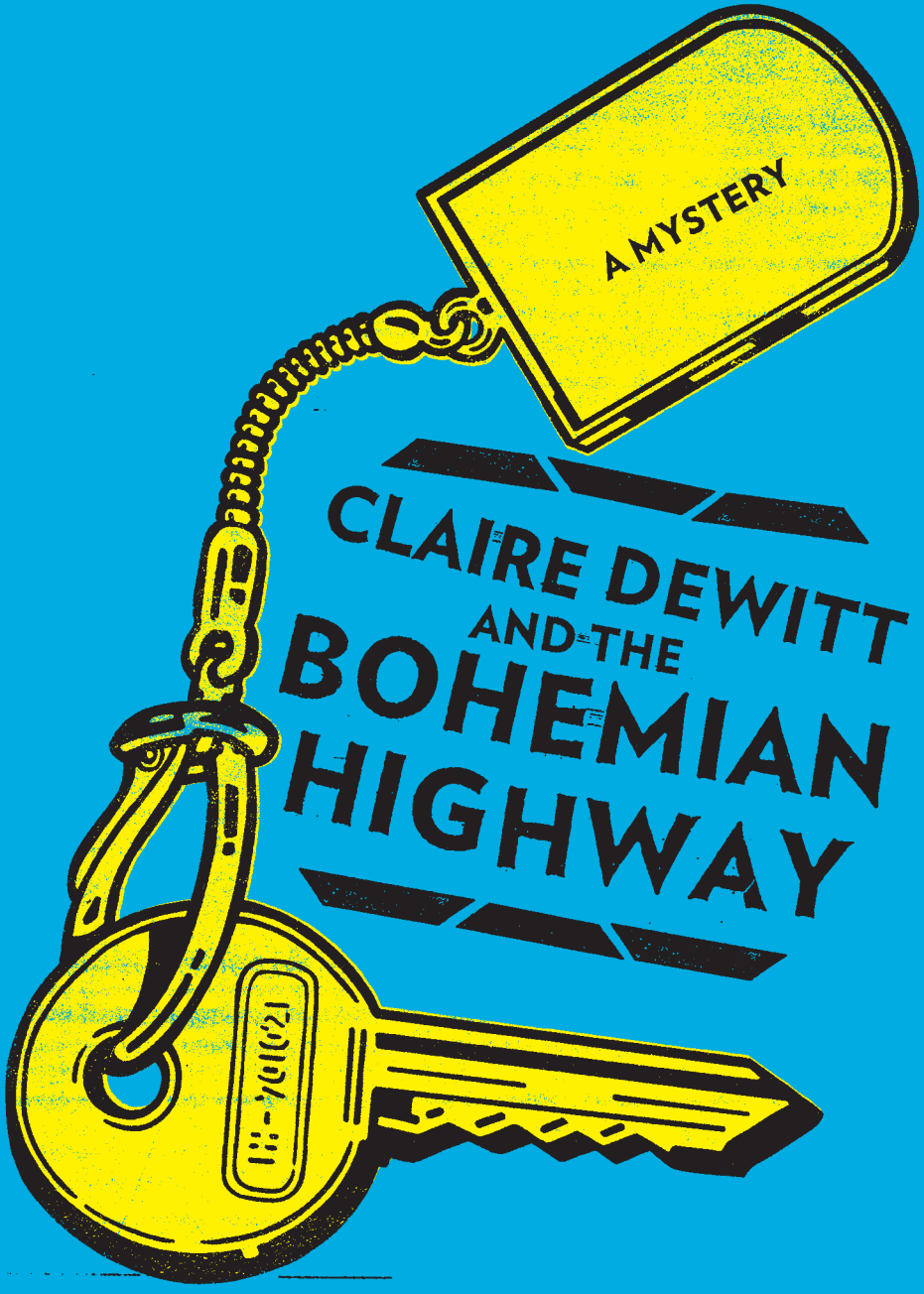
SARA GRAN



CLAIRE DEWITT AND THE BOHEMIAN HIGHWAY

MEET CLAIRE DEWITT,

THE WORLD'S GREATEST PI.

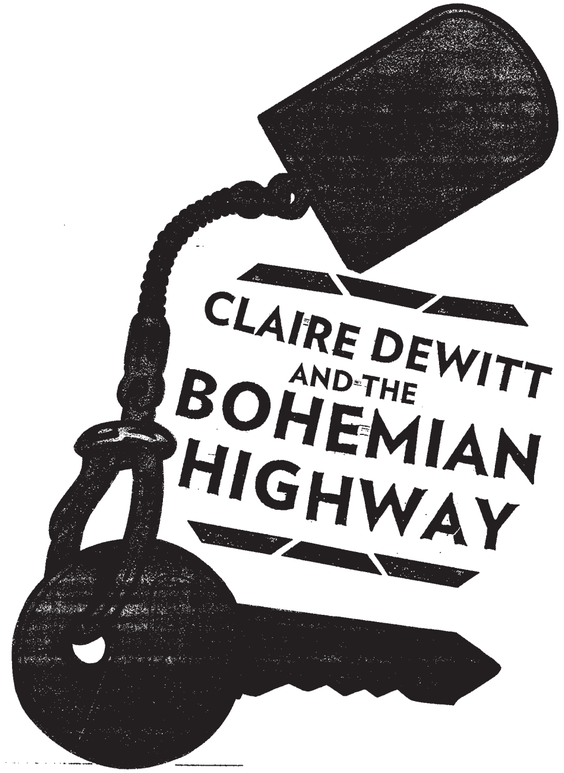
CLAIRE DEWITT AND THE BOHEMIAN HIGHWAY

A MYSTERY

SARA GRAN

HMH

SARA GRAN



W

SPOT GLOSS LAYER

CLAIRE DEWITT AND THE BOHEMIAN HIGHWAY

Sara Gran

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
BOSTON NEW YORK
2013

www.hmhbooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.
ISBN 978-0-547-42933-5

Book design by Brian Moore

Printed in the United States of America
DOC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

3

January 18, 2011

I'd spent the night in Oakland, in the redwood forests in the hills high above the city, talking with the Red Detective. He said he smelled change coming. For him, for me, for all of us. He pulled tarot cards, and no matter how many times we shuffled we got Death.

"I'm not sayin' it's anything more than a change," the Red Detective said. "I'm just sayin' it's gonna be one hell of a shakeup."

At two or three I drove back to my place in San Francisco and took off my clothes and crawled into bed in a T-shirt and underwear, twigs and leaves still in my hair.

At five o'clock the phone rang. I didn't plan on answering it, but my hands picked it up all the same.

"Claire?"

The voice on the other end was brusque and female and I didn't recognize it.

"Yeah," I said.

"Hey. It's Detective Huong from the SFPD."

I knew Madeline Huong. She was all right, as far as cops went. At least she tried. That was more than you could say about most people these days.

"What's up?" I asked. My mind was blank, still not quite awake.

"I've got bad news," she said. "I'm sorry to have to tell you. There's been a murder."

"Who?" I said. But then suddenly black flashed before my eyes and I knew.

"Paul Casablancas," we said at the same time.

"What?" she said. "What did you say?"

"Nothing," I said.

"Well, anyway, I'm sorry," Huong said again. "I saw your number in the wife's phone and I figured you'd. You know. Not everyone . . ."

She meant that I was accustomed to death, that I would know what to do and who to call and I wouldn't faint or cry.

She was right.

"Claire? Claire?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'm here."

"If you could come down to the scene. We're at his house. The wife, she could use someone."

"Lydia," I said. "Her name is Lydia. And yeah, I'll be there soon."

I hung up with Huong and called Claude. He'd been my assistant since I came back from the Case of the Green Parrot in New Orleans. I didn't need an assistant because my workload was so big. I needed an assistant because so much of it was boring. Looking up credit card statements, making phone calls, going to city hall to check the bill of sale on a house, following up on miniature horse feed distributors—I was tired of it.

Claude was the latest in a string of assistants I'd hired and then fired over the years. Or would have fired, if they hadn't quit first. Claude was a good worker, smart, loyal, and with an encyclopedic knowledge of Medieval economics, which came in handier than you might think.

On the night Paul died Claude picked up his phone on the fifth ring. He'd been sleeping.

"There's been a murder," I said.

"Okay," he said, unsure. "Is this how we do this now?" Usually we didn't get involved in a case until a bunch of other people had already had their hand in it and screwed up. No one called a private detective, especially not me, until every rational option had been explored and dismissed. Like an exorcist or a feng shui

consultant. I'd never called Claude in the middle of the night to start a new case before.

"I don't know," I said. "I think I just wanted to say that."

I didn't tell him the person who'd been murdered was Paul. That it was someone I knew.

"Do you want me to go somewhere?" Claude said. "Wait, I think I'm supposed to say, 'Meet you at the scene,' or 'I'll be there in five,' and then hang up. I don't think I can be there in five. But I could be there in like an hour."

I didn't say anything.

Paul was dead. Words didn't seem strong enough to hold that fact. Paul, who'd once made me an origami swan. Paul, who knew every Burmese restaurant in the Bay Area, who spent every Sunday at flea markets, buying speakers and tube testers and ohm meters.

I imagined the big flea market in Alameda, the tube testers sitting there, untouched, unbought, alone.

"No suspects," I said. "No known motive."

"Okay," Claude said. "So, uh. Can I do something to help? Or?"

"I don't think so," I said.

"Claire," Claude said. "Are you okay?"

"Of course," I said. "Listen, can you start a new file?"

"Sure," he said. "What are we calling it?"

"The Case of . . ."

I closed my eyes and saw something against my eyelids—a bird fluttering, fireworks exploding, a ghost. According to one school of thought we were in the Kali Yuga, a long stretch of time that might be as short as a hundred thousand years or as long as a million, depending on who you asked. In other yugas we have been, and will be, better-looking and kinder and taller and we won't kill each other all the time. The sky will be clear and the sun will shine. But in the Kali Yuga every virtue is engulfed in sin. All the good books are gone. Everyone marries the wrong person and no one is content with what they've got. The wise sell secrets and sadhus live in palaces. There's a demon named Kali; he loves slaughterhouses and gold. He likes to gamble and he likes to fuck things up.

In this yuga, we never know anything until it's too late, and the

people we love are the last people to tell us the truth. We're blind, stumbling toward what's real without eyes to see or ears to hear. Someday, in another yuga, we'll wake up and see what we have done and we'll cry a river of tears for our own stupid selves.

"Claire?" Claude said. "Claire, are you okay?"

"Of course," I said. "I'm fine. And it's the Case of the Kali Yuga."

When Claude walked into my apartment for the first time he looked like he had never had a good day in his life. He wore a jacket and shirt and clean blue jeans and real shoes, not sneakers. That told you something positive right there. He was thin and handsome—my guess was one parent with ancestors in Japan and another with history in Africa, with a few different coasts of Europe thrown in, and later I found out I was right.

I interviewed him.

"You're a student, right?"

"I'm getting my PhD," Claude said. "Medieval history."

"So let's say we're on a case," I said. "I call at five in the morning to bounce some ideas around. Is that going to pose a problem for you?"

"Absolutely not," Claude said, still not smiling. "I am an idea guy. Anytime. Always happy to bounce ideas around. Or, you know, do stuff. That's also good. I can do stuff."

He didn't sound so sure about doing stuff.

"Why are you getting a PhD?" I asked him. "And why do you want this job?"

He sighed.

"I thought that was what I wanted," he said. "I mean the PhD. Berkeley. I thought that was what I wanted since I was, like, fifteen. This is exactly it. And now I'm here, and—" He looked around the room and furrowed his brow. "I don't think it's what I want," he said. "I mean, I'm not giving it up. Not yet. I've put too much work into it. And I'm in a really, really good place right now professionally. Academically. But I don't think it's what I want." Claude threw his hands up in the air as if he were talking about someone else, someone crazy, a man he could not understand. "I think I want to be a detective," he said.

"A detective," I said. "Why?"

"I have no idea," Claude said. "Sometimes I think it's what I always wanted. It just seemed too . . . too—"

"Unprofitable?" I suggested.

"Yes," he said. "But also—"

"Dangerous?" I said.

"Maybe," he said. "But also just—"

He held out a hand to stop me when I opened my mouth.

"Just," he went on, "unrealistic. I mean, everyone wants to do it, right? I figured the competition must be just, you know, astronomical. And me with no experience, not even insurance investigations or anything. But when I heard you were looking for someone, I figured I might as well try. I knew the odds were slim. And I know you're probably interviewing people much more qualified than me. But, life is short. I figured—I mean—"

Claude frowned.

"In 2001," he said, and all of a sudden I knew he was telling the truth, and he had never said it out loud before. "I was doing research in the library at Stanford. And somehow I ended up in the criminology department—I think I was looking for penal codes in fifteenth-century Russia. And this book, this little paperback. It was like—I know this sounds stupid. But it was like it fell off the shelf right by my feet. And I picked it up and opened it and I read this line: 'Above all, the inner knowing of the detective trumps every piece of evidence, every clue, every rational assumption. If we do not put it first and foremost, always, there is no point in carrying on, in detection or in life.'"

The room was quiet. We were in my apartment in Chinatown. I had the top floor of a building on Ross Alley. Beneath me were three stories of light industry and immigrant housing, nearly all of it illegal. My place was big, close to fifteen hundred square feet, and served as both a home and an office. Or neither.

My best friend, Tracy, had found the same book in my parents' house when we were younger than seemed possible now. The book that would save our lives and ruin them.

Even the noise of the street outside was hushed as Claude talked about the moment he became Claude. Only he didn't know it then, and I could see he still didn't know it now.

"I don't know," he said. He sounded sad and maybe a little angry. "I don't even know what it means. It was like—like what everyone's always told me? Like the things they tell you to do, you know? All of that. I don't know how to say it. I mean, it's like coming down here, to Chinatown, and you see the signs but they're all in a different language, and it's just like your life but it's—like it's out of register, or in another time. Another yuga. Like, all my life, you know, you walk out of the house every day and turn right. And then one day you realize, left was always there too, only you never saw it, and instead of ending up in Berkeley, you're in Chinatown. Or China. Like that dream when you're in the house you grew up in and there's a secret room no one told you about, you know? And it was like everyone knew about it and no one told you. Like that. And all around you, still, no one sees it. It's like they don't even know it's there. Or they know, but they'd just rather not know at all. Like they just, you know, like insects. Like a hive. Does that make sense? Does that make any sense at all?"

"Yes," I said. "It does."

"So I checked the book out of the library," Claude continued, upset. "To be honest, I never gave it back. Which I guess is technically stealing, but. I mean, it hadn't been checked out since 1974. And ever since then—I know this sounds crazy—I wanted to be a detective."

I didn't say anything. Claude started to fidget and cough. Then he started to cry, little trickles of tears squeezing their way out of his eyes at first, stingy and cheap, then big sobs as something died inside him. Maybe it was his hope of being someone else. His hope of being a normal person with a nice life and a pretty girl and a good job. All that was over now, or would be soon. Good riddance to it.

We sat in my office for an hour or so and Claude cried and he was hired.

I never saw him cry again.

Jacques Silette's *Détection,* the book that found Claude in the sterile Stanford library, was a book that had ruined many lives, as it had ruined Claude's. And mine. For three years I'd lived in New

Orleans and studied with Silette's student, Constance Darling. Constance spent the better part of the fifties and sixties in France with Silette, learning everything he had to teach as they became friends and then lovers. He'd been a renowned detective, the best in Europe. But after he published *Détection*, he was written off as a crackpot. Almost no one understood the book, or admitted they did. Instead they pretended that he, Silette, was the crazy one while they, the other detectives of midcentury Europe and America, with their abysmal solve rates and idiotic pseudoscientific methods, were the clever ones. Silette had anticipated this, and from what I'd heard wasn't especially hurt by the reaction. I can't believe it didn't sting at least a little, though, when even his closest friends in the world of detectives stopped taking his calls. But over the years he developed a new set of friends and fans—few and far between, but devoted.

Jacques Silette was the best detective the world had ever seen. So I thought. His methods were unusual, but I and a few others were loyal to them. I'd never met Silette—he'd died in 1980, when I was still a child, heartbroken after his daughter, Belle, was kidnapped and never seen again. A few years later his wife, Marie, died from heartbreak. His genius was no defense against pain. It never is. His role as the best detective in the world did not protect him from also playing the role of the heartbroken, beaten-down sap left behind.

Constance was Silette's favorite and best student—also his lover, friend, and companion. Constance was one branch of the Silettian tree, and I was her fruit, but there were other branches too—other detectives who had studied with Silette and imagined a claim on his legacy. There was Hans Jacobson, who gave up detection for finance. Hans made fortune after fortune, and joyfully threw it all away on women, boats, art, and drugs. Now he lived under a bridge in Amsterdam. I'd met him and I was pretty sure he was the happiest man I'd ever met. Jeanette Foster became a good, if dull, detective specializing in corporate espionage. She'd died just last year in Perth. And there was Jay Gleason, who went on to develop a scam correspondence school in Las Vegas that advertised in the back of *Soldier of Fortune* and *Men's World* and *True Detective:* BE A DETECTIVE OR JUST LOOK LIKE ONE or something like that.

Jay was one of Silette's last students. He moved to France in 1975, just fifteen years old, to study with Silette. It was two years after Silette's daughter Belle had disappeared, since everything good had drained from his life. Supposedly, Jay showed up on Silette's doorstep one day. Without even a hello, messy blond hair in his pretty face, in dirty bell bottoms and a rock-and-roll T-shirt, Jay launched into his solution to the one-hundred-year-old Case of the Murdered Madam, a famous unsolved case in Paris that had done in better detectives than Jay. He was sure he was right and sure he would impress the old man. It was the ex-husband, Jay was certain. When he was done, Silette laughed, the first time he'd laughed since the last time he'd seen his daughter. Something in Jay—his earnestness, his intelligence, his faith in Silette—amused the older man.

"You're wrong," Silette said to the young American, having of course solved the case many years ago himself. "You did some good work. But you missed the most important clue of all."

"What was it?" Jay asked.

"Close your eyes," Silette said.

Jay did as he was told.

"What do you see?" Silette said.

Jay hesitated. He didn't know what the right answer was. More than anything, he had wanted to impress the old man.

"Blackness," Jay said. "I mean, nothing. I—"

"Shhh," Silette said. He put a hand on Jay's back to calm him. "Keep your eyes closed. What do you see? Not what do you want to see. Not what do you think I want you to see. Me or anyone else. Not that. Use your eyes. What do you see?"

No one knows what Jay saw. But, so the story goes, Jay saw something—something that made him shake and cry and, finally, eyes still closed, collapse on Silette's doorstep, ruined. Ruined and saved, the two sides of the Silettian coin.

"It was the son," Jay finally choked out. "It was the son. Oh, God. He killed his own mother. It was the son."

Silette smiled. That was the answer. Silette invited Jay in and let him stay.

Jay was from a wealthy northeastern family with branches in Newport and Long Island's gold coast, along the groves of the

Hudson River and in rich wooded corners of the Mid-Atlantic. He could have been anything he wanted, or, like most of his family, nothing. There's no shame in being idly rich—not among the other idle rich, at least. But Jay wanted to be a detective. And now he was peddling official PI certificates suitable for framing.

Some took this, these mixed outcomes, as proof that Silettian detection was a sham. There were only a few of us Silettians and we did get more than our share of negative attention. Our enemies said it was because we were strange and unreliable, theatrical in our methods, dramatic in our solutions.

I said it was because we solved so many fucking cases. And usually by the time a Silettian got his hands on a case, ten other detectives had already failed. Most cases never even got to a Silettian unless the client was desperate enough, the way a person with cancer goes to an herbal clinic in Tijuana when the doctors tell her she's got no chance.

"The detective's only responsibility," Jacques Silette said in an interview for *Le trimestrielle des détectives* in 1960, "is not to his client or to the public, but only to the awful, monstrous truth."

I knew someone who went to one of those clinics in Tijuana. Brain cancer. Stage four. Before she crossed the border the doctors told her she had six months, maybe nine. Maybe less.

When she came back they put her in one of those full-body scanners and took lots of blood and ran test after test after test.

Not one cell of cancer remained.