

# Chez Betty

---

(a novel)

Other books by Kenneth Farmer:

*Real Lawyers*

# Chez Betty

---

(a novel)

**Kenneth Farmer**

Three Towers Press  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Copyright © 2017 by Kenneth Farmer.

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the printing, scanning, uploading, electronic sharing, and reproduction of any part of this book by any means without the permission of the author is unlawful piracy and theft of his intellectual property. If you would like to use material from the book, prior permission must be obtained by contacting the author at [farmdogedog@yahoo.com](mailto:farmdogedog@yahoo.com) or the publisher.

This is a work of fiction, meaning the cases, events, names, plot, and characters, are invented and a product of the author's imagination and literary license. Any resemblance such elements have to actual people or events is purely coincidental and not intended by the author.

Published by Three Towers Press,  
an imprint of  
HenschelHAUS Publishing, Inc.  
[www.henschelHAUSbooks.com](http://www.henschelHAUSbooks.com)

ISBN: 978159598-524-8  
E-ISBN: 978159598-525-5  
Audio: 978159598-600-9  
LCCN: 2017935964

Cover photo by the author.  
Printed in the United States of America.

*To my friends at Chez Betty*



# Acknowledgments

---

**T**his work would not have been possible without the tireless efforts and consultation of Parisian avocat Pierre-Xavier Chomiac de Sas, and his wife, Amicie. They were very helpful in educating me on France's criminal justice system, and of course, correcting my French. A special thanks is extended to Pierre's uncle, Alain Peyrot, who introduced me to him and has taught me much about French culture in our many conversations at La Maison Française in Madison, Wisconsin. Also essential in translation were my loyal French friends, Stephane and Tanya Esnault. Finally, I would be remiss if I did not include Thierry, Alexis, and Betty Gigant of Villefranche-Sur-Mer, France. They have not only given me permission to use the name Chez Betty, they have also provided excellent support and guidance in my travels in that area of the world.





This is a work of fiction, meaning the cases, events, names, plot, and characters, are invented and a product of the author's imagination and literary license. Any resemblance such elements have to actual people or events is purely coincidental and not intended by the author.



# 1

---

**A**lan Newberg pinched his watch between his thumb and forefinger and awaited the exact moment his train from Paris would arrive in Nice. When its wheels turned not an inch farther, causing him to rock back gently in his seat, he noted the precise time: it was 2:55 p.m. Marveling at TGV's punctuality, he smiled and shook his head. Then, with a nervous sigh, he stepped down onto the station platform and commenced the last leg of a journey a nagging inner voice had told him never to begin.

Though he still suffered jet lag from his overnight flight from Chicago, with determination he dragged his canvas roller bag down a set of stairs to a walkway that crossed beneath the tracks. The loud pop of the bag's wheels jumping down each step didn't seem to bother the other passengers, who swarmed around him, jostled his backpack and aggressively chased him like a pack of hungry wolves. They had an agenda, it seemed. He strived to have none.

A crowded escalator took him up to the main part of the station, where he found, amongst a plethora of vending machines, concession stands, and information booths, a navy-blue contraption labeled *La Billetterie Régionale*. The machine presented an endless and confusing array of screens: number of adults and children, starting location, ticket class, and date of travel, to name a few. He negotiated them efficiently, however, until he came to the last one: *aller-simple* or *aller-retour*. After a moment of hesitation, he

snapped the button for *aller-simple* and a one-way ticket to his final destination of Villefranche-Sur-Mer popped out.

The ticket was the size of a business card, a seemingly inconsequential piece of paper. It had all the necessary information, but one part stood out, a French phrase with which he was not yet familiar—*à composter*. He asked for an explanation from a train company employee, and the man told him that he would have to validate the pass at one of several odd-looking yellow machines that stood sentry-like at the entrance to the tracks. At first Alan couldn't get the one he chose to work, but after four tries, he heard it click. Without examining what had been printed or otherwise giving the process much more thought, he stuffed the tiny ticket inside the zippered left breast pocket of his tan Eisenhower-style jacket.

From a schedule board displayed on a wall by an overhead projector he noted his train would leave in three minutes. He rushed down one set of stairs and up another to *Voie D*, where he found a boxy-looking chain of cars that seemed antiquated in comparison to the modern aerodynamic bullet train on which he had arrived. Over the public address system he heard three sing-song musical tones followed by a female-automaton voice, France's version of Siri. Although it declared a message in French far too rapid for his complete comprehension, he did understand the last part very well: *attention au départ*. For a split second he wondered if the words were meant for him, but quickly discarded the notion as a figment of his paranoid imagination.

His confidence now reinvigorated, he hoisted his luggage onto the train and installed himself on a flop-down seat near the entrance. Through the still-open sliding doors his eye caught the attention of a woman clutching the hand of a girl of perhaps five years. The woman, whom he assumed was the child's mother, stood

## *Chez Betty*

helplessly on the platform, while ominously eyeing her valise. So he exited the train and with a gentleman's nod lifted the suitcase inside. She in turn grasped the girl by the armpits and swung her aboard, stating one word: *merci*.

The woman appeared to be in her thirties, a good ten years younger than he. She was French thin and had dark brown hair, several strands of which crossed her face. While using one hand to whisk them aside, she used the other to guide her child to the last remaining seat. Though attractive, the woman had a harried look that suggested no bright star had ever shined upon her, except of course that which must have been provided by her beautiful daughter.

The girl, on the other hand, as yet unblemished by the vicissitudes of life, sported a blissful grin. Her locks, slightly lighter than her mother's, were combed back into a neat ponytail. She wore an orange-ruffle dress and a thin matching sweater. Her feet, covered in white socks and little-girl tennis shoes, could not reach the floor and dangled innocently above it.

Alan felt a wave of infatuation, but did his best to put a lid on it. Even though he had been working on being more spontaneous and less analytical, he did not believe in the unrealistic notion of love at first sight. More than likely the woman would rebuff him anyway, causing the train ride to become embarrassingly uncomfortable. Nonetheless he offered her his seat, and she returned the favor with a curt smile.

Suddenly the doors slammed shut and the train jolted into a smooth glide through a mountainside tunnel. The girl babbled in French at what seemed like breakneck speed. She posed various questions to her mother, to which she responded, "*Non,*" and just like her American counterpart, the child repeatedly protested, "*Mais Maman!*"

## Kenneth Farmer

Fascinated by this interaction, Alan dug into his basic command of the language that he had obtained by studying instructional manuals and listening to compact discs in his car back home. He had learned the nuances of its grammar, the basic pleasantries and enough vocabulary and phrases to function at hotels and restaurants. But he was far from fluent. Intimidated by the prospect of asking his first question of a native speaker, he sought an easy one to pose, and after several minutes mustered the courage to spit it out: "*Quelle heure est-il, madame?*"

Startled by this abrupt overture, the woman glared at his multi-function watch, which was equipped with every bell and whistle imaginable. She turned her face away in disgust, apparently offended by what she perceived to be a come-on line or a ruse to steal something. But the young girl beamed, proudly displaying her pink-banded Mickey Mouse watch, and responded in a small reedy voice: "*Il est quinze heures quinze, monsieur.*"

Alan noted the child's perfect use of the liaison that blended "il" and "est" into one word (ee-lay) as well her precise pronunciation of the phrase *quinze heures quinze* (can-zur-canz). A *quarter past three*, he translated inwardly. Only the most advanced classes in America taught such phonetics, so at first he believed her to be a little genius. Then he realized his perception had been jaded by his frame of reference—she was French, and he was in France.

The train made it to Villefranche-Sur-Mer in just six minutes. As the mother and daughter departed in a different direction, he smiled politely at the girl and thanked her for giving him the time. "*De rien,*" she replied, projecting the letter *r* from the back of her throat. It was nothing, she had said. He sensed otherwise, but knew not why.

\* \* \*

## *Chez Betty*

A conductor wearing a dark blue uniform with red trim and a hat having a shiny black visor stuck his head out the train and looked both ways. Having assured himself no passengers were still getting on or off, he whistled once to signal a departure, and a dozen or so cars slowly passed Alan one by one.

The station stood in sharp contrast to the hustle and bustle of Nice-Ville. It had no passengers save a young couple, who sat on a bench in a bus-stop-like shelter on the other side of the tracks. Its classic-looking terminal had peach walls and mint-green doors and offered a glimpse into the past, though a dilapidated warehouse next to it, drenched in tagger art, brought things back into the present. Behind these structures, a steep, rocky hillside, densely packed with ornate villas and pastel-colored apartments, towered above in a scene that only an artist could imagine. As the lonely sound of the locomotive's air horn trumpeted in the distance, he whispered to himself, "I'm in deep cover now."

In the States, Alan had rented an apartment in the small town from a Norwegian named Rolf Swenson, a petroleum engineer who dabbled in real estate. E-mail exchanges established the man's credibility, so he took the risk of wiring him three month's advance rent, or 6,000 euros. That morning Rolf had told him by phone he could pick up the keys at Côte d'Azur Immobilier, a local realty office. Hence, his first task was to find the business, get the apartment and settle in.

He trudged up a hill from the station, and before he got too far, he stopped a woman and asked for directions. She did not speak English, so he showed her a slip of paper with the name and address that he sought, and she pointed down an asphalt walkway no wider than an alley that led into town.

## Kenneth Farmer

As he moved along the path, he savored a view of the Mediterranean Sea on his left, turquoise blue by virtue of the water's reflection of a cloudless day. A mile-long cape protected a mammoth cove and formed a natural harbor for fishing boats and yachts that dotted it like stars on a clear night sky. On his right, a jagged escarpment, out of which the village had been cut hundreds of years before, provided zero tolerance for errant movement. Eventually the route became bordered on both sides by an unbroken chain of medieval-looking four-story buildings that had weathered wooden front doors, windows flanked by large colorful shutters, and balconies from which sheets and recently washed clothing waved gently in the March breeze.

Several hundred feet down the narrow passage, he noticed a small fountain with a brass lion head at its center. Water trickled from the lion's mouth into a pool in front of it, making a soothing, percolating sound, evocative of introspection. A plaque, hanging from a semi-circular stone wall behind the pool, read Place du Conseil. He knew the words meant place of advice or counsel. Though an extremely rational man, unbelieving in the ethereal, he accepted the invitation of a single bench next to the shrine. Setting down his cumbersome suitcase and backpack, he reflected on what had brought him four thousand miles from home.

In the months before his departure, he had left a twenty-year marriage in spirit, though his wife, Sara Elliot-Newberg, was the one who had filed for divorce. With the legal proceedings still pending, somewhat out of the blue, he decided to go to France. This uncharacteristically impulsive detour caused many who knew him to suggest he had lost his mind. But he believed he had found it, or at least the will to discover it.

As an attorney, he did title searches and conducted real estate transactions at his own company. While this might have been



## *Chez Betty*

viewed as underemployment, he made good money as a result of low interest rates that induced plenty of refinance opportunities before and after the mortgage crisis. His job was quite suited to his personality—precise, predictable and organized. Mechanic's liens, lis pendens, mortgage releases, federally required loan disclosures, warranty and quit-claim deeds, and detailed closing statements excited him, though most lawyers found such technicality boring. He had never practiced inside a courtroom, and this suited him just fine.

The rest of his life was equally nondescript. He and Sara lived in an upscale multi-story home with a two-and-a-half-car garage in Schaumburg, Illinois, a quite ordinary northwestern suburb of Chicago. She was an accountant at a successful firm and provided steady income when closings were lean. The two had very similarly uninspired constitutions and seemed to get along well for most of their marriage. They both had an affinity for classical music, enjoyed going to the opera, frequented book clubs, played Scrabble and Trivial Pursuit, and incessantly corrected each other's grammar. Their impeccably organized household left nothing to chance; the freezer held alphabetized Lean Cuisines, and their garage housed well organized tools and lawn equipment. Even in winter it had no grease or dirt on its painted floor.

Despite their outward congruence, the couple had no anchor in this rather staid existence unfortunately. Early in their marriage, they had decided not to have children even though both were physically capable of it. Sara had felt kids would disrupt her career and elected to defer this challenge until later, and he was hardly in a position to object given his own professional obligations. By the time the subject came up again, and she heard her clock ticking, they had drifted apart, and their lives had evolved into a tomb

## Kenneth Farmer

wrapped inside an economic relationship. He did his thing and she hers, and no longer did they spend time together.

Meanwhile, he had begun to change, so Sara asked him to see a shrink, ostensibly out of concern for his welfare. The impetus for her request was a series of events she found particularly distasteful. For one thing, he had purchased without her consultation or consent a blue Lexus convertible, a bold deviation from his ten-year-old black Honda Accord that he kept in immaculate condition, always washing it on Saturdays and religiously getting oil changes every 5,000 miles. He had also gotten an earring and altered his hair, growing out his close-cropped helmet into a cool-guy messy look. His white Perry Ellis shirts and conservative suits that he had worn at work morphed into casual Columbia button-downs and blue jeans. At one point he had even told Sara that he wanted to be called Al, but she ignored the request, dismissing it as further evidence of his insanity.

The shock of the divorce petition, filed after Alan had refused to participate in counselling, initially inspired him to suspend his rebellion and retreat into the security of the Ben Franklin-like schedule that had heretofore dominated his life. It consisted of the following:

6:00 Rise

6:15 Thirty-minute jog

6:45 Shower and dress

7:15 Breakfast (always a protein shake)

8:00 Arrive at work

8:15 Title searches and paperwork for closings

12:00 Lunch (a tuna sandwich and a latté)

1:00 Closings

## *Chez Betty*

5:00 Depart work  
5:30 Arrive home  
6:00 Dinner  
6:30 Read/Watch TV  
10:00 Bed

One day, while he was doing his morning jog in a park near the apartment he had acquired at the beginning of the divorce proceedings, he experienced what felt like an epiphany. He observed in the park something he had not seen the day before: a bush blooming with white and purple flowers. He could not name the kind, but the idea of their unexpected appearance encouraged a resurgence of a personal renaissance the divorce papers had temporarily arrested. Thus he resumed his pursuit, if not hunger, for fulfillment undefined.

To be sure, he could have resisted this life-altering force, but chose not to. At forty-two, his own clock had started ticking, and he had begun to focus on death, to him a permanent nothingness that made eternal darkness look good. The only way to make sense of this inevitability would be to open up his life to places he'd never been, talents he didn't believe he possessed, and discoveries his methodized mind had thus far blocked out. If he succeeded even partially in this endeavor, the sting of life's meaninglessness and death's certainty would not be so bad.

As time progressed, he searched the Internet for outlets for his new beginning. Travel attracted him the most, and in particular, to France. So he studied its language. At first the exacting grammar came as second nature to him, his brain being so well structured. But after a while, he savored its beauty and poetry, which motivated his interest all the more and ratified his changed focus.

## Kenneth Farmer

During the course of his investigation of the country, he came across Villefranche-sur-Mer, or Villefranche for short. The photos of the classic coastal town mesmerized him, not to mention its beautiful weather. His divorce was dragging on due to backed-up court dockets, and so without informing his wife or seeking her permission to spend marital funds on an extended vacation in the Riviera, he closed his title company and just plain left, shocking all who knew him.

A seagull's loud cackle awoke him from his daydream. He felt as though the bird were laughing at him, or perhaps with him. Place du Conseil had afforded him the opportunity to reflect but not the benefit of its wisdom. He washed his face and hands in the shrine's pool and continued his search for the real estate agency and the keys to the apartment, climbing endless stone stairwells that connected to a spaghetti of streets.

Eventually, he entered a mysterious underground passage marked by a barely visible sign that read La Rue Obscure. The passage extended a considerable distance and curved in such a way as to block a view of its end. Nevertheless, he slowly ambled down the bedrock floor that had been grooved and polished by centuries of human traffic and the relentless attrition of time. He saw nobody and heard only the echo of his footsteps and the occasional dripping of groundwater from above.

For a moment, he wondered if he would find his way out and become forever lost in the passage's dark recesses. But after a while, he came to an intersection, dimly lit in yellow by a lantern-styled fixture hanging from the ceiling. The intersection offered two more passages, one going left and the other forward. He chose the one on the left, which led him outside, where he found the storefront of Côte D'Azur Immobilier.

## *Chez Betty*

“I’ve rented an apartment from your client, Mr. Rolf Swenson, and I’m supposed to get my keys here,” Alan declared to the man inside, who himself must have just arrived, since he appeared a bit disorganized and had yet to turn on the lights.

The man, whom Alan assumed was a French real estate agent, unlocked a filing cabinet and retrieved some manila folders, whereupon he scoured various lists of apartments and sheets of names. After a few minutes he scratched his head and tossed the records onto his desk in resignation. “I unable to accommodate you—no paperwork,” he said.

“You have nothing about my rental?”

The agent muttered defensively in French and replied, “Pardon, monsieur, I do not understand your word ‘rental.’”

Alan consulted the translation app on his iPhone. “*La location* is the term, I believe.”

“Ohhh,” the agent exclaimed. “*Mais non, monsieur, elle n’existe pas.*”

Alan felt jet lag ganging up on him. “*Regardez,*” he snapped. “This is an email from Rolf Swenson that documents our understanding.” He slapped a copy of the communication on the desk and tapped his finger on the part that supported his position.

The agent slowly read the email and lowered his unibrow-shaded eyes sheepishly. “I sorry, sir, but I have no paperwork and without paperwork you are, how you say in English, shit out of luck.”

“But I paid 6,000 euros for this place!”

“There are other immobilers in Villefranche,” the agent quickly reassured. “Perhaps there is some mistake, and one of them has your *location.*”

“No, Rolf said Côte d’Azur Immobilier—you’re Côte d’Azur Immobilier, *n’est-ce pas?*”

Kenneth Farmer

“You say, *n’est-ce pas*’ You want English or French now?”

The comeback did not impress. “What I want is satisfaction,” Alan hollered, slamming his fist on the desk. “I’ve been on a plane seven and a half hours and a train five and a half.” He paused and took a breath. He knew he was behaving like the classic ugly American; so he reined in his rage. He should relish the challenge of the unexpected as part of his new persona instead of further making a fool of himself.

“This man *Norvégien*, oui?”

Sighing, Alan conceded the fact.

“I know him—I tell you where he live—you fix this *merde* with him.”

“How do I get there?”

“His apartment near church. Street, hmm, *rue d’Église, je crois*.”

The agent gave him the directions, telling him to watch for a large yellow bell tower, having a clock. “You find Rolf there, okay?”

“Oh, I will,” Alan emphasized. “This is a matter of 6,000 euros, and I’m going to get to the bottom of this one way or another.”

“Bottom of this? What you mean?”

“You know, get this worked out, hell or high water.”

“Hell or high water?”

“Let’s just say that he’ll be made accountable.”

“Ah, *vengeance*,” the agent cried out.

“Something like that,” Alan responded. He strode from the office, determined not to worry, for worry in his new world was not supposed to be part of the equation.

\* \* \*

On the way to the Norwegian’s home, Alan descended a dark, narrow walkway, shadowed from the late day sun by a seamless

array of old buildings and restaurant terraces. The path appeared to end at a massive stone wall, but at the last second snaked to the right. The wall constituted one side of an old church and was speckled by small holes that had been cut out by friars in the Middle Ages for nesting seagulls. In modern times, according to his exhaustive research of the area, the holes were covered by wire mesh to prevent entry of the birds and unpleasant streaks of excrement that such creatures would inevitably produce.

As he rounded the corner, the mottled stonework blended into yellow-painted plaster that rose to the top of a square bell tower. Each face of the tower had a large clock whose five- to six-foot hands jumped minute by minute toward four o'clock. At the final jerk of the big hand, the first of four resonating metallic clangs of the bell sent a chill down his spine, for their clarion call seemed to be omniscient and a witness to all that had transpired before that point.

Past the church Alan found a courtyard that cloistered a two-story apartment structure. Oddly enough the small quadrangle was cordoned off by crime-scene tape marked, "*Ligne de la Police—Ne Traversez Pas.*" Numerous French police criminalists dressed in white booties, hair nets, and latex gloves carefully stepped about the ground and inspected its grey-slate tiles for clues. Amidst a group of red triangular-shaped evidence markers near the doorstep of the building, a motionless lumpy mass lay covered by a piece of black plastic. Outside the yellow tape, several onlookers gaped at the grim spectacle.

One of them, a hunchbacked old lady, stooped her small, feeble frame forward onto a dark-colored cane that she grasped for support. She looked as if she were dressed for mass, wearing a formal midnight-blue suit and a matching pillbox hat. When he got closer, he noticed her eyes, recessed and almost entirely white. She

was in fact blind, though there was something about her in a figurative sense that suggested she could see very well. Since she may have learned the particulars, Alan decided to query her. "*Qu'est-ce qui s'est passé?*" he asked.

"*Il y a eu un meurtre,*" she responded ruefully. She held up her thumb and forefinger in the universal sign for a gun.

A murder? The town seemed too small, too innocent, and too beautiful for such a thing, he thought. Yet the tarp-covered body confirmed the woman's words.

Alan asked his third French question of the day: "*Qui était-ce?*"

"*Rolf Swenson—le Norvégien,*" the blind lady answered. She spoke of the man as though he were a unique figure in the town, with whom everyone was familiar.

Recognizing the name, Alan blurted, "He's the one who ripped me off for 6,000 euros!" So loud and forceful was his reaction, the onlookers snapped their heads around and looked at him aghast, he having disrupted their mournful gaze.

Within seconds, someone gripped his shoulder and asked in a heavy French accent, "Did you know Rolf well?"

"Apparently, not well enough," Alan replied as he spun around. Before him stood a man in his fifties, who sported a closely-trimmed mustache, a dark fedora, and a grey blazer, worn from years of use and wrinkled from neglect. He produced a card that said, "Lieutenant Gustave Esnault, Gendarmerie Nationale."

"Ez-nalt, is it?"

"The correct pronunciation is, 'Ay-no,' monsieur."

"So you're a cop?"

Esnault smiled tight-lipped and replied: "In a manner of speaking."

"Look, I just arrived by train and have nothing to do with this—"

"Did Rolf owe you money?"



## *Chez Betty*

His lips quivering, Alan replied, "I rented an apartment from the man, paid the money, but got nothing in return."

"How unkind," the lieutenant said, his voice oozing with sarcasm.

"Are you making fun of me?"

"No no, quite the contrary," Esnault insisted. "I'm concerned about your plight. Please, tell me more. I imagine this development has placed you in a position quite untoward."

"What are you implying?"

"Simply that you have lost a great deal of money—"

"And what? That this would give me a motive for murder?"

"Your words, not mine, monsieur."

"So what do you want from me?"

As though the lieutenant were chiding an errant child, he said, "For one thing: the truth. For another: you must accompany me to an adjunct office of *la gendarmerie* along the Basse Corniche for a few more questions."

They made their way to a white Citroën having blue striping and the typical squad-car light package atop its roof. The lieutenant permitted him to sit in the front seat, not handcuffed or restrained in any way. He claimed he had extended this favor, because he didn't think Alan would be violent or a risk to flee. They drove to a brown-brick structure along the main vehicular drag of Villefranche. The building had three flags draped over its entrance, one of which was the familiar tricolor of the Republic of France.

"Your card says you work for Gendarmerie Nationale. Is that like the FBI or something?" Alan asked.

"We are a branch of the French military that conducts police investigations of serious offenses committed in the countryside or in small villages. Our activities sometimes involve interrogation."

## Kenneth Farmer

“Interrogation?” The word frightened Alan and put him even more on the defensive. “You have arrested me without any basis and now you want to interrogate me?”

“Technically it is an identity check,” the lieutenant said. “Our law permits the detention of foreigners for up to four hours to determine who they are and the propriety of their presence in our country. Normally this occurs at transportation centers, but in some cases elsewhere. You mentioned you had come here by train and obviously, eh-hem, are not French.”

“So now you plan to take advantage of this housekeeping procedure and question me.”

“Quite naturally.”

The lieutenant led Alan into a small office, where he hung his fedora and blazer on a rack in the corner. After he readied himself for the encounter by rolling up his sleeves and stretching out his arms, he took a place behind a desk cluttered with paperwork and pointed to a single chair in front of it. “Please, have a seat.”

Alan complied and posed a simple question: “Do I need a lawyer?”

Esnault ignored him. Instead he fingered out some tobacco from a pouch that he had retrieved from his blazer and meticulously organized it into a neat pile on the desk. “Smoke?” he asked.

Alan declined and repeated his question.

As the detective calmly rolled a cigarette, he finally answered in a noticeably blasé voice: “You are entitled to inform a family member of your situation or anyone else of your choosing.”

“Would such a person include a lawyer?”

“Why yes, though the term ‘person’ might be a bit generous. By the way do you have an avocat?”

“Not in France.”

## *Chez Betty*

“As I thought,” Esnault said. “Of course, you wouldn’t need one for walking around here, unless you had something else in mind.” He lit his cigarette and blew a smoke ring that rose upward like a halo in search of a saint. “Are you sure you don’t want one of these?”

Alan shook his head and asked for the name of a local attorney with whom he could consult. But the French cop shifted back from his desk as though something vile had crawled across it and provided a sanctimonious reply: “That, sir, would be improper.”

“Fine, I will call my American lawyer instead.”

“An expert on French criminal justice, I trust?”

Conceding the lieutenant’s point, Alan sighed and got out his iPhone and began scouring the local listings for an attorney. This constituted a laborious and frustrating process, for he did not understand the phone system and struggled with the correct terminology.

For a while Esnault seemed amused by such efforts, but as time went on, he decided to expedite things and offer some friendly advice: “Obtaining an *avocat* could take several hours, and in order to get you on your way as soon as possible, it might be more efficient to answer a few innocuous questions and forego such formality.”

“All right, you win. Let’s get this cleared up.”

The lieutenant smiled approval. “Your passport, may I see it?”

Alan handed it to the cop, and he paged to his photograph, which had been taken long before his personality reversal and didn’t reflect his many changes in appearance.

“You look much younger in person,” Esnault complimented.

“How I look has nothing to do with this.”

“You seem to have some animosity toward me, but I can assure you that I’m on your side as much as that of the *République*.”

"I'm not convinced of that."

"I can tell."

"All I know is I'm not free to leave, which means I'm in custody," Alan said. "By this point in America the police would have read me my rights."

Esnault laughed, openly mocking the sophomoric irrelevancy. "As you no doubt have already observed, monsieur, your rights in France are very different."

The remark plainly summarized Alan's dilemma. Nothing he had learned about the law in his own country would assist him. "What if I refuse to answer questions?" he asked.

"I will report your lack of cooperation to the *procureur*, and he might view your unexplained recalcitrance as evidence you are hiding something," Esnault responded. He began pacing the floor with his hands clasped behind his back in a manner reminiscent of Sherlock Holmes. "Now, tell me why you were you at the murder scene again?"

"To find Rolf Swenson and get my money back."

The lieutenant pursed his lips and nodded slowly as he absorbed the response. Before he could comment further the phone rang, and he picked up the receiver. "*Oui.*" A pause ensued, then "*Oui*" again, followed by another pause and another "*Oui.*" Esnault hung up and resumed his pacing. "It seems you had a conversation with a real estate agent at a business called Côte d'Azur Immobilier. Can you tell me about that conversation?"

"The man there was supposed to have the key to the apartment, but he had no documents reflecting my agreement with Rolf."

"And what was your reaction upon being so informed?"

Alan hesitated, for Esnault seemed to know the answer before it came out of his mouth. "I was angry. Wouldn't you be?"

## *Chez Betty*

“He claims that you threatened revenge against the victim over the rent money.”

“I never said anything about revenge,” Alan replied, half laughing.

Esnault’s face went stone cold and expressionless. “You said you wanted to get to the bottom of the matter—hell or high water.”

“Those are English clichés that he didn’t understand.”

“He suggests otherwise.”

“Well, he’s wrong.”

Esnault canted a disbelieving eye, at which point Alan began chattering in an attempt to justify himself like a teenager who had come home late with the family car. Plainly he had forgotten the most elementary advice any neophyte lawyer in the U.S. would have given him: shut the hell up when dealing with the cops. Esnault, on the other hand, said little, often maintaining uncomfortable dead air at every moment his willing subject paused for breath.

“I left the real estate office a few minutes before I got to the scene at 4 p.m., and the police were already there,” Alan said. “The murder had to have happened some time before I spoke with the agent. However he has spun my words, they could not have been the motive for a crime that had already occurred before my arrival at his office. This is just a big misunderstanding!”

“Uh-huh.”

The “uh-huh” offered little reassurance, so Alan continued his nervous babble. “Before I went to the real estate office, I had been on a train from Nice to Villefranche, and before that another train from Paris to Nice, and it arrived just before 3 p.m. When the murder occurred, I was still—”

“You seem very familiar with the time of the victim’s death,” the lieutenant interrupted. “How, pray tell, do you know when Rolf was

Kenneth Farmer

killed? It could have been early in the afternoon or even this morning.”

“I just assumed it was an hour or so before I got there.”

Esnault responded with yet another “uh-huh.”

“Before I was in Paris, I was on an overseas flight from the United States. Before that I lived a normal existence there.” This statement was a bit of a stretch, but Alan went with it, figuring the cop would never learn about his troubles back home. “Even if Rolf were shot weeks ago, I couldn’t have done it,” he said.

“Shot?”

Alan straightened in his chair. “A-an onlooker told me that.”

“Indeed, monsieur. Indeed.”

“You’re wasting your time.”

“We can only hope.”

“Why don’t you let me go?”

“It has never been my intention to keep you.”

“But I thought I was under arrest.”

“As I explained, monsieur, this is only an identity check.”

“Yeah, up to four hours to check my identity, right?”

“It’s the law.”

“And I suppose that makes it all good.”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, it does. May I ask your profession by the way?”

“I-I’m a lawyer.”

The lieutenant laughed again, this time more derisively.

“Pardon monsieur, but I find the irony most entertaining.”

All Alan could do was grunt.

“Before you leave, I do have one request,” the cop continued.

“What’s that?”

“Would you mind giving me that jacket?”

## *Chez Betty*

The wording of the question seemed deliberately designed to conceal the fact Alan would be giving formal legal permission to take his personal property. Figuring he had no choice, however, he removed the jacket and handed it to the lieutenant, who in turn gave it to another cop having a spastic facial tic involving his left eye.

“Why do you need it anyway?”

Esnault smiled coyly. “I have the right to remain silent.”

“Very funny. Is there anything else, or can I go on my unmerry way?”

“Yes. Have you washed your hands lately?”

“Actually I did at a fountain in town.”

“About what time?”

“Maybe a half hour ago. Why do you ask?”

“Again, I have my rights.”

Esnault returned Alan’s passport. He suggested that he sign in daily at the police station to show his good faith and avoid more severe terms of release that a magistrate might impose. The lieutenant then got permission to search his luggage and rummaged through his roller bag and backpack, but found no gun or weapon. “All right, we are finished for now,” he said. “In the meantime, where will you be staying?”

“I have no idea. My apartment fell through.”

“May I suggest an accommodation?”

“So long as it isn’t a French jail.”

“There’s a hotel down the street on the left that you will find very much to your liking.”

“What’s it called?”

“Chez Betty.”

# About the Author

---



Kenneth Farmer began his 34-year legal career as a public defender in Louisville, Kentucky, before moving back to his native Wisconsin, where he served as a prosecutor until he retired in 2011. During this time, he defended or prosecuted thousands of cases, including everything from the mundane

traffic matter to the not-so-routine capital murder charge.

Farmer has lived and traveled extensively in France, speaks French fluently, and has studied the French criminal justice system with the assistance of lawyers and prosecutors from that country.

To date, he has published two novels: *Real Lawyers*, the story of a newbie public defender who proves he is a real lawyer, and now *Chez Betty*.