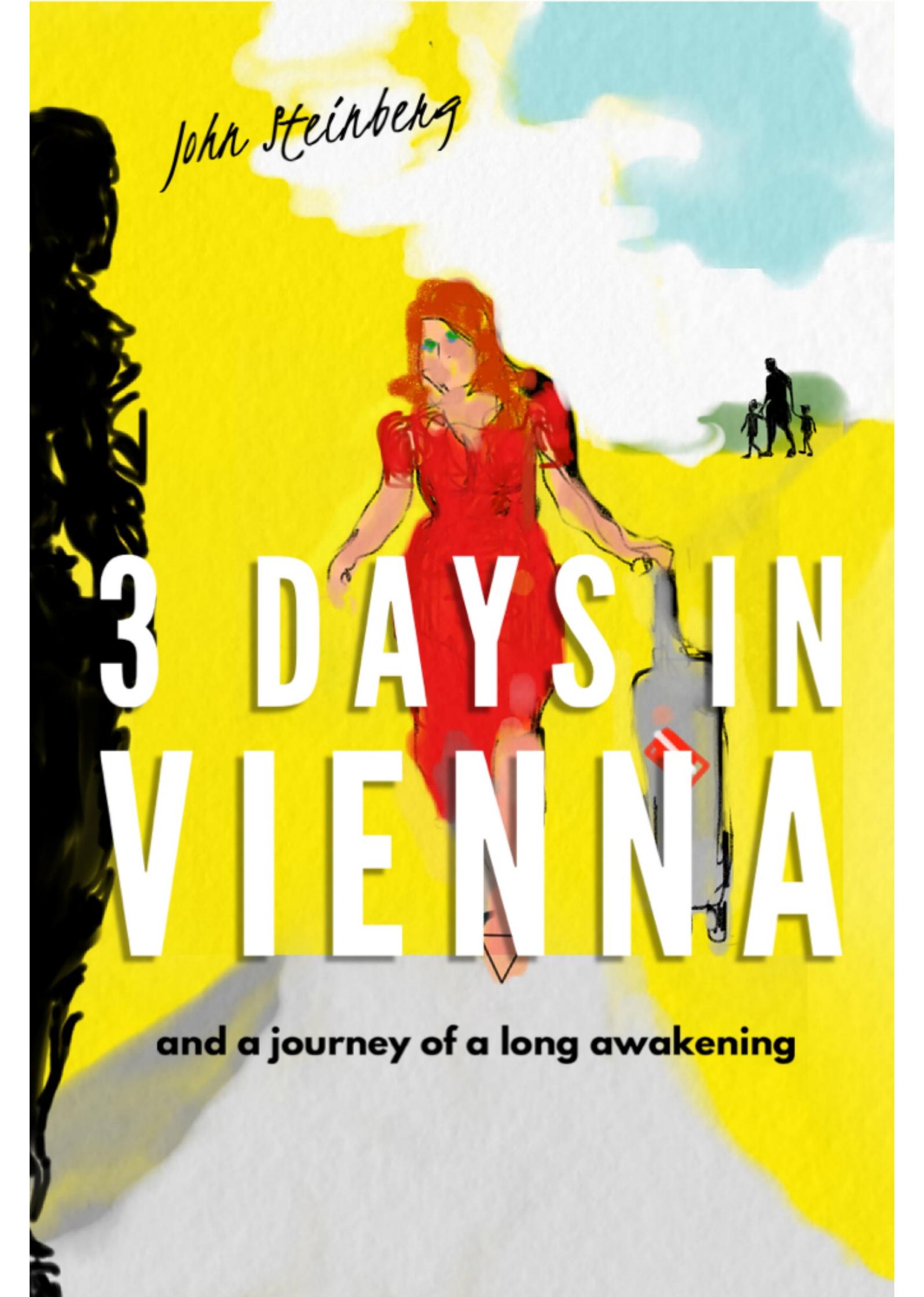


John Steinberg



3 DAYS IN VIENNA

and a journey of a long awakening

About the Author

John Steinberg spent many years in business before becoming a writer in 2007. Since then, he has co-written and produced comedies for the stage and created a series of books for children. *Three Days in Vienna* is his fifth novel.

By the same author

Shimon

Nadine

The Temple of Fortune

Blue Skies Over Berlin

Three Days in Vienna

THREE DAYS IN VIENNA

John Steinberg

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*In memory of Traute Morgenstern.
A special lady from Vienna.*

Central London, February 2000

The graceful Nash terraces of Regent's Park shimmered in the winter sunshine like bands of iced sugar on a wedding cake. It was a stunning sight, and one that never failed to lift her spirits, Elizabeth McCreary found, as she drove around the Outer Circle before parking her brand-new Range Rover in front of an exclusive block of flats.

Elizabeth had a ton of things she'd much rather be doing on that Saturday afternoon, but as sole beneficiary of Charlotte Brown's will, it was her responsibility to clear out the small flat that had been the woman's home for the last thirty years. Not, she knew, that the contents would add up to much. 'Aunt Charlotte', had been a woman of modest means, so the job shouldn't take too long. The one item of potential worth that Elizabeth knew about was the Monet painting, one of the Water Lilies series, that Charlotte had always cherished, despite it being no more than a very accomplished copy.

'Good morning, Dennis, how are you today?' Elizabeth enquired of the concierge on duty, who'd been around for as long as she could remember.

'Apart from me arthritis playing up, can't complain,' the

small man answered without looking up from his copy of the *Sun*. 'More o' them asylum seekers washed up on the beaches yesterday,' he mumbled, focusing on the double-page image. 'Not that they've got a hope in hell of finding work here, poor bastards.'

Tearing his eyes away, he looked up and said, 'Good Lord! For a minute there, I'd swear it was Rita Hayworth herself standing in front of me. It's the red hair and the way you hold yourself, love. Class, that's what does it.' He nodded to himself. Then: 'Haven't seen you in a while, young Elizabeth. Expect those kiddies are keeping you busy, eh?'

'They certainly are,' Elizabeth answered politely.

'Your mum is still away with her husband if that's who you've come to see,' Dennis said helpfully.

'Yes, I know,' Elizabeth replied, relieved that she would not have to call in at her mother Lillian's apartment, which was just along the corridor from Charlotte's. Elizabeth had never taken to Allen Paul, the brash American antiques shop owner who'd eventually won her mother over after a long courtship.

'Could I possibly have the keys to flat twenty-five?' she asked.

'That's the late Miss Brown's place if I'm not mistaken?' the concierge said nosily.

'Yes, but the property is in my name, if you recall,' Elizabeth reminded him.

'Course it is. Totally slipped my mind. Must be me age catching up on me. It only seems like yesterday that she moved in,' he sighed, retreating into the back office to unlock the key cupboard. 'That Miss Brown, nice lady,

never any trouble – unlike some of the other residents I could name,’ he grumbled, returning with a small bunch of keys.

‘I get a lot of enquiries for flats, you know,’ he went on. ‘I might be able to point you in the right direction if you’re interested in selling it?’ A sly look on his face indicated that he would expect to be compensated for his trouble.

‘Yes, of course,’ Elizabeth said, impatient to get started. ‘Thank you.’

Taking the lift to the first floor, she regretted that she hadn’t made more of an effort to spend time with Charlotte during her final weeks in the hospital. The truth was, the younger woman couldn’t bear to see someone she loved waste away from the cancer that had ravaged her so cruelly. She could still picture the willowy woman, dressed in black, cigarette-holder in her hand like someone out of a 1930s film, giving art lessons to her beloved students from her cramped second bedroom. ‘You hold the brush in this vay,’ she would say in that deep voice with the trace of an accent she had never quite managed to lose despite her many years in London. The fact that she had never found happiness in her personal life but had remained alone, always seemed so unfair.

When the inevitable happened, Elizabeth stepped in to make all the arrangements, for which her mother was grateful. Elizabeth’s lasting impression was not of the funeral itself, a quiet affair attended just by Charlotte’s adopted family and a few of her mature students, but of the sight of her own mother, stooped at the graveside saying goodbye to her dearest, closest friend. Lillian Paul had suddenly become a little old lady.

Without further delay, Elizabeth set about her task of sorting and packing, putting Post-it notes on the furniture and other items to be collected by the British Heart Foundation, and bagging up all the clothes and bedlinen to be disposed of elsewhere. By the end of the afternoon, she'd accomplished a lot, but there was still a great deal to do as she hadn't finished in the sitting room yet, let alone the bedroom or kitchen, and there were so many other jobs such as taking down the curtains. One trip simply wouldn't be enough.

Consumed with tiredness, she was just about to call it a day, when she noticed a small mahogany writing bureau that had so far escaped her attention. The key stood in the lock, so Elizabeth carefully opened it and started to sort through a pile of the deceased's personal correspondence.

A few minutes later, she was sitting in an armchair, clutching a small bundle of her aunt's intimate letters to a German doctor, her expression shocked. She was devastated. It was just so hard to believe that there could have been another side to the woman she thought she had known so well. If the contents of these letters were true, the affair with Dr Johann Weber had remained hidden for many years.

She must have lost all sense of time because it was almost 6 p.m. and already starting to get dark. Her teenage son Freddie would be back from football practice by now and Anthony's parents, who had come up from the country for the weekend, would be wondering where she was. Thoughts of her family and the prospect of a few glasses of burgundy over the dinner she had prepared this

morning and had yet to cook was just what she needed to make her pull herself together.

Elizabeth replaced the letters where she had found them and left the premises, determined to put the past few hours' experience out of her mind for the time being.

Arriving back at the house in Chalcot Square a mile away in Primrose Hill, the musty aroma of the vacant apartment still clinging to her, she felt something in the pocket of her sheepskin coat. It was Charlotte's bunch of keys which she had inadvertently kept, subconsciously knowing that she would have to return to the flat, and to the letters.

*

That evening, Elizabeth sat on the edge of the bed, her head full of contradictory thoughts. The evening had been a complete disaster. Until now, she had usually got on reasonably well with her in-laws, so her uncharacteristic outburst was something she ascribed to having drunk too much.

'What was all that about?' her husband's well-spoken voice enquired from behind the crime novel he'd been pretending to read.

'I never realised how narrow-minded they were until now,' Elizabeth said moodily.

'What, just because of my father's few disparaging remarks about that Pakistani chap, Mustafa? A bit of an overreaction on your part, wouldn't you say?'

'You always told me how good Mustafa was at his job,' Elizabeth retorted, turning to face the lean figure sprawled out on the king-size bed.

'True, but let's face it, he's hardly partner material.'

‘Because he doesn’t quite fit the mould, you mean?’

‘An established practice like McCreary’s does have to think of its reputation, you know,’ Anthony asserted, putting his book down to make his point.

‘One which doesn’t include anybody other than white Anglo-Saxon public-school boys, I suppose.’

‘And a few upper-class lasses besides,’ Anthony said straight-faced.

‘I’m surprised your family ever accepted me, a second-generation Austrian refugee!’ Elizabeth retaliated.

‘Nonsense. You’re practically as British as I am! And in any case, they adore you.’

‘Only because of the children,’ Elizabeth answered back.

‘So, what’s brought all this on? You’ve been acting really strangely since you got back this evening – cutting it very fine, I might add.’

‘I’m sorry, it’s just that I found going to Charlotte’s flat really traumatic.’ Elizabeth would have liked to share the experience with her husband of twenty years but knew she couldn’t. Even after all this time, there was still so much they were unable to communicate to each other.

‘I understand,’ Anthony said, reaching out to his wife.

Accepting the invitation, Elizabeth moved over to lie beside him.

‘Perhaps I didn’t behave particularly well,’ she sighed. ‘I’ll ring your mother when they get back from France and apologise, otherwise they’d have every right to reconsider letting us use the villa in Antibes again this summer.’

‘I shouldn’t worry. They’ll have forgotten all about it by then – and anyway, they’ll probably end up cancelling the trip. Dad’s political commitments are taking up most of

his time; he hardly comes into the office at all these days. And why they bother going to France in the first place is beyond me, as there's zero chance of my sister coming back to London. By the way, I forgot to mention that she phoned the other day.'

'That was a bit out of the blue. What was it about?' Elizabeth asked.

'Just to see how we all were, as well as the usual stuff about how she can't fathom how I could carry on working with our father.'

'I know that he and Jess have never got on.'

'That's an understatement. They've always fought like cat and dog – and sure enough, during the call she came up with that same old cock and bull story that she was sure Dad was up to no good.'

'You never told me that,' Elizabeth said.

'That's because it was hardly worth repeating.'

'It's a shame. She and I always got on really well.' Elizabeth jumped off the bed and stepped out of the black Armani dress that accentuated her shapely figure.

'I see – so you can relate to that alternative lifestyle and those funny vegan friends of hers, can you?' Anthony said, eyeing up his wife.

'I just think it's brilliant that she doesn't wish to conform,' Elizabeth said, getting into her side of the bed.

'She's lucky she can afford not to!' Anthony quipped.

'Jess will make a go of it; just you wait and see.'

'Do I detect a hint of envy?' he teased his wife.

'Don't be silly. You know I wouldn't change places with her – or anyone else for that matter,' Elizabeth protested a little too vehemently. Of course there were times when

she missed the adrenalin rush of her music publishing business, but when she eventually recovered and conceived again after going through a traumatic miscarriage, the decision to give up work became a lot easier.

She had actually met Jess McCreary first when Jess was a personal trainer at a gym Elizabeth frequented and living in a flat around the corner with Aisha, her Pakistani female partner.

Apart from helping her get into shape, the three of them quickly became friends. And then Jess introduced Elizabeth to her older brother Anthony. Jess had actually sold him to her friend, saying that behind his snobbish exterior lay an incredibly kind individual – and the fact that he was handsome, in a typically British, clean-cut sort of way, was an added bonus. Being the self-confessed black sheep, Jess had never fitted in to the McCreary family. It still seemed peculiar though, the way she had upped and left with Aisha for Paris without any warning, six months ago. Although they kept in contact, Elizabeth felt that she had lost a much-needed ally.

‘With all the money Dad’s happy to keep throwing at her, I do hope you’re right,’ Anthony said.

‘Strange, because I thought he had an aversion to strong-minded women,’ Elizabeth said.

‘That’s only the impression he likes to give.’

‘You mean he really likes to be challenged?’

‘Only by volatile females who always want – and get – their own way!’

‘Like your daughter, for instance?’ Elizabeth laughed.

‘Well, she *is* just like you,’ he said.

‘Emily’s more confident than I was at that age. Poor

Freddie hasn't got much of a chance, has he? She can't help it – she overshadows him.' Elizabeth paused before saying, 'It worries me that he keeps things inside. My mother's the same, you'd never know what she's thinking.'

'Perhaps it was wrong not to have considered boarding school; it would certainly have brought him out of his shell. Public school didn't do my family any harm.'

'Well, it did to me!' Elizabeth said forcefully. 'I wasn't going to subject the children to what I went through.'

'Ah yes, your misspent youth, sex, drugs and rock and roll. Must have been a lot more fun than serving in the Army Cadets. I can't tell you the mock salutes I got, walking down the street in that ridiculous khaki uniform that they forced us to wear at City of London junior school.'

'So much fun I nearly died,' Elizabeth snapped.

'Sorry, I didn't know anything about that,' Anthony replied sheepishly.

'You never did show any interest in the person I was before I met you,' Elizabeth griped, unsure why she had suddenly brought that subject up.

'OK, point taken, now come here and I'll show you that Dad's not the only one who finds strong-willed women a turn-on,' Anthony said with the smirk of an overgrown schoolboy who had come across a pornographic magazine for the first time.

Elizabeth knew then that he hadn't listened to a word she had said.