



The Case of the Shouting Suitcase

When desperate pleas for help suddenly emerged from inside a suitcase in Rome's Leonardo da Vinci Airport, panic ensued. What followed was a high-speed police chase after an Egyptian diplomatic car through the streets of Rome. Read the riveting yet amusing account of the Egyptian attempt to catch a traitorous double-agent and bring him to justice in Egypt.



- Asher Levine

The cold winds of early winter in the Italian capital offered little relief to the broadly-built worker in Rome's Leonardo da Vinci Airport. Mario Colelli sweated profusely as he went about his work, loading and unloading the heavy luggage of the thousands of passengers passing through the airport that day. He schmoozed with the other workers as they went about their back-breaking task, not even noticing the various suitcases and bags that all began to look the same after the first few days on the job.

It was November 18, 1964, and Colelli was working in the United Arab Airlines terminal that fateful day. The airport was brand new. It was Italy's largest and most beautiful, befitting an airport that bore the name of the legendary Renaissance artist.

Colelli barely glanced at the oversized



Leonardo da Vinci Airport in Rome.



A United Arab Airlines jet.

suitcase he was lugging as he carried on a conversation with a co-worker. Then, he heard strange sounds coming from inside the suitcase. The porter stopped and listened. It was definitely a human voice, weak but frantic, calling out desperately from inside the suitcase!

"*Aiutatemi! Salvatemi!*" (Help! Save me!) came the cries in Italian.

A chill ran up Colelli's spine as he instinctively dropped the rather heavy case. He looked at the suitcase now for the first time, wondering if some evil spirit was stowed inside. Then he noticed the large words printed on the sides: *Valisa Diplomatia* (Diplomatic Case). That meant that under international law this suitcase was subject to special protection and could not be searched by airport security. Further inspection turned up markings that identified the baggage as property of the Egyptian embassy in Rome that was being shipped to the Foreign Ministry in Cairo.

It quickly became clear that a live person was imprisoned inside the suitcase—not the sort of luggage this porter was used to carrying around the airport. Colelli called to his friend, "The Arabs have forced one of ours into this suitcase. Who knows what they're going to do to him in Cairo?!"

The worker bent over the suitcase trying to figure out how to open it, when at that moment, two tall Egyptian diplomats in expensive suits suddenly appeared. With forced smiles and honeyed voices, they attempted to smooth out the situation. "You have our suitcase. It contains some rare musical instruments that might make unusual sounds. Don't get nervous..." they said.

The Italian airport worker was completely unfazed. "Are you out of your minds?! You're kidding me. I heard a man screaming inside there!"

Before he could finish his sentence, the two men grabbed the suitcase and ran off with it. Colelli chased after them shouting,

"Murderers! There's someone in that suitcase!" But the Egyptians dashed out through a side door with their baggage and disappeared inside a waiting Volkswagen.

Colelli didn't lose his cool. He continued shouting at the top of his lungs, "There's a live person inside that suitcase! Help!"

Police and airport security officers came running to find out what was happening. Just then, another well-dressed Egyptian, presenting himself as a diplomat, appeared and calmly told the police, "We apologize for the unpleasant incident. This was a suitcase containing expensive accordions that started making noises when the suitcase was moved. Our personnel have removed it to prevent any further alarm."

But the Italian worker was adamant about the fact that he had heard a human voice and nobody was going to convince him otherwise. He grabbed one of the police officers, looked him in the eye, and said very emphatically, "Something terrible is happening to a man the Egyptians have captured and locked into a suitcase. Come with me!"

The officer called a few lieutenants to join him. They mounted their motorcycles and sped off in hot pursuit of the bizarre suitcase and its human cargo.

They Forced Me In Here

Traffic on the streets of Rome was heavy and thousands of motorists watched the desperate chase as the Volkswagen tried to speed away, veering between lanes and escaping down side roads. But the motorcycles' agility gave the police an unbeatable advantage. Relentlessly, they bore down on the escaping Egyptian car, riding between the car lanes, with their sirens wailing.

As they caught up to the Volkswagen, the officers pulled out their guns, and, aiming at the car windows, they yelled, "Come out

with your hands up!" The men inside had little choice. They reluctantly emerged from the car and stood obediently with their hands in the air.

The Rome police handcuffed the Egyptians and cordoned off the area as a crime scene while they waited for backup and detectives to arrive. Meanwhile, they removed the suitcase from the car as the cries and shouts continued ceaselessly from inside the suitcase.

When the police cars arrived, the arrestees were seated in one car while the mysterious suitcase was loaded into another. Two high-ranking officers bent over it, guns in hand, and carefully ripped open the thick contact paper that covered the entire piece of baggage. Next, they untied the rope and opened the buttons that fastened the case shut.

Everyone was shocked by what they saw as the suitcase was opened. Bent over inside



Police patrol the streets of Rome on horseback.