

A Day at the Office

By Anne Swardson

Petar smoothed his thin black T-shirt as he climbed up the Métro stairs and stepped onto rue Scribe. Pushing down the belt of his faded blue jeans so they sat properly on his hips, he turned up the collar of his fake leather jacket. He was ready for his workday.

It was a sunny, warm afternoon in Paris and the tourists were out in droves, bunching at the door of the Fragonard perfume museum and snapping selfies in front of the blocky Opéra building. Actual Parisians snaked their way through the chattering packs.

Time to prowl. Petar walked in a rolling slouch, head lowered. Never raise your gaze, his mother had always said. Even when he was a child in her arms as she begged in the Métro tunnels, that's what she told him. She kept saying it right up until she disappeared, when he was 13. Had she gone back to Bulgaria? He never found out.

He checked out a gaggle of Chinese in front of the Grand Hotel. They were all wearing money belts. Then ahead he saw his first likely target of the day: a middle-aged man in a soft gray suit, jacket over his arm, that Petar recognized as Dior. Last year's collection. The fellow was wearing gleaming Guccis and carrying a black briefcase that had to be Hermès.

The mark didn't sense anything when the two stood together at the red light. He might be rich, but he was stupid enough to carry his wallet in his back pocket. The light changed and the guy went on, his dreams of money and power uninterrupted and his wallet now in Petar's jacket

pocket.

Petar knew what he should do next: head to the pizza place around the corner and turn the wallet in to Bilal. The boss didn't like his operatives holding onto the merchandise too long. They might skim off a little, or get arrested, or both.

But Petar couldn't help himself. Sticking his hand into his pocket, he caressed the supple black leather. He ran his fingers over the folds, feeling the buttery way the calfskin gave to his touch. He didn't even try to estimate the thickness of the cash inside, or to count the credit cards. It was the beauty of the wallet he wanted to sense, like a blind man.

Petar thrust out his chest and walked on, eyes looking ahead. He was a very sophisticated person carrying a very distinguished wallet, after all. Maybe it had been given to him as a bonus by his boss at the bank: "*Cher monsieur*, we've chosen you as the employee of the month. We are all so proud of you and we know you'll do great things." The boss smiled as the other employees applauded.

Or perhaps it had been a present from his beautiful blonde wife, after he'd given her the diamond pendant. She proffered the orange box with a brown ribbon around it. "My darling," she began. He reached out his hand for the...

"Hey asshole, what the fuck!"

It was Bilal himself, standing right in front of Petar. He put his hand on the younger man's chest.

"Are you crazy? Prancing around for all to see with the stupid grin on your face?"

Petar's posture was transformed. He curved his shoulders and hung his head. He scraped the sidewalk with one sneaker-clad foot.

"Boss, I was just heading over to the café," he whined. "Gimme a break, I just scored a big one."

“That doesn’t help us any if you get nailed by the cops, cretin. Now follow right behind me. I want that wallet as soon as we get there.”

#

Was it really 1 p.m.? How had she fallen so far behind? She was supposed to have arrived at the hotel half an hour ago. She shouldn’t have let Antoine take the Champs-Élysées.

Monique put on a last dab of lipstick and ran her hand over her tightly coiffed hair as the black limousine pulled into the covered driveway of the Grand Hotel. She burst out of the car as soon as the top-hatted flunky opened the door.

“Forty-five minutes, Antoine,” she called over her shoulder, rushing up the hotel steps, high heels clicking. She had to walk slightly sideways because her skirt was so tight. Ignoring the smiles and bows from the staff, she swept past the reception area and into the high-ceilinged lobby café.

Jean-Yves was there, reading a newspaper. A tiny coffee cup sat on the table in front of him. His white shirt was open at the collar, unbuttoned just enough under the jacket. His black jeans were clean and pressed. A long strand of hair threatened to fall into his eyes. He looked as if he had just arrived, off the plane from Afghanistan or Iraq or wherever the hell he was always going.

Pulling her phone out of her handbag, Monique punched up his number and composed a text. “Which room?” She could see him reach for his phone and answer. “508.” He laid a few coins on the table and left without a glance. She gave him five minutes before following him, to avoid being in the same elevator. There wasn’t much time. Her secretary had already pushed back her 2:30 once.

It was their habit not to speak until they were done, until each had consumed everything of the other except the words. It was only as Jean-Yves was buttoning up his shirt and she was inserting her gold earrings that she asked the question.

“Did you bring me anything?”

He nodded. “Something special. My regular contact was detained by the Taliban, but I was able to find someone else. It’s just a sample, but it’s special.”

Her eyes lit up. She always anticipated the joy of Jean-Yves’ deliveries, and the idea of something different was almost more than she could bear. She could hardly wait to try a tiny bit and then turn it over to her lab for testing.

She’d heard rumors of an entirely new strain coming out of Afghanistan. This could be a game-changer for her business. Her secret business, not the one she was known for. She needed to act fast, before any of her competitors learned about it.

“Give it to me quick. I have a board meeting in 30 minutes.”

He reached in his pants pocket and, bringing out a stamp-sized packet, handed it to her. She could tell by the color that it wasn’t one of her current lines. She pulled out her slim, zippered wallet, removed a wad of bills, handed them to Jean-Yves and slid the packet inside.

“I’ll go first, Antoine is waiting,” she said, and slipped out the heavy door quietly.

But Antoine wasn’t. The car was nowhere to be seen. That idiot! Ignoring the querying look of the doorman, Monique walked down the hotel steps and turned left. Maybe he was at the corner. She sent him a text; no answer. Maybe he’d had to go around the block. She stood on the sidewalk for a second, looking toward oncoming traffic. Then made a decision. She went back to the hotel and nodded at the doorman to beckon toward the taxi stand.

It wasn't until she arrived at the office and went to pay the driver that she realized: Her wallet was gone.

#

Petar's fingers grazed his catch as he slipped it into his pocket and headed for the pizza shop. He always felt worse stealing from women. Why was that? This one clearly had plenty of money. That suit—Chanel never went out of style—fit her like a second skin. The Manolo Blahnik high heels cost more than he made in a month. Nor had she been a tough mark. Her bag was open.

But there was a lost feel about her. She'd been looking for someone, but it was more than that. Even if she hadn't angrily gazed up and down the street, he could have seen that she was missing something. Like she'd had an arm cut off and it hadn't fully healed. He was sure that when she discovered her wallet was gone, she'd shrug it off as the least of her problems.

The odor of burnt crust greeted him as he walked into the pizza joint. The sign in front said Café Italien, but that fooled only the small handful of tourists seated at the tables in front. In a back room, with half-empty glasses of cloudy-white liquid in front of each of them, sat Bilal and Adi.

“Decided to let me have this one?” Bilal asked in a menacing whisper as Petar sat down.

“It's a good one, Bili,” he responded, sliding the wallet under the table to his boss. Bilal took it and headed to the men's bathroom. Petar sat with the wordless Adi, wondering if they would let him order a pastis or if he had to go right back to work.

When Bilal returned, his face was pale.

“Who'd ya get this off of?”

“Blonde, fancy suit. Kind of like a business lady, you know? But with lots of makeup. She came out of the Grand Hotel.” Had he done something wrong?

Bilal cursed loudly.

“I never seen a product like that on a target around here. Especially a woman. You didn’t see where she went?” Petar shook his head.

“I need you to watch out for her. You see her, you come tell me,” Bilal said. “Never mind why. Now get back to work. You’ve been pissing me off today. Don’t make me take you off the team.”

“Bilal, you wouldn’t do that! I’ve been getting good stuff for you! I promise, I’ll...” Petar stopped talking when he saw the look on Bilal’s face and hustled out of there.

#

Captain Henri Bassin liked to walk his territory. His days as a foot patrolman were long past, and, as head of the local police *commissariat*, his job was mostly to ensure that the front office processed all the paperwork for the many tourists who got pickpocketed.

But there were other things he needed to check on. Slipping on his suit jacket, he walked through the receiving area, past the slack-faced Americans, Japanese, Chinese and Dutch waiting in the vain hope that their wallets or purses would be returned to them.

He tilted his face up to feel the sun. It was a fine day indeed. Just around the corner from the Grand Hotel, the outdoor tables were chock-full at the Café de la Paix. Inside, suited businessmen sat across from each other at the white-tableclothed restaurant, cooking up deals legit and non-legit. Both groups were equally likely to get their wallets lifted when they left this place.

Henri knew all the operators in the *quartier*. The gangs of Romanian girls took the easiest pickings: the jeans-clad Americans with passports and wallets poking out of their back pockets. Actually, the girls weren't the lowest on the ladder. That would be the Gypsies, who sat on the sidewalk, a frayed cardboard sign and a tattered paper cup in front of them, a dog or child asleep in their laps. Drugged. But Henri didn't count them, because what they did wasn't technically theft.

He headed down the boulevard des Capucines, glancing to the right as he passed the walking street that led to the Theatre Edouard VII. He'd worked this precinct for almost three decades and never gone to a play there. His wife teased him that he was "*le petit ordinaire*," the little ordinary guy. He didn't mind that. Though he wasn't as ordinary as she thought.

He turned right on the next street and walked by the pizza café. He knew it was Bilal's headquarters. That team was at the top of the ladder. They made the most money, and they did their lifting the most skillfully. He ostentatiously turned his head toward the street as he went by, to make it clear he wasn't going to look inside.

#

Petar had hoped he would see her in the neighborhood again. Because Bilal wanted her and because he admired her fashion sense. But he never thought it would be the same day, and he never thought it would be she who found him.

"Please, don't run away," said a voice in his ear.

He'd been casing the crowd on the steps of the Opéra. A bad location, since it was so exposed. But he knew how to sweep his eyes across the dozens of tourists milling around the stone steps and single out one or two who were about to walk onto quieter streets.

He didn't turn around.

“Please,” said the voice. “I won’t hurt you. I think you have something of mine, and I want to buy it back from you.”

He swiveled his head. She had changed into a pantsuit, maybe Armani. Camel-colored, a little light for her hair in his opinion.

He nodded. “But it can’t be around here.”

“Fine. Get in the car.” She made a gesture and a black limousine pulled up in front of them. A driver came out and opened the back door.

Where would she take him? Was this safe? What if Bilal saw him? Then Petar remembered Bilal’s last words to him, about dumping him from the team. *Quel con*, he thought. What an asshole. He got in on the other side.

“I know you took my wallet,” she said without preamble. She was perched on the edge of the back seat, every muscle tense, her hands clasped in front of her. “The doorman said this is your territory. He said he’d seen you follow me.”

He shook his head and raised his hands in helplessness. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t have anything of yours,” he said. His French was not that good; he hoped he was pronouncing the words correctly. Even in his discomfiture, he saw how well her suit fit. There was no gap at all between her neck and the collar as she leaned forward anxiously.

“Did you give it to someone else?” She tilted in a bit more. He could smell her perfume now. He couldn’t identify most fragrances. Just the ones whose samples were tucked into the fashion magazines that he rescued from the trash receptacles.

He lifted his hands again. “I can’t say, I don’t know, I don’t know anything.”

“I’ll give you money,” she said. “A lot of money. What do you want?”

“I told you, I don’t have it!” The car was driving aimlessly around, a little too fast to allow him to jump out.

She laid a manicured hand across his. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to sound so pushy. I’m just saying, I can help you. If you can get me my wallet back, with everything in it, I can give you anything you want.”

Petar looked down at the car seat and thought for a second. “I need €10,000.” It was the biggest sum he could imagine. She nodded. But before she could speak, he opened his mouth again. “And there’s another thing.”

“Yes?”

“I’d like to go a fashion show.”

“A fashion show! You mean, like, couture?”

“Well, I wouldn’t rule out ready-to-wear, but I think I can learn more from seeing a couture show.”

She looked at him as if he was from another planet. Then looked again and saw the way he wore his fake-leather jacket, the way his hands straightened out the hang of his jeans as he sat.

“Well, okay. That’s something I can do that you can’t buy. But do you have the wallet?”

“I know the person who does. Meet me here in two hours.” He gestured outside. They were not far from the theater and the pizza place.

She smiled thinly and pulled a 100-euro bill from her purse. “Wonderful! Here, take this. It shows my good faith. You can go now.” As the car pulled away, he saw her pull out her phone.

#

Petar had no idea how he was going to talk Bilal into turning over the wallet. Surely whatever was inside was more valuable than what that lady was going to pay him. He had the feeling that Bili wouldn't be interested in haute couture, either.

He tried to imagine what a fashion show looked like. He had seen photos in magazines. Pouty-faced waifs striding down a long runway. Actually—he looked down at his lean body—maybe he could be a model!

He could picture it: After the show, Stella McCartney or Hedi Slimane would walk over and start talking to him. “Could you walk a few steps for me?” Stella might ask. “Turn around.” Walk he would, eyes straight forward.

That was worth fighting for. He knew Bilal's regular route, the one he took to check on each of his men. It was about 3 p.m. He would be near the theater.

#

Henri Bassin didn't usually go out twice in one day, but he'd gotten a call. After searching through most of the streets in the neighborhood, he walked past the theater and turned into the part of the roofed passage that led to the narrow rue Caumartin. It was darker there. He swiveled his head in both directions.

On his left was a manicure shop, on his right, the entrance to a subterranean parking garage. The garage was closed. There had been a big fire there a few months ago and the building owner, the insurance companies and the owners of hundreds of cars trapped below weren't even close to reaching an agreement.

Something caught Henri's eye as he glanced at the garage entrance. Part way down the sloping ramp. It looked like a piece of clothing. He walked a little closer, following the ramp as it spiraled to the right. And then did a double take. This wasn't what he had expected to find.

He took out his phone and called the police commissariat.

“Send forensics and send the wagon. Someone has strangled our big boss pickpocket.”

#

Petar was waiting just where he had said he would be. Behind him, down the pedestrian street toward the theater, was a line of police tape and a police car flashing blue lights. He and Monique pretended not to notice.

At her signal, he climbed into the car.

“I have it,” he said. She didn’t ask where he’d gotten it.

He pulled the wallet from his jacket pocket but kept it in his hand. “Which fashion show?” he asked. “When?” He didn’t notice that the driver had quietly slipped out of his seat.

She proffered a wad of bills. “Surely this will do, *non?*” Before Petar could open his mouth, the back door opened, throwing him off balance. Antoine reached inside and pulled Petar out entirely, casting him to the ground and snatching the wallet out of his hand.

As Antoine jumped back into the driver’s seat, Monique threw the money at Petar. “Fashion show? With the likes of you? I can’t believe you fell for that.”

The car sped off. With shaking hands, she opened the wallet.

The packet wasn’t there.

#

In his heart, Petar had known she wouldn’t make good on her promise. His mother hadn’t stayed with him, France treated him like scum and his boss – his late boss – had disrespected him. It was no surprise that Monique did too.

So he’d kept himself some insurance. Buried in the pocket of his stylishly torn jeans.

There must be someone who was willing to pay a lot for the tiny packet. Enough that he could buy his own way into a fashion show. Which one would be best? Spring or winter collections? He started to picture himself walking into one of those temporary structures they erected around Paris each season.

“*Monsieur*, please come with me.” It was a man in a suit—not designer—and three uniformed cops. They were standing on both sides of him. No hope of flight.

He mouthed the word “Why?” but he knew why. He’d been set up.

The suited man reached into Petar’s jeans and took out the packet, just before the cops shoved him into a waiting car. They clearly didn’t care that they’d rumbled his well-smoothed T-shirt.

#

Packet safely in his pocket, Henri Bassin made sure the cop car was gone before he picked up the bills lying on the sidewalk. He folded them and slid them into his plain, stiff wallet. Not an amount that meant much to him, but he knew more was coming.

It didn’t take long for the black limousine to drive up. The back door opened. Henri leaned in. “*Voilà, Madame*,” he said as he handed Monique the packet. She took it and passed him a fat envelope. “*Merci, monsieur*,” she said. “A pleasure doing business with you, as always.”