

The Man Who Hated History

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Dedication

For Marta and Adam Dewey

I admit it: I'm a nit-picker. I could claim a professional or cultural cause for this trait; after all, not only am I a policeman, but just as the speculative mind is to Paris and the clerical mind to Avignon, the legalistic mind is to my city of Rouen. Mainly though, I'm a picker of nits because I enjoy being one. If I had been a fisheries inspector in Brest, I suspect I would have been equally absorbed in poring over fins for traces of contamination. I find it absolutely delicious to detect irregularities and inconsistencies, whether they be of man or God.

That said, I must also admit that Mario Salerno's most conspicuous inconsistency was one I discovered only after he had left Rouen – and, at that, it wasn't so much a planned deception on his part as a presumption of mine he chose not to correct. Perhaps if he had corrected me, I would have never pursued the riddle of George Keller beyond a filched collection of sketches. In light of later events, I realize this doesn't reflect well on my perceptiveness, but I wouldn't be frank if I didn't admit the possibility.

Matters began, blandly enough, with the address book. Because my section is called Special Affairs, it has become something of a garbage dump for other departments. No matter the crime under investigation, if it threatens to fall outside the parameters of routine inquiry and administration, alludes to political delicacies an ambitious section chief would prefer to avoid, or simply represents one dossier too many for the allegedly overburdened, it will end up on my

desk. This was not what I had anticipated that July morning four years ago when Commissioner Edgar Blanc summoned me to his office, announced my promotion, and shook my hand. To hear Blanc that day, Robert Frenaud was being put in charge of Special Affairs because of his fluency in three languages and because the section responsible for international questions required, as he put it with far too much gravity, a ‘clean young broom’. For all my fantasies of rising through the Ministry hierarchy at a speed that would have made Mercury envious, I had never before conjured up one about being a ‘clean young broom’. But as hapless as that job description might have been, I would have gladly settled for it if the actual work had entailed more than chasing down Moroccan street vendors, interviewing local politicians about their criteria for recommending foreign workers, and contacting the intimates of foreigners who had chosen Rouen to suffer fatal strokes or muggings. It didn’t take me long to realize that my chief asset for the position was that I was 20 years younger than my predecessor, that a Special Affairs broom was otherwise always clean because it had so precious little of importance to whisk away.

All by way of saying that when my secretary, Odile, handed me the file on George Keller, with the single word SUICIDE, I grunted before the prospect of another round of letters to people who might or might not have cared about the dead man. Granted Odile had to write the letters and I only had to sign them, but after four years, the death notices above my signature struck me as some bloodless mockery in their very execution. Since there had to be an unresolved investigatory question about the deceased to merit police attention, we had to balance our announcement of the death itself with a tempered plea for the extra fact or two that would appease our bureaucratic consciences. Had your brother (aunt, cousin) been under a physician’s care for the malady that killed him? Did your associate (partner, competitor) indicate why he might find it necessary to

frequent the most dangerous district of Rouen after midnight? Believe me, when they are sent across borders, continents, and oceans, questions of the kind sound doubly pointless. More than once I've imagined one of my cables arriving at a home in Los Angeles or Nairobi, the recipient reading it, and the recipient concluding that Inspector Clouseau had adopted the alias of Robert Frenaud. So much commotion for so little clarity.

The one consolation in George Keller's case – at least it appeared initially – was that he had left behind few people to grieve his literally precipitous end at the Hotel Flamant. As reconstructed by area investigators and confirmed by my office, Keller had arrived in France, at Le Havre, aboard the Norwegian freighter *The Northern Sky*. After two days in Le Havre, he had come to Rouen and taken a room at the Flamant. While there, his only visible contacts had been with concierge, Yvonne Belair, and a hotel guest, a Parisian student named Andre Lafont. For two days, he had been observed doing little but setting off from the hotel in the morning for long walks around the city, sitting at a café across the street sketching waiters and customers, and dining cheaply at a nearby restaurant, once in the company of the student Lafont. During the night of his second day, between midnight and one o'clock, he had jumped from the third floor of the Flamant to the courtyard, fracturing his skull and dying instantly. Based on interviews with Lafont, the concierge Belair, and others, as well as on physical and forensic evidence, foul play was excluded. The only loose thread was the dead man's missing sketch book, and I had a feeling right away that had somehow ended up in the hands of Lafont.

So why Special Affairs? For one thing, Keller was an American citizen – an automatic red flag for my section. For another, he had left behind a pocket telephone book with three foreign addresses – two in Rome and one in Copenhagen. The Copenhagen name, and one of those in

Rome, meant nothing to me. But the other Rome name – Mario Salerno – piqued my curiosity. In the 1970s and 1980s, there had been a Mario Salerno noted for his political agitation in the United States. He had been some kind of sociologist, given to creating egotistical scenes at international symposia in the name of troop withdrawals from Vietnam, ending sex discrimination, protesting Iran-Contra, and whatever the other causes of the moment had been. There had been a steady series of books too, though I was hard pressed to recall any titles from years back-scannings of literary reviews. Was it the same Mario Salerno? It was hardly a rare name. Didn't the Italians have their Mario Salernos the way the French had their Pierre Duponts and the Americans their John Smiths? Of course they did. Why would somebody like my Mario Salerno have anything to do with a suicide, whose passport described him as an artist but who had worked his way over to Europe as a seaman? Was I so bored I had to start fabricating the identities of the people receiving my inane correspondence?

No, I wasn't. So as soon as Odile walked out of my office with three signed letters to Italy and Denmark, I went back to the more urgent business of figuring out why the Greek consul needed three Algerian servants when he lived alone in a two-room apartment.

Three days later, Mario Salerno the one I hadn't needed to fabricate at all walked into my office

My first impression was of that American actor who played Perry Mason on television: in his apparently healthy sixties, tall, stocky, greying, overdeveloped jowls, a somewhat disconcerting liquidness to his eyes. I also sensed that what I had on my hands was a buccaneering intellectual between projects, somebody prying into George Keller simply because he had nothing more entertaining to do for the moment. His very look seemed to betray the transience of his interest. On the one hand, he had come all the way from Rome on the basis of my all-but-form letter and wasted little

time in sounding prosecutorial for more information on the suicide; on the other hand, there was an eerie quality of glistening detachment in his eyes, even as the words issuing from his mouth approached rudeness. That first day in my office, I attributed the disconnection solely to his personality and to his impatience with me for not helping him add another intellectual credit. I have never claimed to be a perfect policeman.

“You’ve been in touch with the American Embassy in Paris? If Keller had a passport, he must’ve had a mailing address in the United States.”

I told him that had been a dead end, and wouldn’t have minded recalling if it actually had been. The fact of the matter was, apart from Andre Lafont and the question of Keller’s missing sketches, I hadn’t planned on any more conversations about the suicide and felt totally unprepared for any quiz.

“Very mysterious our Mr Keller.”

“Is that what accounts for your interest in him?”

Salerno twisted in his seat so he could look doubly offended. “Are you saying you wouldn’t be interested if you received the kind of letter I did? A man I’ve never heard of, but apparently knew well enough to remember me just before he killed himself?”

“No, Monsieur Salerno. If you say you never heard of him, you never heard of him. In your place I would have regarded my cable as some kind of misunderstanding. At most, I would have telephoned for a clarification. But come all the way here?”

“You make that sound like an accusation.”

“A curiosity. Is your interest scientific?”

He smiled; mirthlessly. “Suicide isn’t my field.”

“But still a sociological problem.”

“For people otherwise qualified than myself. But tell me about this address book. Was mine the only name in it?”

The question seemed to define a new frontier in vanity, and I was sorry there weren't three thousand names in the book rather than merely three. I had to be satisfied with his disappointed nod; even two other names seemed to strike him as unwanted competition. "I see."

"Three or thirty, Monsieur. Is it really all that odd to have the name of somebody he didn't know? I myself have a pocket notebook with the names of people I've never met. Mutual friends say I should look up so-and-so, but I haven't got around to it yet. I have other addresses taken from newspaper stories – sometimes for professional reasons, maybe from whim. Psychologists tell us clutter and insecurity go hand in hand."

"A book with three names hardly qualifies as clutter, Inspector."

"On the surface, no. But consider that Keller was somebody who wanted to get away from America for a while. An artist without money, without prospects, perhaps desperate for the job he found as a temporary seaman. Maybe he was intent on starting a new life here, maybe on travelling around the world, maybe on killing himself. In any case, a man burning his bridges behind him. He turns his back on his acquaintances in America and buys a new book as a symbol of his new beginnings."

"Very fanciful."

"Then indulge me one more step. It doesn't follow, necessarily, that the names he puts in the new book are unrelated to his past habits. Maybe the only difference is that he starts collecting *European* clutter."

He had never been called that before, but to his credit, he seemed to think it was funny. "And you think that's all that's involved?"

"As I've said, I would be interested in hearing what you think is involved. In some circles of France your reputation is not negligible. I myself followed your adventures in Montreal."

For the first time since walking in and taking the chair before my desk as a tiresome obligation, he looked at me as other than a traffic cop. “Hardly an adventure. I just think it’s common sense to speak in the language of the city hosting your conference when possible.”

“And I bow to no-one in appreciating the French language. But at the cost of creating an incident requiring riot police? And where was it, the state of Colorado? You deemed it ‘common sense’ to introduce all your colleagues by listing the government agencies sponsoring their work? Some of our own delegates were quite put out by your assiduous research.”

“Social scientists should never be put out by research. But weren’t we talking about George Keller?”

His defensiveness would have been more satisfying if I hadn’t felt some of my own. At least Salerno had travelled from Rome for his entertainment; I had grown so encrusted with the administrative routines of Special Affairs that I had given George Keller little more thought than the tiny back-page item *Le Quotidien de Rouen* had given him. It was in that spirit that I pulled the Keller file off the shelf next to my desk and opened it out. Had I missed some obvious clue to a connection between the dead painter and the rabble-rousing academic? I wanted to think Salerno himself would point it out to me.

“George William Keller. Thirty-five. Born in New York City to parents now deceased. No siblings. Arrived at Le Havre on July 14 on the Norwegian freighter *The Northern Sky*. Left the ship at the request of the captain, Niels Barfoed. Some misconduct at sea. We have been unable to check that. *The Northern Sky* is now somewhere in the eastern Baltic. A radio message said only...” My assistant Emile Josselin’s hand was as indecipherable as ever. “‘Information confirmed.’ Hardly enlightening on the part of Captain Barfoed, but the fault was apparently ours in putting the query in such a way he thought it adequate to reply as he did.

In any case, we were more interested in Keller's activities in France than at sea."

"On the assumption the two weren't related?"

I blamed Josselin for leaving me vulnerable to that crack. "On the assumption we are all provincials here and not the least curious about events in other parts of the world. Keller spent two days in Le Havre. He confined his contacts there to the manager of the hotel where he stayed. He then came to Rouen by train and registered at the Hotel Flamant, a place of no particular distinction one way or the other. Two days later, on the evening of July 18-19, he leapt from his top-floor accommodations into the hotel courtyard. The concierge discovered the body and had to be treated for shock."

"Just like that."

"An autopsy excluded drugs and alcohol. Otherwise, his motive was buried with him. He didn't talk much with the people at the Flamant. The concierge said he had some rudimentary French but didn't go out of his way to practise it. The only one who appears to have engaged him in substantial conversation is Andre Lafont, a student from Paris, staying at the Flamant for the summer. Lafont insists they made only small talk, where they were both from, the architecture classes the boy was taking, Keller's reasons for being in Europe. According to Lafont, Keller said he was here because he was 'tired' of America. He didn't elaborate and Lafont didn't press him. Nothing in their conversation would indicate a reason for suicide."

"Would Lafont know a reason if he heard one?"

"He's a student, but he doesn't seem especially obtuse."

Salerno gave me my smile. "So that leaves the address book."

I pulled out a copy of the passport photo we had made. "Not only that. I'm surprised you haven't asked to see this. Surely, you've come across people you know only as faces."

He showed nothing as he leaned forward in his seat to study the grainy photo. He appeared to see only what I had. George Keller was a model of anonymity. In a dark shirt, open at the neck, he could have been a social worker, dentist, or street paver as easily as an artist. His hair was neither especially long nor short, his eyes conveyed a remoteness that could have been accounted for by something as banal as a photographer's instructions. Mouth, nose, and jaw had been evened off by the original photo and erased further by the copying. It was such an anonymous photo that it insinuated an infinity of anonymities for George Keller.

Salerno shook his head and handed it back to me. "As I say, that leaves the address book."

His eyes fell to the book under my hand as the prize he had really come to Rouen for. Its bright red cover and alphabetical thumbing index distracted me, too, for a moment: It brought Keller alive in a way that none of the dusty details of the official reports did. "The other two names are of a man in Rome with an address at the General Post Office and a woman in Copenhagen."

"Your three pieces of European clutter."

I ignored his attempt to be ingratiating. "I'd say only two. For reasons quite apart from geography, the Copenhagen address has a different significance from yours and the other one in Rome. Look here. Under *S* we have Salerno with your Rome address. Under *W* we find Leo Webber at the Post Office address. But the third person, this Denise Rosen, isn't on an *R* page, but on an unlettered page in the back."

"That's important?"

My pedantry enjoyed his bewilderment. "You can intuit a great deal about people from their address books, Monsieur. Some insist only they can write down an address on the lettered pages an act of possessiveness, a declaration of property. Others insist on using the same pen or colour ink. Then you have the advocates of printed names and

addresses, as opposed to those with a preference for script. The idiosyncrasies are endless. The Rosen woman on an unlettered page, says to me Keller noted her name only out of tact. He knew he'd never need it, but found it difficult to say no."

"I thought he spoke only to this student Lafont."

"Here in Rouen. So obviously he met this Rosen elsewhere. Maybe on *The Northern Sky*."

"Well, didn't she tell you?"

My feeling of doing penance was over. "We sent her a cable, like the one you received. But neither she nor Mr Webber in Rome have shown your... whatever it is."

"And you let it go at that?"

"What do you recommend Monsieur? Are we to ask the Italian and Danish authorities to arrest the two of them? Have them interrogated until they lay bare this Keller's soul? We are not Anglo-Saxon functionaries, Salerno. We let the parish priest handle the eternal questions."

"But this woman must know something. She was close enough for him to write down her address, whatever page it's on."

"Close? I would guess a shipboard affair the seaman and the passenger, that kind of thing."

"You talk about things in bed, don't you?"

I had an image of *him* talking in bed, and felt repelled. "If they talked about why he was going to kill himself, it couldn't have been a very gay affair. All the more reason for her to throw away my inquiry."

"I think you're missing the point here, Inspector."

Josselin entered the outer office behind Salerno; if he didn't have anything more urgent on his plate, I decided, he was going to keep an eye on my Italian guest for a couple of hours. "Then question her yourself. You seem to have precise ideas about how to go about it and the time to indulge your methods. If you discover something interesting, don't hesitate to contact me. But as far as this office is concerned,

the matter is closed. The American Consulate agrees with me.”

It was too much of an opening, and he didn't miss it. Would I be kind enough to supply him with the addresses of Rosen in Copenhagen, Webber in Rome, the student Lafont at the Hotel Flamant, and perhaps even the shipping company that owned *The Northern Sky*? I should have said no, but didn't. The fact was, as I walked the addresses out to Odile for typing, I wouldn't have minded in the least if George Keller turned out to be more than a dull suicide or if Salerno stumbled into that fact. The worst that could happen, I told myself, was that he would waste his time and make a fool of himself. Why discourage such an outcome?

Standing near the open window of Odile's office for his cigarette, Josselin looked at me expectantly. I didn't disappoint him. He was already heading downstairs to his car before Odile began typing up the addresses. “He might resolve the investigation for you,” she muttered.

“There is no investigation.”

“Now there will be, now there will be.”

I didn't like being so predictable, not even to somebody who had been working with me for nine years. Salerno was on his feet when I returned inside with the list. “A pity you couldn't have saved yourself this trip,” I said, giving it to him. “Rome can be very pleasant this time of year.”

“It's hot like everywhere else.”

“But your home now?”

“Most of the year. I still spend some time in New York.”

“One of these Italian-Americans searching for his roots?”

He smiled politely as he stuck the list into an inside pocket of his jacket. “Maybe that was the original idea.”

“And now?”

“In search of what the roots will yield, maybe.”

He held out his large hand, and I saw no reason not to shake it. In retrospect, I should have invented one.

Salerno did the expected. According to Josselin, he went directly from my office to the Hotel Flamant, where he engaged the concierge, Yvonne Belair, in conversation for seventeen minutes. From there he went across the street to the Café Soleil and sat sipping iced tea until Andre Lafont arrived twenty minutes later, apparently directed there by the concierge. The two remained in conversation for fifty-three minutes, whereupon Lafont returned to the Flamant and Salerno took a taxi back to his room at the Hotel Avignon.

Did I want further surveillance on Salerno? No, I didn't. But what I did want was to delve a little further into George Keller and his possible ties to our grating social scientist. Since New York was the one established intersection for the two of them, I had Josselin concentrate his queries on the New York City Police Department.

I should have known from Josselin's glumness, when he entered my office at the end of the day, that he had stumbled across something. Being of Breton descent, Emile Josselin has the unshakeable belief that France is a temporary concept, but that for him, to declare contentment about anything at any time, would risk prolonging that aberration and imperilling his region's hope for being recognized as an independent entity. As a result, he has become so dedicated to the humourless, that, no matter his professional satisfaction, he refuses to let down his guard. After working with him for ten years, I in turn have become something of an expert in interpreting the various gradations within his fixed expression. Normal glumness, the face he brought into the office after contacting New York about Salerno, was the equivalent of somebody else's war whoop.

As it turned out, Josselin was right, but for the wrong reason.

“At least twelve years when they were both in New York together,” he said, laying out a printout with a treasure map of intersecting arrows. “Salerno was teaching at the University of Columbia. I don’t see how they couldn’t have known each other. They both lived in Manhattan.”

I was annoyed. Four hours of tapping into every databank in France, not to mention the satellite hook-ups to New York, and the only fact we had produced was that Keller and Salerno had both lived in a city we had already known they had lived in.

“But not just New York,” Josselin insisted. “Even Manhattan.”

“And what’s the population of Manhattan do you think? I’m sorry to break the news to you, Emile, but it’s well over a million.”

I didn’t have to see his bulging eyes to know they were taking me in as an alien French specimen he would prove wrong as soon as he got back outside to consult an almanac. It was a good thing I didn’t look too; I might have missed the notation from the U.S. Immigration Service. ‘Why American Immigration;? Keller was an American.’

The fleshy wedge Josselin called a thumb, came down just as I saw for myself what the notation concerned. “It’s about Salerno, not Keller,” he said superfluously. “He was eleven when he moved to America from Italy.”

I was dismayed, but not so much that I didn’t recall my remark about his searching for his roots in Italy and how he hadn’t corrected me. “He was being polite,” Josselin shrugged.

It was a possibility, of course, and one I brought home with me. Salerno the Polite nagged at me through dinner through Janine’s petulance she had been given more canned corn nibblets than Roger, and Rachel’s irritation that I had once again forgotten to bring home the newspaper. For once,

I was glad Roger shut himself into his bedroom after supper and dared Rachel to break down his door to lower his caterwauling music: It kept both of them busy away from me. At the risk of sounding more prescient than I was, Salerno's evasiveness about his nationality gnawed at me all evening. I even took it as an omen that, after making sure the children were prepared for their summer school the next day, Rachel returned to the living room and turned on an old Yves Montand concert. Montand the epitome of France for the rest of the world, but actually a Tuscan!

By the time I gave up my pretence of reading a French general's memoirs on Algeria and went up to my bedroom, I knew I was going to drop by the library the next day to brush up on Mario Salerno. My evening call-in to the office only strengthened my resolve.

"There's another thing, Inspector," the night duty man, Rolin, said after he had dispensed with the usual menu of major and minor fracas. "A clerk from the Hotel Avignon was here with a letter addressed to you."

"What does it say?"

"It's addressed to you personally."

"For god sake, Rolin, open the damn thing and read it to me!"

Out in the hall, Rachel paused on her way to the bathroom to look in at me curiously. She was right, of course: I didn't know why I was excited, either. She settled for throwing me a baleful look for smoking in the bedroom, then continued on to her evening shower.

"Not much, Inspector," Rolin reported. "All it says is, 'I never knew of the existence of George Keller before I received your message. I suppose that puts me in your debt.' That's it, sir. No signature. Nothing."

I had Rolin read it again. It wasn't really necessary; I'd memorized it instantly. What I didn't take in then, or for some time afterward, was that I wasn't memorizing a jeer, I was memorizing a plea.