



LE CRIME DU MÉTRO

A PERFECT CRIME

On Sunday, May 16, 1937, a striking, twenty-nine-year-old woman, elegantly dressed in a tightly fitted green suit, walked out of a bal musette called L'Ermitage. The squeals of lively accordion music and the murmur of laughter and conversation quite probably escorted her into the street that day. She would have been familiar to any passers-by because she was a handsome woman and often drew the gazes of men, young and old. She regularly danced at L'Ermitage, one of the largest dance establishments in the city, which catered to the working classes and accommodated over eight hundred clients on this particular Sunday afternoon. The heavy wooden door, known to regulars as “le Tambour” slammed behind her. It was a hot, cloying afternoon, early for summer weather in Paris, and it was just beginning to rain. L'Ermitage was located at 13 rue des Deux Moulins in a blue-collar neighborhood of Paris on the banks of the Marne, a feeder river into the Seine and in many ways its poorer, scruffier cousin.¹

The woman wore a smart white hat with matching purse and gloves, a fur stole hugged her shoulders, and she carried a pretty parasol. Even though she had been widowed for over two years, she still wore her engagement ring engraved “J. T. à L. N. II.9.29.” At this moment, she was in a hurry and may have even glanced at her watch; it was 6:00 P.M. on the dot. Descending the steps, she quickly walked along a sidewalk next to a gray stone garden wall. The wall was low and an iron fence stood atop it. Enormous chestnut trees, doubtless planted hundreds of years ago, grew just inside the wall. Yellow light bulbs that buzzed and glowed from their strings clumsily festooned the branches of the trees, as close to a romantic atmosphere as the soldiers, factory workers and laborers who comprised the bals' usual clientele were likely to get. L'Ermitage catered to young people who loved to dance and socialize, and while most of the regulars were respectable working-class immigrant types, prostitutes and pimps were known to work the dance hall as well, especially its second-floor balcony.²

Laetitia Toureaux, for that was her real name although her friends knew her as Yolande, had danced away this particular Sunday afternoon with her younger brother, Riton, and his friend Maurice Kagan. They had sipped on Pernods and listened to Jean Salimbeni play his accordion with the band. Salimbeni had been a friend for many years, a fellow Italian immigrant whom Toureaux had engaged to teach Riton the accordion. Salimbeni was known to the Paris police as well. He was a talented musician, but he could not keep a job and was frequently picked up for vagrancy. On this day he had kept Toureaux's purse so she did not have to pay the coat check fee. Laetitia had also waltzed with twenty-one-year-old Marceau Marnef and his younger sister, Pierrette, whom she knew as bals musette regulars. For the most part Toureaux seemed content, although Marceau did report later that she had indicated she expected the evening to take a turn for the worse. "I'm laughing now," she supposedly said to him, "but I won't be laughing tonight because I don't expect things to go well."³ She tried to get Pierrette to leave with her, but when the girl refused, Toureaux left L'Ermitage alone.⁴ The owner, Monsieur Henri Begni, noted her departure.⁵

At 6:10 P.M. Toureaux arrived at a bus stop called Chateau, after the Chateau Gaillard, in whose former grounds the revelers at L'Ermitage now danced. The bus driver later claimed that he had made his rounds exactly on schedule and picked her up just beyond the garden at 6:19 P.M. He remembered her because of her striking green suit and the pin she wore, the medal of the Ligue Républicaine du Bien Publique (League for the Public Good), a public service organization. He'd seen her before as she flashed her radiant smile at him on her way to or from L'Ermitage. Often she stopped to chat with him or the other passengers, but not this afternoon. On May 16, she sat by herself and spoke to no one. She seemed rushed and maybe a little nervous, according to the bus driver when the police later questioned him. Perhaps she was just annoyed at getting her costly new hat, suit, and high-heeled shoes wet. Laetitia Toureaux was always one of the best-dressed passengers on his bus, especially on Sundays. By the time she reached her stop, the storm had broken and it was pouring rain. At 6:22 P.M. the driver dropped her off in front of the Métro station, Porte de Charenton.

Toureaux was not alone at the Porte de Charenton. It was Pentecost, a Catholic holy day and a long holiday weekend for even the most overburdened of the Parisian working class. The unexpected thunderstorm had driven many of the picnickers and strollers who had been enjoying the unusually warm afternoon in the Parc de Vincennes to take cover in the Métro.

The damp underground air reeked of stale perspiration and the nauseating odor of soot from the trains. At 6:25 P.M. the subway train pulled into the station. Toureaux got into the first-class car, its only passenger, according to the scores of fellow travelers who had seen her on the platform. Most everyone else crammed into the three gritty second-class cars. Witnesses would later recall her solitary figure framed in the window on the left-hand side of the car as the train pulled out of the station. That was at 6:27 P.M.

At 6:28, train number A.B. 356 arrived at the Porte Dorée. At this point witnesses' recollections of what happened next begin to conflict. Raymond Bruel and André Lejeune, two passengers traveling in a second-class car, told police that they heard a cry from elsewhere on the train just before it screeched to a stop. When the doors opened, they leapt out and ran to the source of the sound, the first-class car. On its floor lay the young woman in green, her lips moving, forming words only she could hear. The handle of a knife protruded from her neck.⁶

According to the Parisian press, however, the first witnesses to discover Toureaux were passengers waiting on the platform at the Porte Dorée station, who intended to take the first-class car. A military dentist with the rank of major named Raymond Dubreuil, his fiancée, and their friend Jean Vigneau entered the first-class car through the door closest to Toureaux. On their way to a play, the trio wore their Sunday best and thought the dirty and crowded second-class cars would soil their clothes. Meanwhile, three young prostitutes, or *filles de joie*—Elisabeth Guy and Mary Catin, who were English, and Yvette Bailly, who was French—entered the first-class car through the door at the opposite end. Dubreuil and his party said they saw a young woman sitting on one of the single-person benches, facing away from them and in the direction of the front of the train. The car was stifling hot, and one of the English girls asked whether they might open a window. Suddenly the seated woman slumped over and slid slowly to the floor. Major Dubreuil later testified that he approached her and saw immediately that her jugular vein had been severed and that she was doomed. The three girls moved forward and seeing the knife protruding from the right side of the woman's neck, they began to scream. "There's nothing we can do here," Dubreuil said, and he and Vigneau briskly shepherded their female companion out of the car, hoping, so Dubreuil claimed, to avoid involving themselves in a scandal. They promptly disappeared into the crowd. Dubreuil volunteered their story only after the press tracked them down, and then only if the police and press promised to keep his name out of the papers. The three women left the car

and waited on the platform until the police had taken their statements. It is possible that the cry Bruel and Lejeune heard was actually the screaming of the three women.⁷ In the meantime, the Métro car's conductor, Joseph Fabre, tried to defuse the situation by keeping the curious from entering the ill-fated car. The sight was grisly. Blood was spattered across the bench where Toureaux had been seated, and large quantities of blood ran down the bench onto the floor, where it pooled in various spots. Later, someone remembered seeing a green and gold earring lying in a puddle of blood.⁸

On the street above, another Métro employee flagged down a passing policeman from the 12th arrondissement, Agent Isambert, and in a certain sense this act sealed the poor woman's fate. Moments later Isambert arrived at the crime scene, panting from exertion and soaked from the rain outside. He bent down over the injured woman and asked, "Who did this to you, Madame?" Her lips moved, but again she made no sound. Then Isambert yanked the knife out of her neck, and blood gushed from the wound in torrents. Almost immediately she lost consciousness. Bruel and Lejeune helped carry her to a bench on the platform while they waited for help. The situation appeared dire, and everyone feared she would die before the ambulance arrived.⁹

Shortly thereafter Monsieur André Baillet, a chief inspector of the police in the Picpus quarter of the city, where the Porte Dorée station was located, arrived on the scene with two investigators, Inspectors Lavaille and Chaillet. The moment the inspectors arrived, they realized that the knife that had been embedded in the dying woman's neck was a clue of enormous significance. Italian and Alsatian professional assassins typically executed their victims with a stiletto and left the murder weapon in the body as a sign that this was no random killing.

Even before the unfortunate woman was laid on a stretcher to be transported to a hospital, the police had begun to sift through the contents of her purse. There they found papers identifying her as Laetitia-Marie-Joséphine Toureaux, maiden name Nourrissat, born September 11, 1907, in Oyache in Italy. By the time she arrived at the Hôpital Saint-Antoine half an hour later, she was already dead, and the police investigation to discover the identity of her murderer geared up for the task that lay ahead. Dr. Paul, the physician at Saint-Antoine who performed the autopsy, confirmed the police's initial conclusion: that the woman's murder was a professional assassination or a "hit." He also definitively ruled out suicide. The killer had to have delivered the blow with enormous speed, accuracy, and force. This is the primary

reason why the police from the start assumed that the perpetrator had to be male. Female professional assassins were rarer than male ones, and few women would have had the necessary upper body strength to have carried out the crime on a moving subway car. The knife had entered the victim's neck just behind her right ear, severed her jugular vein, and perforated her carotid artery. There were no other marks on her body. Only a practiced professional could have succeeded, and would have been brazen enough to attempt such a feat, in a crowded public Métro no less. Thus, from the beginning of their investigation, the police directed their search more toward the professional crime world of Paris rather than hunting for amateurs with a grudge. Laetitia Toureaux was not the victim of a random act. She had been executed.¹⁰

The Parisian police quickly found that they had a perfect crime on their hands, one which would be difficult if not impossible to solve based solely on evidence from the crime scene. The crux of the mystery was this: not a single witness among the dozens of people waiting at the platform at the Porte de Charenton station saw anyone but Toureaux board the first-class car, where she sat in the last bench seat, her back to the door. Neither did anyone remaining on the platform as the train pulled out of the station see anyone except Toureaux silhouetted against the large windows of the first-class car. During the ride from Porte de Charenton to Porte Dorée, no one in the adjoining second-class car who glanced through the glass door separating the cars saw anyone except the victim in the first-class car. By the same token, when the train arrived at the Porte Dorée station, none of the witnesses on the platform admitted to observing anyone leave the car in question.

Time adds a serious complication to the scenario. The killer had only about forty-five to ninety seconds, depending on the exact speed of the train, to complete his task if he killed his victim while the train was in motion between stations. If, as the police theorized, he leapt aboard the train while it was still at the Porte de Charenton station, grabbed the metal bar behind Toureaux's seat for balance and force, drove his knife up to its hilt into her neck with his right hand, and then dashed off the train before it ever left the station, he would have had to have accomplished the crime in even less time than he would have had during the brief train ride from Porte de Charenton to Porte Dorée. Moreover, why did none of the people milling about on the platform see him enter or exit the first-class car at the Porte de Charenton station?

The fingerprints on the metal bar behind Toureaux's seat were never identified, which is unsurprising, as the police would have had a record of them only if the killer was a known criminal. None of the fingerprints of the habitual criminals the police suspected at first in the murder matched those at the crime scene. Nor did they match those of the witnesses who discovered the dying woman. Equally frustrating for the police was the sheer number of people who used the Métro every day. Even if they had identified a match for the suspect prints, they would have had to have found prints on the murder weapon itself to prove that the owner of the matching prints had anything to do with the murder. And as the weapon was clean, it is likely that the murderer wore gloves and that the prints belonged to a passenger uninvolved with the crime.

The only other potential clue, a bloody shoe print near the exit behind where Toureaux sat, was also next to useless. At least eight people had entered and left the car before the police even arrived on the scene. There was no way of telling whether the killer had left the blood when exiting, which at least would have established how the killer got off the train, or whether one of the witnesses had accidentally stepped in the copious blood pooled around her body and left the smudge on the floor. And again, there remained the question of why no one noticed a bloodied person leaving the first-class car at either station.

The first-class car, it is important to note, was not widely used, because it cost more than most people could afford in Depression-era France. While it was reserved for wealthier travelers, it was also used by high-class prostitutes in search of well-paying clients. People tended to notice who came and went from first-class cars because they were few in number and usually well-dressed and prosperous or—like the three women who first entered the crime scene in the Toureaux murder, Guy, Catin, and Bailly—looking for a good time. All Parisians knew that only holders of first-class tickets were authorized to ride in first class. Tickets were checked often on the Métro, and scofflaws who were caught could expect to pay a steep fine. As such, the first-class car, and the area of the platform in front of it, would not have been packed with a crowd into which a killer could easily have melted without being observed.

So how did the killer commit his crime and flee the scene unobserved? Several hypotheses emerged among the police and in various French newspapers, which covered closely the sensational murder and its aftermath. One, mentioned above, was that the killer did the deed in the Porte de Charenton station. Another was that he killed Toureaux during the ride and then

slipped through the doors separating the first- from the second-class car. The problem with this hypothesis, however, is that the doors between the cars were kept secured; and in fact an anonymous letter to the police from one of the second-class passengers on the train when Laetitia Toureaux was killed affirmed that the doors between his car and first class had indeed been locked. Even had the killer managed to pick the lock (which showed no signs of tampering), get between the cars, and enter the second-class car, why did no one in second class mention seeing a bloodied person—or anyone, for that matter—slipping illegally into their car from first class during the trip? A related possibility was that the killer stabbed Toureaux at the Porte de Charenton station, jumped out of the first-class car onto the platform, and dashed into second class before the doors closed and the train left the station, and then rode to Porte Dorée in second class and made his getaway there. Again, this sequence of events is problematic, not only because of the absence of witnesses noticing anyone entering the second-class car from first class, but also because of the time factor. The trains simply didn't wait that long in each station, and the killer would have had to have been waiting in first class for Toureaux to get on, hoping that she arrived at the platform sooner rather than later. If she had lingered even a few moments at the bal musette, the train would have left the station without her, forcing him to disembark and wait for her to arrive or to leave with the train. Either way, the murder would have been foiled.

Much less risky, from the killer's point of view, would have been to wait in the station for Toureaux to arrive and board with her, but wait until the train was in motion before committing the murder. While the train was in the station, there was always the possibility that Toureaux would get on too late to allow time for the murder and the getaway, or that some other person would follow the killer aboard and either witness the crime or prevent its accomplishment. While the train was en route, no one could get aboard and, better yet, no one could stand outside the train and see the assassin at work through the windows or the open door. Toureaux would have had nowhere to run if the first blow failed to immobilize her. As it was, the killer needed only to stab her once, wait until the train arrived at the Porte Dorée station, and leap off the train, hoping, reasonably, that he would be able to vanish into the crowd and perhaps even flee the station before anyone found the victim and sounded the alarm.

The only hitch in this theory is that the killer would have had to have been seen leaving the train at Porte Dorée. The Métro cars had two doors that opened onto the platforms, one at each end of the car. When the car

carrying Toureaux arrived at Porte Dorée, two groups of passengers entered, one through each of the doors, and neither reported seeing anyone get off the train. The three young women entered through the door farthest from Toureaux; Dubreuil and his party got on through the door behind her. It would seem, therefore, that this scenario should be excluded.¹¹

Doubts linger, however. Major Dubreuil's story was odd, to say the least; and equally odd, or suggestive, was the inability, or unwillingness, of the police to clear up the discrepancies in it. According to Dubreuil, he and his party were on their way to the theater on the evening Toureaux was killed. They entered the train, saw her slump to the ground, and approached her. Dubreuil had medical training and, so he claimed, bent over her, bloodying his clothes in the process, to ascertain the nature of the wound. He quickly realized that she was beyond help. But then Dubreuil and his companions left the scene and returned home without either sounding the alarm or giving a statement to the police.

When the police tracked him down, Dubreuil offered two explanations for why he had taken off so quickly. First, he stated that he had still hoped to get to the play before it started. Perceiving that his clothes were stained with the victim's blood, he needed to rush home and change before he could proceed to the theater. Obviously this explanation for fleeing the scene of a crime was inadequate. When the police pressed him, Dubreuil admitted that his primary concern was for his fiancé, whom he hoped to spare the scandal of being a witness, even after the fact, to a murder. Despite the obvious weakness of this chivalrous explanation, not only did the police refrain from reproaching him for his callousness toward the victim, but they also dropped the matter and never questioned him again. And they had their reasons for doing so. Neither Dubreuil nor any of the other witnesses were suspects in the case, primarily due to the nature of the crime itself. Toureaux's murder was no spontaneous act of violence or a murder that an amateur could have carried out, the police quickly concluded. Rather, it seemed most likely to have been the work of a professional or at least of an experienced killer who knew what he was doing. Dubreuil and the other witnesses on the scene all turned out to be who they said they were when the police investigated their backgrounds, and none of them appeared to possess either the nerve or the skill to have accomplished such a brazen hit. Dubreuil was only twenty-five years old, and this did not seem to fit the profile of the murderer the police had established of a seasoned professional assassin. Nor is it likely that Dubreuil, were he the killer, would have

taken the immense risk of bringing with him two witnesses whose stories the police might later have been able to break under questioning. Thus unless one assumes a rather massive police conspiracy to manufacture a false identity and alibi for Dubreuil—a highly unlikely prospect that would have been extremely difficult to pull off—one must assume that the reasons for which the police ruled him out as the killer were valid. It is possible, however, that Dubreuil and/or the other witnesses either simply missed the assassin when he slipped off the train or lied when they claimed not to have seen him. Dubreuil's reluctance to involve himself and his companions in the investigation in any way, even to raise an alarm when he found the mortally wounded Toureaux, suggests that he may have been equally unwilling to admit that he might be able to identify the killer.

One constant runs through all these possible scenarios for Toureaux's murder: the probability of success for any one of them rose enormously if, as the evidence suggests, Toureaux was on her way to meet someone, and her assassin knew this. In fact, it is quite possible that the murderer knew what train she would be likely to take, as the Porte de Charenton station was the terminus of the line, and lay in wait for her. On weekends and holidays, French trains ran on a special schedule. There were fewer of them, and one could calculate fairly closely when a Métro train would arrive in and depart from the station. Because Toureaux's choice of trains would have been restricted, her killer could have had a reasonably good idea what train she would have to have taken to make her rendezvous on time if he knew her starting point (the bal musette), the bus she was taking to get to the Métro, and the line she had to take to get to her destination. It is possible that she planned to meet her killer on the train, in which case both would have known exactly when she would be there.

Again, however, there are difficulties with this scenario, the most serious being that before Toureaux left L'Ermitage, she told her friend Pierrette that she was "already late" for an appointment.¹² Although the killer could have been waiting for her in the station, it is unlikely that she planned to meet him on the train, since her tardiness would have caused her to miss the train chosen for the meeting. It is even possible that the prearranged meeting, if there was one, was merely a ruse on the part of her killer to lure her to the station.¹³

Laetitia Toureaux was clearly dressed for a special meeting that afternoon. She had dyed her brown hair blond, donned a new dress, and chosen to wear an unusual and striking pin signifying membership in the Ligue du Bien Publique. All seemed calculated to alter her appearance and to make

her stand out. This may suggest that she was meeting someone whom she had never before met and not only wanted to make a good impression, but also needed some identifying mark, probably the pin. It worked well; many of the witnesses recalled the pin, which is not surprising as membership in the Ligue was very prestigious. Even if her assassin had never seen her before, it would have been quite easy for him to lie in wait for her and be sure he had the right victim.

Thus from the beginning, the murder of Laetitia Nourrissat Toureaux, alias “Yolande,” had all the characteristics of a carefully planned, cold-blooded execution. Little did the police detectives first assigned to the case realize, however, how deep into the recesses of fanaticism and political intrigue, and how high into the preserves of wealth and power, their investigation would take them. One petite woman with a ravishing smile and a new green suit was the key that opened the hidden world of the Comité Secret d’Action Révolutionnaire, or the Cagoule. For us, she is the key to understanding the political climate and culture of France in 1937.