

Monday, 9th April 2012

“How come his trousers aren’t wet?”

“How come?”

“Given the smell.”

Sternberg made a show of twitching his nose.

“Come on, Franck. You’re telling me you can’t tell the difference between fresh and stale urine?”

“It’s not my field of expertise.”

“That’s odd, coming from someone who has lived here so long. What’s more Parisian than pissing in a shady corner? Build a long passageway like this and you’re asking for trouble. There’s probably enough ammonia on these stones to fuel a fertiliser plant.”

“Think that’s why the place keeps catching fire?”

“It does?”

“Now and then.”

Franck was exaggerating. It had burned to the ground twice, but the last time was almost two hundred years ago – long enough to make the current incarnation of the Théâtre de l’Odéon the city’s oldest surviving theatrical venue.

“I doubt swollen bladders are the reason for that,” said Sternberg. “Despite its reputation, ammonia is pretty stable, and even a couple of centuries’ worth of urine wouldn’t produce a dangerous concentration of the stuff. The worst it can do is irritate your nose. And if you’d been here as long as us” – by the time Franck had turned up Sternberg’s team had been moving about the crime scene with proprietorial ease – “you’d have got used to it by now.”

“Speak for yourself.”

That came from Julie, Sternberg’s principal assistant. She was on her knees a few metres away, poking a tweezer into a crevice between two flagstones. A fabric mask concealed her nose and mouth, muffling her voice but apparently doing little to hold the stench at bay. The protective suit she was wearing

was no longer clinically spotless. Dark red blotches stained her knees and cuffs.

Despite the flames that had subsequently engulfed it, the Théâtre de l'Odéon had barely changed since Marie Antoinette attended its grand opening seven years before the outbreak of the Revolution. Every time it had risen from its ashes the architects in charge of the project had dusted off the original plans and preserved its austere, classical appearance. Standing at the focal point of the semi-circular place de l'Odéon, its facade was dominated by a series of tall archways fronted by a pillared portico. At each extremity of its temple-like porch was a passageway that flanked the building, providing covered access to the rue de Vaugirard and the leafy calm of the Jardin de Luxembourg.

Franck, Sternberg and Julie were in the passage that hugged the theatre's left side. Built of massive stone blocks, it ran a metre or so above street level. Regularly spaced arches let in light and air from outside, but the neighbouring buildings were too close for the sun ever to penetrate the dim tunnel. Massive iron grills, topped with spikes, blocked off all the lateral openings, ensuring that anyone who ventured into it had to walk its full length before being able to see the sky once more.

Assuming they made it that far.

This one had not.

A male in his late twenties or early thirties lay crumpled against the inner wall of the passageway, twelve metres or so from the steps that led up from the place de l'Odéon. He was the focal point of the battery of lights that Sternberg had set up to illuminate the scene. He wore jeans and a fleece jacket and was lying face down, the soles of his running shoes clearly visible. They were in a pristine state. The same could not be said for his clothes. Nor the wall against which he had fallen or the flagstones beneath him. Congealed blood – pooled or splattered – was everywhere.

Franck could not see the man's face, and was in no hurry to. His skull had lost its original shape, its curves turned into craters.

It was easier to focus on his hair. Despite being matted with gore, the care with which it had been cut was still visible – close-shaven on the side, gelled and combed into a thicket above. The victim's skin was the colour of coffee drowning in milk. Either he or his immediate ancestors had come from North Africa or the Middle East.

Franck's gaze moved on to the victim's arms, tossed out on either side, as if to keep him afloat.

"He didn't try to shield himself from the attack?"

"Oh, he did," Sternberg assured him. "Look at his right hand."

Its knuckles were crushed and two of the fingers were bent backwards at an unnatural angle.

"He tried once and then gave up? He chose to save his hands rather than his head? Nobody does that."

"Depends. Maybe he was a concert pianist - trained from childhood to preserve his fingers in all situations," offered Sternberg, before quickly relenting. "But if you ask me, I think we'll find the attacker moved the victim's arms once he was out for the count."

"You mean once he was dead."

From what he could see, Franck found it hard to believe that there had been any lapse of time between loss of consciousness and death.

"Let's wait to see what the medical examiner says."

"While we're waiting, maybe we could ask George Sternberg for his opinion?"

"If you insist." Sternberg drew himself up and brought his gloved hands together, adopting a position of learned authority befitting an *ingénieur principal* of the *police scientifique*. "The victim, as you can see, is a young but mature adult male in good physical condition. He entered the passageway from that end." Sternberg pointed backwards, over his shoulder, towards the rue de Vaugirard entrance.

"How can you tell?"

"If you could touch the soles of your shoes" – Franck could

not, as Sternberg had ordered him to cover them with a pair of pale blue elasticated bags when he arrived at the crime scene – “you would find that they’re sticky. That’s because you came up the steps from the place de l’Odéon, which are covered in spilt beer. It’s been there long enough to evaporate and leave a gummy layer behind.”

“Our victim wasn’t the one doing the drinking?”

“There’s no smell of alcohol about him. Unlike you, I’ve been close enough to check. And I’ve run a finger over his running shoes too. No stickiness at all. He came from the rue de Vaugirard.”

“Only to run into something sharp?”

“No. Something blunt and heavy. There are no puncture wounds. He was battered to death.”

“Just the head?”

“As far as we can see. When we lift him up we’ll get a better look at his chest, but my current guess is that he took a blow to the head, lost his footing, and found himself being pounded into the flagstones.”

“Hit several times?”

“Yes.”

“Sounds pretty savage. Someone consumed with anger or otherwise out of control?”

“Ask a psychologist, Franck. When you’ve seen as many crime scenes as I have, savage and civilised lose a lot of their meaning. You can do a lot of damage with a cool, clear mind if you’ve got the right tools.”

“Any idea what was used?”

Sternberg nodded and drew Franck away from the body, towards the place de l’Odéon.

“If you didn’t keep turning up so late, you wouldn’t miss so much,” he observed.

It was six twenty in the morning. Franck had received the call from the quai des Orfèvres at five thirty. He had come immediately, shrugging on the clothes nearest to hand and catching one of the first metros of the day. But he did not waste

his time justifying himself. Sternberg and his team had been there since a quarter to five.

Sternberg walked to where his crime scene van was parked. He opened the rear door.

“Hands.”

Franck offered his right hand, palm upwards.

“You’ll need both of them.”

Sternberg extracted a large evidence bag from the back of the van and laid it on Franck’s outstretched hands, which sank slightly under the weight.

He was holding a club hammer, a chunk of steel impaled on a wooden shaft some twenty centimetres long. Its short, oblong head was smeared with gore, making it adhere to the interior of the bag.

“Where did you find it?” asked Franck.

“Lying alongside the victim’s head.”

“So the killer didn’t think he’d need it again.”

“Or he couldn’t be bothered rinsing it off.”

“Does the victim have any ID?”

“Not that we’ve found and we’ve checked his jacket and pockets. No wallet. No cash. No keys. Just a phone.” He gestured towards a grey plastic crate inside the van. “You want to see it?”

“What kind of phone?”

“An iPhone.”

“So he wasn’t a pauper,” said Franck. “Where was it?”

“In a pocket inside his fleece jacket.”

“Hard to get at?”

“Not really, provided you’re not picky about rifling the pockets of a blood-spattered corpse.”

“Whoever smashed him to a pulp would have had the stomach to reach into his jacket.”

“If he didn’t, it means he thought there was nothing to gain by it.”

So chances were the phone would tell them nothing.

Franck stepped back from the van and looked around. The

sun had yet to rise and the place de l’Odéon was deserted. There were no lights on in any of the apartments that overlooked the theatre. Things would have been as quiet in the middle of the night. The place was a backwater, an oasis of calm cut off from the major thoroughfares of the Left Bank. In the summer the theatre’s in-house restaurant spilled out onto the wide expanse of cobblestones before it, but the rest of the year there was little reason to walk this way unless you were attending an evening performance or were heading for the Jardin de Luxembourg or the Senate building that sat on the rue de Vaugirard – neither of which were open during the hours of darkness.

“When was the body called in?” asked Franck.

“Just before four this morning.”

“By whom?”

“No idea. The caller didn’t give a name.”

It didn’t matter. The days were long past when a phone call could be truly anonymous.

“A cellphone?” asked Franck.

“No, a landline.”

“Even better.”

Sternberg shook his head.

“I’m afraid not. There’s a phone booth up there, on the rue de Vaugirard. That’s where the call came from.”

“A phone booth? An actual working phone booth?”

“Is that you casting aspersions on the state’s commitment to providing even the most modest of citizens with access to the telecommunications network?”

“When was the last time you used a call box, Georges?”

Sternberg shrugged. “I don’t like to have to wait behind all the folk calling in the corpses they’ve stumbled across.”

“Have you dusted the booth?”

“Not yet, but we’ve sealed it off.” Off course he had. Nothing escaped Sternberg’s attention.

“Could it have been the killer who made the call? Is four a likely time of death for the victim?”

“Hard to say. We took the body’s temperature when we

arrived, but it's been a cold night, so that'll complicate the calculations for time of death.”

“Could it have been as long ago as midnight?”

“That's possible.”

“So why assume” – Franck began walking away from the van, back to the steps that led up to the columned porch and the entrance to the side passageway – “that the beer had already been spilt when the victim arrived? A few hours would have been enough for the evaporation to take place, no?”

“Who sits down for a beer less than fifteen metres from a corpse?”

“Who sits down for a beer on a damp stone step in the middle of the night?” asked Franck in return.

“Probably the same kind of person who uses a historical monument as a public toilet. Someone who doesn't know any better.”

“No,” insisted Franck. “The kind of person who has no alternative.”

“Whoever it was, they'll be long gone by now.”

Franck shook his head.

“For once, this is a subject I know more about than you. Being a homeless drunk is a life of fear. If you find a spot that you feel safe in, that you get used to, you don't stray far from it.”

“What can I say? Go test your hypothesis,” commented Sternberg, heading up the steps and back to his team. “In the meantime, I've got a crime scene to log.”

Franck waited until Sternberg had disappeared under the archway before setting off along the roadway that ran parallel to it.

He had streets to walk.

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Three hours later he was back.

Sternberg and his team were packing up. The body was gone.

The theatre's employees were trickling in, clustering under the pillared entrance, casting timid glances round the entrance to the passageway, talking in hushed, excited voices. A little drama – only for real this time.

Franck walked up to Sternberg's van and pivoted, revealing a compact semi-rigid pack strapped to his back.

"It was his?" asked Sternberg, gloving up.

"So I'm told."

Sternberg unhooked the straps from Franck's shoulders and disengaged the backpack.

"The removal of the pack could explain the splaying of the victim's arms," observed Sternberg. "Where did you find it?"

"By the fountain in front of Saint Sulpice." The grandiose Jesuit church was no more than four hundred metres from where they stood, although it had taken Franck over two hours to reach it as he explored the neighbourhood in an ever-expanding circle, pausing each time he encountered anyone who looked like they haunted the city's streets during the hours when its more respectable citizens were comfortably asleep.

"Has it been emptied?"

Julie came up with a folding table. Sternberg placed the pack neatly upon it.

"No," said Franck. "Everything should be there. They swore to me they hadn't taken anything."

"They?"

"Fred and Eddie."

"Are those their stage names? Some kind of comic duo?"

"Frédéric Martin and Edouard Legrand."

"Local residents?"

"Of no fixed abode, but ardent partisans of the sixth arrondissement. The best-stocked rubbish bins in Paris, or so they tell me."

"So we have a pair of witnesses?"

"Witnesses is stretching it a bit far. They're not entirely clear about last night, which is understandable – they didn't get to bed – not that they often do – and worked their way through a dozen

beers to keep themselves warm.”

“They were the ones responsible for the sticky beer?”

“Yes.”

“Did they see anything?”

“No. They’re not sure when they arrived at the theatre, but say it was definitely after two. I popped into the Commissariat. They’re well known there – scarcely surprising, given that they spend most of their time hanging around the church.” Place Saint Sulpice was home not only to the church that gave it its name but also the town hall and the Commissariat of the sixth arrondissement. “The pair of them were chased away from the fountain at two this morning for making too much noise.” The Commissariat was notorious for protecting the beauty sleep of its local celebrities, most famously Catherine Deneuve. “So they came over here, sat themselves down, had a few beers, and then noticed they weren’t alone.”

“Were they were the ones who called in the body, once they finally saw it?”

“Yes. Having first taken the pack from its back.”

“Not to mention walking all over my crime scene. Where are they?”

“I dumped them in the Commissariat. They’re being fingerprinted.”

“I’ll need prints of their footwear too,” said Sternberg.

“I told the locals to hold them until I gave them a call. They’re yours if you want to go check them yourself.”

“I’ll send Julie over. So what’s their excuse for taking the backpack?”

“Let’s just say they weren’t thinking straight at the time. But at some point they thought about handing it into the Commissariat. They didn’t quite make it though – I found them sprawled alongside the fountain at Saint Sulpice. Another twenty metres and they would have done their duty, like model citizens.”

“Had they looked inside?”

“They swore they hadn’t.”

“And we’re going to believe them? They stole from a dead man. Doesn’t suggest they’re handicapped by a lot of moral scruples.”

“Let’s have a look,” suggested Franck. “Only way to find out”.

Sternberg unzipped the backpack and opened it up. He whistled in appreciation.

“I stand corrected. This lot has to be worth a couple of thousand euros.”

Sternberg pulled out the body of a camera, a compact slab of screen, buttons and grip. He clutched it familiarly with his right hand as he pivoted it, studying the front and back. No lens was mounted, but Franck could see three strapped in place inside the backpack.

“A Nikon D3,” said Sternberg. “I’ve always wanted one of these. A 50 mill as a default lens, an 85 for mid-range and a 70 by 200 zoom. If our victim wasn’t a professional, he was a very well-equipped amateur.”

He put the camera down and tried one of the pack’s side pouches. It revealed a black leather wallet. Inside was a Visa card, a hundred and twenty euros in notes, a bunch of taxi receipts, a Social Security card and an ID card.

“Selim Bencherif. Born in Grenoble. 1979.” Sternberg flipped the ID card over. “An address in Aubervilliers.”

“When was the card issued?”

“Twelve years ago.”

“Unlikely to be his current address, then.”

“You’ll know when you’ve checked it out,” said Sternberg, handing it to Franck.

He looked at the photo. The victim had kept the same hair style for over a decade

“Same name on the Social Security card?”

“Same name,” Sternberg confirmed.

“Nothing else?”

Sternberg poked his fingers into the wallet’s more constricted compartments. He came up with a press card, its top left-hand

corner stamped red, white and blue. It was official – issued by the national commission that accredited journalists.

“Not an amateur after all,” remarked Sternberg.

“Not at some point, anyway,” observed Franck. “It’s expired. Look – valid until March 2009.”

“Doesn’t say who he worked for?”

“They never do.”

“Let’s have a look at his work then.”

Sternberg retrieved the camera.

“Want to start at the beginning or the end?”

Franck shrugged. “Beginning?”

Sternberg’s thumbs moved about the buttons on the rear of camera. He then held it up so that both he and Franck could see the screen and started pulling up the photos stored in its memory card.

Figures and faces. In the street. Inside restaurants, shot from outside. Getting in and out of cars and taxis. In most of the shots the subjects ignored the lens. In some they tried to hide from it.

“Not the most welcome of photographers, was he?” said Sternberg.

In which case, Franck had a good idea who he might have been working for.

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“Whatever he’s done, we’re not responsible. He’s not one of ours,” said Jacques Beaufort, tapping the press card Franck had placed before him. “And, frankly, you should arrest him for walking around with expired credentials. That’s the kind of behaviour that destroys our profession’s good name.”

Beaufort’s profession had many names but none of them were good.

The furnishings of his office – a non-descript desk, an Apple workstation, two chairs – had not changed since Franck’s last visit. The same could not be said of the photos taped to every available vertical surface around them. *Exposé*, the scandal sheet

over which Jacques Beaufort ruled, processed a flood of images every week. In a time when magazines were going to the wall one after the other, *Exposé* still made it to the newsstands, regular as clockwork. In its particular field – cesspit, some might have said – it was still the best. To be enshrined on the walls of Beaufort’s office was, in his trade, a mark of honour, but nothing stayed there for long. Fresh scoops and indiscretions constantly dethroned their predecessors, consigning them to well-merited oblivion.

“Don’t try telling me you never buy images from people who don’t work for you.”

“I’m not ashamed to say we do what we can to encourage the entrepreneurial spirit of our fellow citizens,” said Jacques Beaufort, settling back in his chair.

“Doesn’t that mean that, in the end of the day, everyone works for you?”

“Are you kidding? When someone works for us we’re responsible for their social security contributions and have to give them five weeks off a year. They can say they’re feeling poorly and twiddle their thumbs on sick leave whenever they can’t be bothered coming in. And since we can’t sack them without serious and demonstrable cause, there’s nothing we can do about it. Believe me, staff members don’t work for us – we work for them. Freelancers are a gift from heaven by comparison.”

“So was Selim Bencherif one of your freelancers?”

“Assuming you asked monsieur Bencherif the same question, what did he say?”

“I didn’t ask.”

“Maybe you should have.”

“It would have been difficult. He’s dead.”

An eager look flashed across Beaufort’s face. He shifted position instantly, leaning across his desk. A vulture who had spotted a tasty piece of carrion.

“Not in his bed, I’m guessing. Not if the Brigade Criminelle’s taking a sudden interest in his recent dealings. That’s what I like

about you, captain – every time you turn up there’s a juicy story bobbing in your wake. If I wasn’t so strapped for cash, I’d have someone on your tail all the time.”

“You already tried that once,” Franck pointed out.

“And look what I got out of it – a great cover story. So tell me what happened to this monsieur Bencherif. Someone bash his head in with his camera?”

Franck frowned.

“Why do you say that?”

“You’re kidding!” Beaufort cried out triumphantly. “He was killed with his camera? What was he using, some old East German model made of cast iron?”

“A Nikon D3. And, no, it wasn’t turned against him.”

“But his head was bashed in?”

Franck narrowed his eyes. He did not feel like indulging Beaufort.

“Can’t have been a pretty sight,” Beaufort continued. “I don’t suppose you have any photos for us?”

“No I don’t. But here’s a question for you – if you’ve never heard of Selim Bencherif, where did the idea that he might have been killed with his own camera come from? You knew he was a photographer rather than just a journalist.”

“Tell me this first – was he carrying it when he was killed? His camera?”

“Yes.”

“How about we trade? You show me the photos you found in his camera and I’ll tell you what I know. There have to be some, and they have to be the kind of photos we take an interest in. Otherwise, what are you doing here, captain?”

“No trades. Just answer my question.”

“Nobody ever told you Robespierre was supposed to be the last of the incorruptible? Or how he ended up, for that matter?”

“I’m waiting.”

Beaufort sighed theatrically.

“Yes, I knew Selim. He was never on staff, though. We bought his work from time to time, like we do with a lot of

freelancers. Or did. These days, a lot of what we publish comes from whichever idiot happened to be passing by with a phone in his pocket. The upside of which is that we don't pay them that much. The downside is that the images are generally crap. Not that the public seems to mind."

Franck cut him off. "I'm not interested in the trials and tribulations of the noble brotherhood of paparazzi. Stick to Selim."

"Selim was good."

"Good how?"

"Good as in tenacious. Good as in quick on the draw. Good as in a steady hand – no blurry shots. Good as in patient enough to stake out a location for days on end. If he'd been a big game hunter, he'd have had a wall of rhino and lion heads at home."

"And since he was a paparazzi?"

"Topless celebrities, adulterous couples, drunken pillars of society, actresses visibly going to seed, virtuous politicians in the company of whores – the never-ending spectacle of the tawdry side of life."

"A man who annoyed a lot of people, then."

Beaufort's answer came as a surprise.

"Let's not get all melodramatic. He was a freelance paparazzi. One of many. It's an anonymous profession. Nobody's interested in the guy behind the lens. It's the publication and its circulation figures that count. We get the lawsuits, not the photographers."

"So you're suggesting that Selim didn't end up dead because of his profession?"

"Paparazzi get shoved around by security details – roughed up too, sometimes. Now and then they get arrested for obstruction or trespassing. But that's about it."

"This one was murdered."

"Not just murdered – head bashed in, no? Come on, captain – just one little crime scene photo."

"Nobody's interested in the guy behind the lens," Franck reminded him. "The readers of *Exposé* least of all. Let's stay

focused here. Had you bought any pictures from him recently?”

Beaufort shook his head.

“No. Come to think of it, he hadn’t offered us anything for a couple of weeks. More than that, actually.”

“Was that unusual?”

“We pay better than everyone else so, yes, you could say it was unusual.”

“Maybe he had taken some time off.”

“These guys don’t take time off. When you see them on a beach it’s because they’re waiting for some starlet to strip off her bikini top.”

“Maybe he just didn’t have anything for you.”

“Unless you show me what was on his camera, I can’t say.” Beaufort pointed, not at Franck, but at a spot on the floor alongside his chair. “I notice you brought something with you, captain. Time is of the essence in a murder investigation, isn’t that what you lot say? Well, why don’t you save yourself some and show me what you’ve got in there?”

Franck looked down at his old, faithful briefcase. He had propped against the leg of his chair. After a moment’s hesitation he swung it onto his lap. The first thing to come out was a pair of disposable gloves. He tossed them to Beaufort and waited until he had wormed his fingers into them. Franck then unsealed the evidence bag containing Selim Bencherif’s Nikon D3 and handed it over.

“Let me just pull out the CompactFlash card,” said Beaufort, nodding towards his workstation. “The photos will be easier to look at if I plug it into that.”

“Let’s not. Don’t take this personally, Jacques, but I don’t trust you with files.”

“That’s a very hurtful thing to say.”

“You’ll live. Turn the camera on and take a look. From the beginning, if you like.”

“You got all day? He’s probably got a thirty-two giga flashcard in this. That’s almost 600 raw twelve-bit images. How about we start at the end – the last photo he took before someone

snuffed his candle?”

Beaufort thumbed an image onto the camera’s screen. His eyebrows shot up. They remained there as he moved backwards through a series of photos.

“Well,” he finally said, “I really hope there’s a connection between these and Selim’s death.”

He chose one of the photos and handed the camera back to Franck.

It showed a solitary figure exiting an apartment building in the pale, clean light of the early morning. A handsome man in his late forties wearing a suit but no tie, with a coat folded over one arm. His left hand held an elaborate bronze handle as he closed the building’s door behind him. His eyes looked towards a phone in his other hand, a smile forming on his lips as he did so.

A smile both confident and cruel.

“Who is it?” asked Franck.

“You really don’t know?”

Franck’s ignorance appeared to surprise and delight Beaufort in equal measure.

“Who is it?” he repeated, stoically.

“None other than the Prince of Darkness himself.”