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Affairs of State

Written by Dominique Manotti

Translated from the French by Ros Schwartz and Amanda Hopkinson

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Affairs of State

DOMINIQUE MANOTTI

Translated from the French by
Ros Schwartz and Amanda Hopkinson



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Money corrupts, money buys, money crushes, money kills,
money ruins, money rots men's consciences.

François Mitterrand

Prologue

A mutton stew simmers in a cast-iron pot, filling the air with the aroma of tomato and spices. The kitchen is clean, with a sink, white units, a big fridge and a wooden table in the centre of the room. A hanging light gives out a warm yellow glow. The window is closed against the night and the heat is suffocating. The father, a stocky man with a furrowed face and grey hair, crashes his fist down on the table:

‘Not the theatre ... Not my daughter.’

‘I’ll do as I like.’

His fist strikes her temple and he roars: ‘I forbid you ...’

The girl’s head lolls backwards, a crack, a red veil in front of her eyes. She reels and clutches at the table. Her mother sobs, wails, pleads and tries to step between them. The two brothers push her into a corner. The younger children have taken refuge in another room, the TV turned up full volume so the neighbours won’t hear.

The girl leans forward, resting both hands on the table:

‘No one is ever going to forbid me from doing anything, ever again. In two months I’ll be eighteen and an adult ...’ Tensely, almost spitting: ‘An adult, you hear ...’

‘An adult ...’

He chokes with rage, grabs a chair and brandishes it as he edges round the table bearing down on her. She feels the heat behind her, turns around, seizes the pot with both hands and throws it at his head. The sauce splashes out in all directions,

splattering the walls, the floor and the furniture with streaks of orangey-red fat. She doesn't even feel the burns on her hands, arms and legs, she doesn't hear her mother screaming. Her father raises his hands to his head, sways, slides down and collapses in a heap on the floor amid the chunks of mutton.

The eldest brother rushes over, slaps her, twists her arm behind her back, lifts her, carries her to one of the bedrooms and locks her in. The men are arguing in the kitchen, voices loudly raised. The father doesn't want to call a doctor. A tap's running. Her mother sobs noisily.

They're going to lock me in. They're going to kill me. Her temples are throbbing. She walks over to the window and opens it. The air is cold, the housing estate ill-lit, silent, three storeys down. *Don't think. Get out. Fast, before they come back.* There are two beds in the room. She grabs hold of a mattress, leans over the windowsill, concentrates, aims, lets go. *Quick, the other one, repeat exactly the same movements with accuracy.* It lands on top of the first. A woman's screams in the kitchen. *Quick. Don't think, do it; don't think. Jump.*

She straddles the sill, tensing her muscles like at the gym. She gazes at the mattress, focuses on it with all her energy, takes a deep breath and jumps.

She hits the ground hard and her right ankle cracks. She struggles to her feet. She can stand on it. She runs slowly, limping, into the night, zigzagging between the apartment blocks, avoiding the well-lit areas, listening out. How long for? She stops, her heart in her mouth. She's lost. She sits on some steps, concealed by a dustbin, clasping her knees and her head buried in her arms. Slowly she catches her breath. Her heart's still pounding slightly. Cold, very cold. Her left eye's closed up, there's a sharp pain in her right ankle and the burns on her

arms and legs are excruciatingly painful. No ID, no clothes, no money. One thing's for sure: *I'll never go back home.* And another: *They won't come looking for me. As far as they're concerned, I'm dead. Dead.*

June 1985

Outside, it's sunny, summer's around the corner, but the offices of the RGPP, the Paris police intelligence service, are dark and gloomy with their beige walls, grey lino, metallic furniture and tiny north-facing windows overlooking an interior courtyard. In Macquart's office are three comfortable armchairs upholstered in velvet, halogen lamps permanently switched on. A newspaper is spread out on a table, open at page two, the 'Comment' page. Three intelligence service chiefs, men in their fifties wearing dark suits, are leaning over it.

'It's under Guillaume Labbé's byline. Who is this Guillaume Labbé?'

Macquart straightens up.

'In my view, it's Bornand's pseudonym.'

'The President's personal advisor?'

'Who's your source?'

'Simple deduction. Guillaume is the Abbé Dubois's first name ...' A pause. 'Advisor to Philippe Duke of Orleans ...'¹ Silence. 'In any case, Bornand's always felt he has a great deal in common with the statesman portrayed by the historians and memoir-writers of the eighteenth century: intelligent, depraved, a man of influence with connections ... So the pseudonym Guillaume Labbé seems obvious to me. I think he's even used it once before. I must have it on file somewhere.'

'If you say so ...'

They huddle over it and start reading.

In some sectors of the Paris press, one government scandal follows hot on the heels of the last. The wheels of business must be kept oiled.

If it is him, he's got a nerve. He dictates half the editorials of the satirical weekly the *Bavard Impénitent*, so that's their speciality ...'

After explaining at length how, on the orders of the Defence Minister, the French secret services sank the Rainbow Warrior, the Greenpeace ship campaigning against French nuclear testing in the Pacific, in a New Zealand port, killing a Portuguese journalist in the process, certain 'investigative' journalists are now kicking up a fuss over the so-called 'Irish of Vincennes' affair, accusing the men from the Élysée special unit ...

It's Bornand, for certain. He's the one who set up that unit, who recruited the men working in it, who placed it under the President's direct authority without having to be accountable to anyone. So clearly, it had better succeed. If it goes, he goes.'

'It's definitely Bornand. He loves macho police officers who climb over walls and shoot first, ask questions later.'

'You've got to admit they're more of a turn-on than we are.'
'Order, gentlemen, please.'

... of having planted the weapons themselves in the homes of the Irish terrorists they arrested in August 1982, the day after the fatal bomb attack in rue des Rosiers.²

The Rainbow Warrior affair prompted impartial observers to question the workings of the French Secret Service: mind-boggling incompetence or complex anti-government and anti-Socialist machinations? And what was the source of the leaks that

enabled a handful of French journalists to find out more than the New Zealand investigators, and faster? ...

‘Shoot down the Foreign Intelligence Service ...’

... The Irish affair is even more ambiguous. The ‘investigative’ journalists who are on the case all receive their tip-offs from the same source: a psychologically unstable individual with a dodgy personality whose testimony has been doing the rounds of the Paris editors for more than a year, without anyone taking him seriously until now. Furthermore, on his own admission – and this is common knowledge – he is in the pay of one of our major police departments working on the Secret Service’s patch.’

‘Well, well ...’

‘An attack on the Directorate for Territorial Surveillance too ... For the time being, the intelligence services seem to have emerged remarkably unscathed.’

‘He’s not on top form today.’

Have these ‘investigative’ journalists questioned this informer’s reliability? Have they tried to cross-check the information he has given them with other sources? Not at all.

The aim is clear: to discredit the Élysée unit, the team of police officers and gendarmes responsible for protecting the President’s security and coordinating the fight against terrorists in France. A crack team which has been successful in every case it has handled and which has, let it be said loud and clear, dealt a serious blow to the spread of terrorism in France with the arrest of the Irish in August ’82.

The three men straighten up in unison.

‘I bet he believes it.’

‘Impressive.’

This unit continues to centralise and store all intelligence on terrorism, seeking to coordinate the numerous police and gendarmerie departments concerned and plays a key part in international counter-terrorism cooperation. In short, its role is eminently positive and paves the way for setting up a national security council on the model of the American NSC. Its remit will be to support the President and provide him with analyses and briefings on national security issues.

It’s Bornand, without a doubt. Staunchly pro-American since his teens.’

‘We underestimated him. The man’s a poet.’

So who gains from discrediting this crucial mechanism? The traditional police departments which feel threatened, those whose incompetence, inefficiency, infighting and self-defeating rivalry are blatant, and whose chiefs are afraid of losing their powers and their privileges and who, need we be reminded, have never been excessively fond of President Mitterrand.

Guillaume Labbé.

‘What do you think?’ asks Macquart.

‘What’s bitten him? If it is him. It’s less than a year until the election and all the polls, including ours, indicate that the Socialists will lose. This isn’t exactly the best time to start a war between the President’s private police force and the official police department.’

‘The war’s already on. Against the Élysée unit. The press campaign on the Irish of Vincennes hasn’t come out of the blue. I think that Bornand’s simply mistaken his target, it’s his old animosity towards the official police resurfacing.’

‘Is this a storm in a teacup or is it dangerous?’

‘Bornand, if it is him, is a personal friend of President Mitterrand. Definitely influential, but a lone sniper who’s becoming increasingly isolated.’

‘So, much ado about nothing ...’

‘You can’t be too careful. I’ll take another look at his file.’



All morning Noria has been logging reports of lost and stolen cars, mopeds, handbags, dogs, household tools, wines lovingly laid down in a cellar (with the list of châteaux, watch the spelling, the plaintiff is a connoisseur). She’s now been a police officer based in the 19th *arrondissement* of Paris for two months, after more than a year of hardship, poverty, hostels, casual jobs on the side. Far from the dense tangle of family hatred and violence. Far too from her school friends, the occasional caring teacher, books devoured in secret, and from the school drama society. Getting up on stage, existing in her own right while playing the part of another, had been an illuminating discovery. It all now seemed a long way away, all that, a world out of reach ... Now her one obsession was to find a way of earning her living. Fast.

Having reached the age of eighteen, there were the formalities for getting duplicates of her ID, assisted by women’s organisations, and the endless hanging around at various town halls,

where by chance an ad had caught her eye: 'Recruitment competition. Police officers. Baccalaureate required.'

Baccalaureate. She'd had to leave school at sixteen to help her mother, and anyway, studying wasn't for girls. Not for boys either for that matter. Her two older brothers had better things to do around the neighbourhood. Baccalaureate. *I haven't got it either, but I'm bright enough. A police officer. A steady job. Better than that, an ID card, a place in the world, a role to play, on the side of the law, on the side of power.*

And today, like every other day, forms in triplicate, including one for the insurance company, the usual routine. The routine, this morning, is the secret and mysterious disappearance of 174 clandestinely lacquered ducks from kitchens in lower Belleville apartments, destined for the Chinese restaurants that have sprung up there. Gang warfare, blackmail, a racket, a raid by the hungry? No one at the precinct feels exactly at home in the local Chinatown. And now a distraction: the superintendent calls Noria into his office.

'Be an angel and take this file,' (beige cardboard cover, containing photocopies). 'Fifteen or so complaints about the same problem, in the same place, in less than a month. It's not a case of major importance, but it is causing quite a lot of bad feeling. I had a call from the deputy mayor, the elections are getting close. Go and interview the plaintiffs. Reassure these good women, show them that the police takes citizens' concerns seriously and are on the case. I'm counting on you. I want a report this evening.'

'Very good, Superintendent.'

Be an angel. Would it kill him to say my name, Noria Ghozali? She feels choked. Fearing the worst, she picks up the file and sits down in a vacant office to read it.

Four women aged between sixty-seven and eighty-five, all living in one of the reputedly peaceful ‘villages’ in the 19th *arrondissement*, on top of a hill. The grannies state that they’re terrified to leave their homes, because, for about a month, fire-crackers hidden in dog mess explode as they walk past, splattering them with dog shit.

Noria takes a deep breath. The youngest, the only woman, the only cop of North African origin, a mere officer, a lowly, precarious status. *Naturally, I get to deal with the dog shit. Maybe when I ‘grow up’, I’ll be given the dogs that get run over. Huh, some promotion.*

A list of the four ‘victims’ and their addresses, all up on Buttes Chaumont. She walks up the hill. Quiet, narrow streets, not many cars, a few passers-by who stop to greet each other and pause for a chat, brick houses built close together offering a panoramic view of Montmartre as a bonus. On this sunny day, the Sacré Cœur gleams white, looking like a mosque with its minaret-like bell tower.

First on the list, Madame Aurillac, seventy-five years old, owner of a little restaurant serving a dish of the day for more than four decades. Five complaints from her alone. A low house, restaurant on the ground floor, and on the first floor, two vast windows hung with white brocade curtains. Noria pushes open the door. Four elderly women are sitting at one of the tables, gossiping and laughing. There’s a half-empty bottle of Suze – only eleven o’clock in the morning and they’re already sozzled.

‘Madame Aurillac?’ inquires Noria.

The four women stare at her, sizing her up. Average height, shapeless in brown cotton trousers and jacket, a round, slightly moon-shaped face, olive skin, big, impenetrable black eyes

beneath heavily drawn eyebrows, and black hair scraped back in a tight bun.

‘Too severe and a terrible hairdo,’ says the first woman.

A bleached blonde caked with make-up inquires: ‘Are you new?’

‘Perhaps we could emphasise her exotic side,’ says the third. Noria flashes her ID: ‘Police.’

Consternation among the old girls. A woman with dyed hair and a frizzy perm gets up, a black apron around her waist, and slippers on her feet:

‘I’m Madame Aurillac. It’s a mistake. We had an appointment with an applicant ...’

‘For a job as a cleaner,’ adds the blonde.

So they did. The applicant arrives, hair immaculately styled, make-up, high heels, short black skirt and pink cotton vest revealing her navel, breasts spilling out, larger than life. Madame Aurillac rushes over to her, drags her into the street, has a few words with her and comes back into the restaurant alone.

‘This is a reputable establishment, you know. Ask Inspector Santoni, he often eats here.’

Santoni, macho, fat belly and apparently well connected in the neighbourhood. That’s all she needs.

‘Would you like a drink, a little Suze maybe?’

‘No, thank you. I’ve come to see you regarding your complaints about the firecrackers ...’

‘We lodged a complaint too,’ chorus the others.

‘It’s not just the firecrackers. Ill-bred little hooligans, they come from the housing estates down below and cause havoc up here.’

‘They play football in the street late at night, with their radios turned up full blast, playing that jungle music.’

‘Would you be able to recognise them?’

‘They’re all the same, these Arabs ...’ Madame Aurillac trails off in mid-sentence, gazing at Noria, bemused. ‘That’s not what I meant ...’

‘I don’t quite understand what you did mean.’

‘Do you think you can stop these goings-on?’

‘I’ll keep you posted.’

She rises.

‘Are you sure, not even a little drop?’

Outside, she takes a deep breath to steady herself. A report by this evening ... On what? The gang of pimping grannies? Santoni’s leisure activities? *Frankly I’d have preferred the disappearing lacquered ducks.*

I’ll go and check out the housing estate down there. Just opposite is a shop selling toys, games, stationery and books, run by a hunched, smiling elderly couple wearing white dust jackets.

‘Police,’ says Noria. They exchange looks, the woman slips behind the man. ‘Routine enquiry. Do you sell firecrackers?’

‘Of course. Especially at this time of year with it being nearly the 14th of July. Like all toy shops. Isn’t that right, missus?’ he says, turning to his wife.

She nods.

‘Firecrackers with a slow-burning fuse?’

‘Those too, yes.’

He hesitates. He knows about the exploding dog shit, obviously. But as for calling the police ...

‘And your customers are ...’

‘Here they come,’ says the little old woman. ‘As always when it’s a sunny lunchtime.’

Two kids, aged ten to twelve, wearing jogging suits, arrogant

little machos. Noria takes them by the hand and leads them over to a bench, opposite the shop.

‘Noria Ghozali, police officer.’

‘Nasser,’ says the taller of the two.

The introductions are now over.

‘The firecrackers in the dog shit up on the hill, is that you?’

‘What’s the problem? We’re not the first, and we’re not the only ones ...’

‘But you’re the last. You stop, you tell your friends to stop, we’ll forget all about it. I’m sure you’ll find something else. You have to be flexible.’

Back to HQ. Noria crosses the duty room, greeting the uniformed officers, starts going up the stairs to the offices on the first floor and stops. Pinned to the wall are three little photocopied posters: ‘No Arab scum in the French police’, and a target on a shape that resembles her. She stands rooted to the step. Alone. *Don’t give in. It’s not about you.* She makes her way slowly to the toilet, her body rigid, and locks herself in. She washes her hands thoroughly, then her face, staring at herself in the mirror and straightens her bun. Then she goes back to her office and writes her report. Authors of the attacks identified. Problem sorted.

At the end of the day, she goes back down the stairs, her stomach in a knot. The posters are gone. She crosses the duty room, walking past the uniformed officers in silence.