

Rue Saint Maur, 3:14am

by: Christopher Malo

The city had a way of going silent. Not a nervous silence, but a quiet silence. The sky was dark, yet everything was colored in a yellow hue cast by the arched streetlights. Buildings, parked vehicles, walls, pavement. Cars and scooters and ambulances and police cars could periodically be heard off in the distance taking people from point A to point B, but the noiselessness hung in the air. It remained unbroken, saved for an occasional humming of a motor, until that first punch landed. And the violent scuffle that followed.

It took a few seconds to recognize it was an actual fight. The noise of shuffling shoes across the ground first registers as someone simply sliding their feet over the pavement, too lazy or unwilling to lift them further than necessary to move them from one place to another. In this instance, it is really to maintain and ensure balance while blows are being exchanged. At first the latter is misidentified as the former. Next is the realization that movements are happening in a quick pace, and with sharp action. I would come to realize these are blows being thrown. I also here the sound of cloth rubbing cloth. As I start to realize this is a fight, I imagine two or more people grabbing and gripping each other's clothes to a) maintain control of the other's movements, b) to position themselves, or c) use the person as leverage when throwing punches as to inflict the maximum damage possible.

I start to put the pieces together as I lay on the couch in the flat I am renting in Paris for the summer. The windows here are six feet tall and always open. From the 4th floor (or 5th if we were back in the U.S.) I have an obstructed view of the Rue Saint Maur and Rue de la Fontaine au Roy corner below. Bar Le Rubis is on the corner with its maroon awning and gold lettering announcing its name. I can also make out part of a key duplication store, Serrurier, next door. A globe shaped glass ball houses either a street camera or a light. In either case, it is ineffective right now. I can't see the actual corner, but close to it, and almost down to the street. I begin to wonder if I can actually see any of the action.

Leaping from the couch, I struggle for an ideal vantage position at each of the three windows of the apartment, hoping one will treat my eyesight with said people in conflict. I move quick because most of the times fights never happen, and if they do, they are usually over quick. Most of the time the shit-talking that preempts a fight -if a fight eventually even takes place at all, because most never rise to an actual physical exchange- lasts longer than the actual combat. But part of what was piquing my interest that cool July night in the 11th arrondissement, was that no words had been exchanged at all. It didn't have the earmarks of a drunken bar fight, disagreement between two lovers, or the strong-arming of one's personal possessions. So as I went from window to window and back to try and catch the smallest of glimpses of any action, I began to wonder if what was taking place was some sort of robbery.

As I began to listen, my brain began to process and arrange the pieces of the known and assumed puzzle. It tried to sort out the facts of what I had heard versus what I guessed to be true, based on the likelihood of the way things were going down and had gone down in the past from my own empirical evidence/experience. I tried to peer between two of the other buildings forming our courtyard and down to the street below. But I still was not able to see anything. Only listen.

And what I was hearing lead me to believe that this wasn't a one-on-one confrontation, but maybe two or three on one. The amount of foot shuffling and the number of blows being thrown and landed had to be being delivered by more than four arms. The occasional grunt and groan could be made out as punches were thrown and landed, but other than that, no shouting or cursing or verbal exchanges. Only appendages were talking with the occasional guttural response.

Then I heard a noise that, if I was correct in my assumption as to what it was, would probably be a game changer and make this a very lopsided battle, as if an uneven fight wasn't likely to result in that from the beginning. It was the sound of a large stone or brick against concrete, in what I surmised was someone picking it up to move this drama to the climax and then the closing curtain. I listened intently, having surrendered that my eyes were not going to see what I wanted them to witness; the visuals to both fill in the blanks and also correct what my mind had been constructing and putting together as the bits of information came in.

I heard an impact, followed by the noise of rock + gravity = earth. And then one of the stranger results, nothing. For a split second. Was our victim unconscious? Dead? Then came the recipient of the stone's violent trajectory, crying. Wailing. It was a noise somewhere in between injury and inebriation. A slow, escalating wailing. Loud. And growing louder. He was crying out something in French, which I could not understand.

What I thought I could make out was, "Blood. Bloooooooood..." On the one hand it made sense. If he had gotten bricked, there was a substantial chance blood could be involved. On the other hand, I don't speak the language and thought my mind could be processing what it heard and forcing it to fit into the context of what I think I would hear.

I realized my brain was trying to rectify two things simultaneously. One was the "blood" translation. That was either going really well or I was completely off track. The other thought process was trying to resolve what that after I heard the brick/rock/stone/boulder hit the man and then the pavement, I no longer heard fighting. But I also didn't hear footsteps fleeing the scene of the crime. I thought that was rather odd. It didn't seem like the violence had escalated until possible serious bodily injury had occurred and then the perpetrators realizing the error of taking things too far fled to escape responsibility. It was as if the blow was struck and then he/she/they calmly walked away. Granted, it was in the early hours of the morning. Foot traffic and vehicle traffic was virtually nonexistent. But regardless...

The moaning continued. At times it was elevated to levels of epic wailing. It occasionally was elevated to screaming. But it also stayed in the same general place, hidden and protected by the kitty-corner flats obstructing my view of the source of the howling. I felt helpless to provide an effective assistance. New in the city, not speaking the language and being from a place like South Philadelphia all carried weight in the decision making process.

In a beautiful world, I would have gone down and tried to offer assistance. And there is certainly some measure of guilt for not getting involved. But self preservation is one of the most integrated, base, primal instincts an animal knows.

Instead, I opted to stay put by our 4th floor walk-up window, and listen. Eventually moans subsided. Not that the man could be heard trailing off as he walked/limped/stumbled away. They just became lower and less frequent. And the night returned to its original state of silence.