

Crouching Frog, Hidden Fox

Preliminary report. 29/6/2018 Detective Chief Inspector Jean Thisse, Police Fédérale,
Brussels Office, Homicide

Victim: Brian Thornberry

Case opened: 26 June 2018. Palais de Soignes, Brabant, Conference on the Future of the
European Union.

Files concerning participants:

#21 Jay Howard, Conference Fellow and London-based correspondent for Washington
Post. Email messages sent to Professor Sheryl Riggs, Department of Journalism,
University of Bath.

Jay Howard

26/6/2018 at 8:50 a.m.

Tragedy and travel plans

To: Sheryl Riggs (sriggs@bath.ac.uk)

Sher,

I hope you're checking your email before you leave. I won't be at Waterloo Station as planned. Incredible news: a murder here. One of the Conference Fellows, a guy who worked for the European Commission, was found dead in his room this morning. The Brussels police want to talk to each of us. I've arrived at murder scenes while the body was still warm, but I've never been caught up in one where I know the person. His name was Brian Thornberry.

I'll email as I can from the computer bank. Police confiscated phones, tablets, and laptops first thing. Do me a favor: call Stephen and tell him what's happening. Tell him I'm on it, and I'll email him a story when I know more.

And another favor: take care.

Love, Jay

(reply)

26/6/2018 at 11:15 a.m.

Sher,

Hoped to be headed for the Chunnel by now, but I think we're all stuck here. Got something to Stephen for an e-edition.

I'll bet the Post didn't think they'd be getting an insider's report on a murder when they let the new guy go off to waste a week talking. The irony is that this Conference, with its academics, bureaucrats, and three reporters, was supposed to help me learn EU politics. And that's all it was at first. But then I started to appreciate the individuals, got into the subtleties of their views.

All that eclipsed by murder.

You may as well hear it from me as read it. I have nothing else to do.

I told you, didn't I, that our rooms are quaint but simple, designed to look older than they are, in a rustic-style building they call the Coachhouse. There's a walkway under arches, winding through flowers, connecting the Coachhouse to the Palais, where we ate and met. The Palais de Soignes, of course, is eighteenth century, ornate as hell. Out in a forest south of Brussels.

I had thought it was picturesque. Now, it's more like . . . isolated. Maybe creepy.

Anyway, a lot of us were leaving early this morning and waiting in the Coachhouse lobby for cabs to the train station. Others were downstairs saying good-byes again. We'd all

gotten pretty close. Yeah, I know that doesn't sound like me, but I was getting ready to miss the very people I was tired of hearing by day two.

Into this confusion of timetables and luggage, a maid comes running down the stairs, waving her hands, making odd noises. I could have sworn I saw blood on an arm as she passed. We looked up the stairs and saw Maria Elena . . . Maria Elena Merino . . . staggering to the edge of the landing. She made it down two steps and sat hard.

"It's Brian." That's all she said. For a moment.

She and Brian worked together in Brussels for the Commission and were pretty tight. I don't know the exact nature of the relationship, but she obviously had visited his room early this morning.

We rushed up the stairs, of course. She was breathing hard and jerking her head more than shaking it.

"I came by to meet him for breakfast. I knocked and knocked and called his name. Maid came by and didn't know either. So I used the key . . . his key was right there on the floor outside the door."

One of the staff dodged around folks to get up the steps and down the hallway. Another headed down the steps, for a landline I guess.

Local police arrived amazingly fast. They scattered us off the stairs and led Maria Elena into the commons room. At the door, she resisted and looked back at us. We weren't any more help to her than we had been to Brian—just doors away from me and others during the attack.

The Federal Police from Brussels are here now. The body is gone. We can go back to our rooms. But no leaving. So I have nothing to do but write. And mourn not only this acquaintance but the camaraderie we—most of us at least—had built in the course of the week.

The only light note is the Detective Chief Inspector from Brussels. Right out of Agatha Christie. You'd love him, I swear. He walks around smoothing a hand over a bush of dark curls and smiling without opening his mouth. Dark, round eyes that flash surprise all the time, like you've just appeared in front of him for his amusement. Sophisticated. Almost dainty. Going to talk to each of us soon, he says.

He or someone from the police can check email from these computers. So don't write anything that would incriminate me.

Joke. Bad joke.

Later, Jay

(reply)

26/6/2018 at 1:30 p.m.

attachments: EU_group.jpg;

Sher,

Yeah, monitoring email bothers me, too. But I'm pulling for the cops. Judging from your reaction, you'd be giving them a hard time if you were here.

I attached a pic from the Conference website. Brian is third from the left, fourth row up. Dark, intense, stiff—no pun intended. Maria Elena is standing in front of him and to his right. It looks like he's taller, but they're both about 5'9", 5'10". He's just up a step.

She has started pointing fingers already. She's from Spain and insists that the Fellow from Bilbao, Jordi Arriaga, had it in for Brian. Everyone's talking carefully, but the implication is Arriaga's only a few steps from being a Basque terrorist. I think she'd suspect anyone from the region. I should ask. But truth is, I don't want to be the investigator here for a change. I just want to get back to London before all the good feelings of the past week evaporate entirely.

Love, Jay

(reply)

26/6/2018 at 3:19 p.m.

Sher,

Lord, that's a lot of questions. You and Inspector Thisse.

Okay, here is what I know. Brian was a bigtime euro-bureau. Economist and more for the Commission and author of a plan to bring order to immigration. Wanted to bring Turkey into the EU and create a Kurdish state there, set up something in Italy. You get the idea: an enclave for everyone.

Except that he didn't propose a Basque state. Cue Arriaga.

Don't know much about Brian personally except that someone said he's Irish. Could have been, from the sound of him.

The people behind me in the picture? The man is a professor from Italy; the woman is another reporter, Caitlin Larkin, Dublin Times.

A knife or sword of some sort. Staff is saying the maid saw a sword sticking out of his chest. And a pillow over his face. Which Maria Elena lifted.

Shit. I've got to go. The good inspector wants to talk to all of us together. Hold those questions.

But I do want to say, my dear, that when I took this post to be in the same country with you, I thought the drama would be between us. Oh, maybe, the occasional terrorist attack thrown in, but no one I'd supped with being stabbed to death three doors down.

Just saying . . .

Jay

(reply)

26/6/2018 at 10:04 p.m.

You won't believe this. We've got to stay here another twenty-four hours. This is no doubt going to talk to us in that eloquent, irritating, superior stage-whisper until someone confesses, until someone says, "Okay, quit talking. I'll say I did it. Just quit talking."

Are you reading this, Inspector?

We all gathered this evening, waiting for Thisse to make his entrance. No one was talking to anyone they might be in conflict with. The Greek government woman with the big hair chatted with the comfortable academic lady from Latvia—but turned her back on the Turk reporter. Folks from the western Balkans avoided the Italians. German and French bureaucrats were suddenly kibitzing. You could feel the thirty of us breaking up into political cliques—what we'd avoided all week.

Then Thisse pops up in front of the big terrace doors, fifteen feet high, wavy eighteenth century panes, framing formal landscaping and a private lake. Like a movie set. No “listen up people,” no “let's get this over with.” I could imagine a frazzled US police lieutenant impatient with a roomful of ivory tower types and politicians. But Thisse simply stood there, sucking on one of the hard chocolates he squirrels in his mouth. We all came to attention.

He said we have to stay because the killer will emerge from our conversations. In other words, we are to gossip about each other and run it all past Thisse. Can't imagine a worse way to proceed. Unless breaking apart newly-formed friendships is his goal.

So he's going to talk to people one-on-one. I'm on deck for the morning. Informed me of that when he told me I'm a suspect. I was duly outraged, but he was chuckling. Said, “Oui, Monsieur, the Canadian professor says investigate the American. They are all so violent.

Surprised he didn't use a gun." Yes, indeed. Thisse says this right there in the marble hall, posed beside a suit of armor, exuding chocolate. Honest to God.

Of course, I'll keep you up to date. You sound worried. Don't worry. I'll lock the door and the window.

Jay

(reply)

27/6/2018 at 9:38 a.m.

Sherry,

Inspector Thisse and I had our talk, over breakfast at that. First bad meal I've had here.

His theory was that the three reporters would best remember who said what. So that's why he waited until today to talk to me and Caitlin Larkin and Kemal Yilmaz. Kemal reports for the Turkish Daily News, an English-language paper in Ankara.

You'll recall me going on about the free bar in the cellar of the Palais—"le Place de Bon Temps." One of the organizers' strategies to get us to bond. And it has been a place for good times. You leave the gilt and the polish and the serving staff; the aristocracy watch

jealously from their portraits as you wind down several marble flights. The Bon Temps has rough white-washed walls, plain wood tables, and good spirits. The odor of many German beers poured over the years greets you. American music; American foosball. The talk usually goes on into the wee hours, depending on your ability to stay awake during morning lectures.

Last night, it all turned pretty dark.

Mind you, no one stood up and said, “Brian’s plan wouldn’t work for us, and we were tired of him pushing it.” What happened was people who didn’t like the plan—or Brian personally—sat around telling other people why at least three or four folks across the room had it in for Brian. It was exhausting, but no one dared leave.

The other gossip revolved around the key. I told you Brian’s key was sitting outside his locked door. And that sounds silly unless you picture the keys here. We’ve been joking about them all week. The actual room key is big and old-fashioned, and it’s attached to a heavy metal do-dad that’s probably two and a half, three inches high. Picture the pawn from an oversized chess set with a raised number in the neck. Makes you appreciate plastic keys that can be slipped in your pocket. Because these little mothers don’t fit in anyone’s pocket. At first people carried them to meetings and set them on the tables—which announced which room you were in. By the end of the week, people just left them at the front desk and picked them up on their way upstairs.

So, someone could have known Brian's room number and picked up his key, but then how would Brian have gotten into his own room? And why leave it outside his room?

I don't like this at all.

Miserably yours, Jay

(reply)

27/6/2018 at 11:53 a.m.

Lord, Sher,

You're saying all this comes down to national prejudices? Maria Elena suspects Jordi because he's Basque. The Canadian suspects me because I'm a gun-slinging American. And you assume it's another Irishman that went after Brian? You Brits.

Of course, I couldn't resist asking around, given your prejudicial remarks. Yes, Brian was from Northern Ireland, Belfast. But he'd worked in Brussels for twenty years. I hadn't thought to ask if a UK citizen could continue working for the EU after Brexit. Maybe all his intensity was aimed at keeping his job.

But the only other Irish here is Caitlin Larkin, the reporter. From Dublin. Award-winning journalist; it's how everyone identifies her. In fact, I thought you might know each other. I asked her the other night, in the Bon Temps, but she didn't answer. Have you met her in your journalism circles? She's dead serious all the time and lectures people about the importance of accuracy in a world of shoddy reporting. Didn't bother to make an exception for me and Kemal.

Dark hair, a bob, I think you'd call it. Surprisingly light blue eyes always in a squint. Intense. Like Brian.

You're reading something into this, aren't you?

And now so is the Inspector.

Yours thoughtfully,

Jay

(reply)

27/6/2018 at 4:19 p.m.

Oh, I see. You think a sufficiently neurotic Irish—meaning Republic of Ireland—would see Brian’s plan as a way to diminish the Republic’s economic success? And kill for that reason?

Why would you suggest such a thing?

I know you read a lot of murder mysteries, sweetheart, but you’re reaching on this one. Inspector Thisse undoubtedly thanks you, though. I can imagine his little round eyes lighting up at the thought of the lead you’ve given him.

Really, what the hell are you thinking?

Jay

(reply)

28/6/2018 at 10:26 a.m.

Sher,

I imagine you’re sending this info just to see how the Inspector reacts. Do you know Inspector Thisse somehow? Are you working together? What don’t I know here?

Because you suggested it, I had little choice but to check out everyone else's stories online. And you're right, of course. Kemal and I have the same details from the Inspector. The details that differ in Caitlin's stories are small but not necessarily insignificant: like blood on the pillow or not, a note in the room—or not. It would look like an incompetent reporter wasn't quite getting all the information down correctly. But you don't think that, do you? And, of course, Caitlin does not strike me as incompetent. Quite the opposite.

And how do you know about Caitlin's family if you don't "really" know her? You're going on a rumor that Caitlin had a brother who'd moved to Belfast, joined the IRA, and died in a fight years ago. That's the stuff of fiction, don't you think?

I'm going to my room to rest before lunch. The level of suspicion that has replaced our camaraderie is exhausting. My own guilt for getting close to people instead of distrusting them like a good journalist is worse. For that matter, I'm wondering what I know about you.

I need to think all this through. Need to make a tough decision.

Jay

(reply)

28/6/2018 at 12:02 p.m.

Sher, are you there? Did I piss you off?

I suppose I should apologize.

I've been sitting in my room, trying to make a decision. And I decided to offer the good Inspector a memory that might support your theory. Even though it seems such a minor thing.

Meaning, this is where you say, "I told you so."

Glad I'm across the Channel.

Here it is:

Caitlin and I sat together in the Bon Temps Monday night, talking at some length. I'd avoided her most of the week, but it occurred to me she might be a good contact, so I tried to make small talk. Hard work with Caitlin. We left about the same time, but I detoured to the WC, having had too many beers.

I walked from the Palais to the Coachhouse, under the archways, looking out at the lawn stretching down to the lake, like dark velvet in the moon glow. I was all fuzzy from drink and sweet goodbyes—which I now regret. Unprofessional of me. Anyway, Caitlin was in

front of me. I saw her take a key from her right pocket, tilt her head to look at it in the moonlight, put it back in that pocket, and take a key from her left pocket.

I found the Inspector minutes ago, on the same lawn, and replayed the scene.

He said exactly this: "Perhaps your friend to whom you write is correct, Monsieur Howard. Perhaps it does have to do with an old issue between a Belfast Protestant and a Dublin Catholic. Perhaps pushed to some edge by nationalism and Brexit. I shall check it out."

I swear he was purring. Or did I say he looks like a frog? I'm tired and mixing my animal metaphors.

Wouldn't you like to tell me how well you know Caitlin Larkin? Or maybe the Thornberrys?

Either wary or frustrated,

Jay

(reply)

28/6/2018 at 4:12 p.m.

May not matter that you're not answering those last questions. Thisse called us together again. Gave us a new tidbit: the weapon used came from a particularly lethal-looking display of short swords and old rifles on a landing in the Palais. Weapons are everywhere; apparently one of the place's owners used it as a hunting lodge in the late nineteenth century. Whoever killed Brian just took a convenient blade.

Then Thisse dropped the real bomb: said evidence involving blood on the damn key has given the police new information, and they are planning to detain someone within the hour. Naturally, Kemal and I busted our butts to get that one online.

I didn't look back to see if Caitlin was following us to the computers.

When Kemal and I returned to the commons room, Thisse and Caitlin were nose to nose.

It seems Caitlin didn't intend to report the latest. And Thisse was pressing her on it. As we watched, he gestured to the local police, who guided her out of the room. She went past me with a look that made me think your warnings were justified. Like she thought I knew what was going on all along. Like you had told me something I'm not clever enough to have figured out on my own.

And the good Inspector, who seemed to enjoy the look on my face, simply said, “Our Caitlin is not one to publish wrong information.” His grin couldn’t have stretched any wider.

He had already printed out a news release. “Detective Chief Inspector Jean Thisse has announced that the Police Fédérale are detaining Caitlin Larkin of Dublin, a Fellow of the Foret de Soignes Summer Conference and award-winning journalist, for further questioning in the death of Mr. Brian Thornberry. Other Fellows, from all parts of Europe and North America, have been told they are free to leave.”

Just in case Caitlin sealed it by reacting as she did.

So I emailed Stephen with a retraction on the blood thing and correct news of the prelude to an arrest.

Maria Elena and Jordi eyed each other, and he waited for a second cab so they wouldn’t have to share. Jordi may go bomb Madrid some day. But not today, I think.

And what will the questioning turn up?

Here’s my guess. Caitlin went to Brian’s room after dinner Monday evening, both of them knowing all week that there was a blood-deep antagonism between them for family reasons. But I’m thinking they would have argued the current situation, not history. They

flailed at each other, I picture, with euro finance and immigration schemes. Until he told her to leave. Maybe turned his back on her. And she picked up the giant room key as she left.

To return later with a purloined blade.

Maybe.

Maybe she'll tell all. Maybe she'll keep mum. I'm betting on the former. Caitlin plays by the rules, and she'll justify herself—according to the rules of Irish politics.

As you knew from the start.

I do admire Inspector Thisse's work. He's sharp as an eagle, determined as a hound. And smug as a frog. A Belgian frog, if you will.

You, on the other hand, have been as inscrutable as an owl and sly as a fox. A fox who stumbled on prey, I'm thinking.

I'm planning on London for a late supper. Meet me.

If you care to.

Jay