

Montreal Gazette

MONTREAL - We're sitting in a car with tinted windows parked in a quiet residential street. Remi and Mike are shooting the breeze, something about car insurance premiums. Suddenly, Remi sits bolt upright. "It's her," he says slowly. "Looks like she's been cooking."

It is indeed she. A young woman with long dark hair, smartly dressed, carrying a metal lunch box. She's supposed to be on her way to her French lessons. But she's on her way to meet her lover. He's parked just round the corner in a black Mercedes.

"Did ya get the licence plates?" asks Remi. "Yeah, yeah," says Mike, his sharp-featured, Russian rookie sidekick. We trail the Mercedes as it speeds along the streets, swerving unexpectedly into a deserted industrial park.

"Where the hell is he going? D'ya think he saw us?" asks Mike.

"Nah, they're too wrapped up in each other," says Remi, slowing down to allow our car to fall behind a block or two.

Eventually, despite nearly losing them in the rush-hour traffic, we trail the car to a Courtyard Marriot. Mike deftly tucks his video cam behind the windshield pillar to snap the lovebirds. They embrace before entering the hotel, hand in hand. "Ain't that sweet," he says, clicking the save button. "Got it!"

Afterwards, we grabbed some coffee and doughnuts. "For a moment, I thought he was onto us!" said Mike. I felt a warm glow as I listened. It was hardly the stuff of a Raymond Chandler novel, but I'd at last witnessed a real-life surveillance op. My first attempt, a few weeks earlier, with another PI, had been a bit of a damp squib ...

I'd actually turned up in a trench coat. A trench coat. It had been an accidental choice, grabbed from the coat rail as I flew out the door to meet the first PI who'd been trusting enough to invite me out on a mission, the first of several I encountered as part of a harebrained scheme to delve into their secret, shadowy world.

I'd found him, we'll call him Frank, on Craigslist. Our first meeting had set some alarm bells ringing. He was young, only 23, a conspiracy theorist, who claimed to have trained Israeli soldiers in hand-to-hand combat in a top-secret unit in the Gaza Strip. Eventually, he wanted to become like George Clooney's CIA operative in the film *Syriana*, setting up a network of highlevel informants in the world's hot spots.

I was to report for duty on de Maisonneuve Blvd. W. There he was, by the Peel métro station, standing with his back to the chill wind. Sensing my approach, he swung round, ninja-like, face shrouded in a black hood, eyes masked by mirrored shades. All at once, I felt a bit less worried about resembling Columbo.

"Did you bring dark glasses?" he snapped. "We have to blend in."

“Blend in? In that get-up?”

Embarrassed, he pulled back his hood and removed his shades. He attempted to explain. For the next three days, he would be trailing the ex-girlfriend of a rich client. “She mustn’t recognize me,” he blurted out.

Anyway, he was to nab some shots of her with her new lover. Didn’t he worry that the client might turn psycho on her? He told me he didn’t want to know. He’d accepted the \$500 payment upfront, no questions asked. In any case, he continued, “He’s sitting in his car, watching us watching her.”

“Where?” I asked, seriously creeped out.

“Around.”

My wariness soon hardened into deep skepticism as our stalker, it transpired, was nowhere to be seen. Neither was there any sign of the ex-girlfriend. Could Frank have conjured all this up out of thin air? After a couple of hours standing around in the wind, interspersed with a trip to Second Cup to warm up, I left him to it.

Frank was clearly an amateur. One thing, I would realize as I met other PIs was that the real pros tended to play down the drama. I’ll admit I was in thrall to the lore of the great detective novel. I’d wanted to find the Philip Marlowes and Sam Spades of this world, the chain-smoking outlaws working from cluttered offices somewhere on the wrong side of the tracks. Of course, these were outrageous clichés. But, hell, I’d have been happy to settle for Jim Rockford.

Disappointingly, the pros evaded my attempts to eke out some romance from their daily grind. There was the detective from out of town, for example, who met me on the grassy verge between Chinatown’s Holiday Inn and the Ville Marie Expressway with his terrier, who bore a promising resemblance to Snowy, Tin Tin’s trusty canine. He kind of dressed the part, too, slightly louche, with dark glasses and a pair of dressy grey shoes with interminable toes.

But I could detect no Marlowesque nobility to what he did, none of the self-made morality of a lone ranger beating his own path through society’s conflicts and contradictions. It was all rather cut-and-dried. Most of his work was corporate stuff, trying to catch out employees lifting weights while on sick leave or tracking down feckless debtors for credit collection agencies. It seemed to be on the dull side of seedy, all related with a world-weariness that suddenly made me want to throw in the towel.

Then there was the PI with the multinational agency, an old-timer with more than four decades in the game. I asked him whether he’d been attracted by the romance. Were there any film characters or books that had inspired him? He threw me a funny look. “In my time, you wanted to be a cop,” he said. That’s what led him to join the RCMP, where he spent over 20 years in fields like organized crime and VIP protection. “I was assigned to (former prime minister Pierre) Trudeau,” he says, remembering past glories.

Then he moved to the private sector, where he now managed big-time corporate projects. I could feel my interest wandering as terms like “budget coordination” and “consumer-oriented service” started cropping up. Didn’t I have a high-speed car chase to attend somewhere?

I’d pretty much written off the whole project, especially since the two bona fide PIs I’d met didn’t seem too hot on the idea of me accompanying them on a mission. But then I met Remi Kalacyan, an independent in his early 40s, whose agency – VIP Investigations – was based in a leafy office shared with some lawyers in Old Montreal. He seemed as intrigued by my work as I was by his. “It’s a bit like being a journalist,” he said, as we drank tea together one late evening. “You guys have to do a lot of investigation too, right?”

A devoted family man, he was as far removed from the hard-boiled archetype as it was possible to be. In fact, he reminded me of a kid I’d known at school, the smart kid who ran a parallel playground economy trading bubble-gum cards, a loner who somehow also managed to be everyone’s friend.

I heard about various cases over the two years of our acquaintance. There were the usual corporate cases and some legal work. But it was the ordinary kitchen-sink dramas that pulled me in, with their unique twists: the anxious parents trying to keep tabs on their “lazy 40-year-old son,” the distraught mom trying to ensure the foreign dad wouldn’t kidnap their four-year-old, the divorcee in an alimony-related dispute whose obsessive-compulsive nature led her to wash her car every day, even in the rain.

“We’re in the emotional sector,” he told me. Clients would sometimes walk into his office, barely able to string a sentence together. He’d have to act as a sort of counselor “working around the emotion, guiding the client with empathy.” Often he had to read between the lines, being careful not to get entangled in personal vendettas. One woman had asked him to find a guy to hit on her husband’s mistress. “She said she wanted to send the video to him. I replied: ‘What’s the point?’ ”

“We’re seeing the deep end, as deep as it can get,” he said. “So deep that the person doesn’t ever want to see you again. We don’t get any repeat orders.”

Finally, we were getting somewhere.

I may have mucked up one of Remi’s ops. I met him by a garbage can next to Lionel Groulx métro station. Dressed casually in a hoodie and jeans, he was with Pierre, an older detective with Brylcreemed hair. It was another infidelity case. We were searching for a man in his 60s in a green windbreaker, who eventually emerged from a minibus. With his mop of greasy grey hair and pasty face, he didn’t look like he had the energy for extramarital congress.

We followed him into the bowels of the métro station. In the stuffy car, it was incredibly difficult to sneak a peak at him. Remi leaned in with his phone-like gadget. Thanks to a camera on the side, we could see our target. Unexpectedly, he got off at Plamondon, swiftly followed by Pierre, just as the doors slid shut. When Remi and I eventually made it back, I jumped out of the carriage, only to find the guy seated there, right in front of me. I think I must have pulled some sort of horrified expression before jumping back in. His eyes followed us with interest as the train pulled away. Game over.

Remi shrugged it all off, but I was beginning to understand this detective game was not as easy as it seemed. There was the drudgery: as Remi put it, “sitting in a parked car for 12 hours to get 30 seconds footage.” There was the endless attention to detail – licence plates, clothes, shoes, features. Finally, there was the sixth sense that I had been so severely lacking back at the Plamondon métro station.

“Later you learn the tricks and you develop the gut instinct. It’s about going that extra mile, not just doing the strict minimum,” said Remi at an espresso bar on Laurentien Blvd. Remi had learned the hard way, all by himself, as in-house detective to a criminal lawyer. There had also been guidance from an Ed Ciriello, a PI from Boston, who’d been in the business for 50 years. Remi talked about him in reverential tones. At last, a hero! I gave him a call. “Yeah, Remi!” Ciriello shouted down the phone. “Pass on my regards!”

Ciriello was a living legend, a former CIA agent who’d received death threats from the Viet Cong, instructed the secret police of the Shah of Iran and gone undercover in Saudi Arabia during Desert Storm. He claimed to be the subject of John le Carré’s *The Honourable Schoolboy*. What was not to like about this tough-talking detective of the old school? Everything he said was quotable. “The morality of the world has hit new lows,” he said. “That’s good for us!” Honesty came first on the list of attributes needed for the job: “You have to be who you are, you have to be who you say you are.”

Ciriello seemed to be an endangered species, a noble maverick spirit in an era of corporate lackeys. But, I began to realize, his legacy was being passed on through guys like Remi. I replayed our conversations in my head. Recently, I’d asked him whether he knew Frank, the Craigslist detective. “Yeah,” Remi replied. “He came knocking at my door a while back, looking for experience.” I’d started recounting the rookie’s nuttier claims, expecting to elicit a few laughs, but Remi’s reaction had surprised me. “C’mon,” he said. “Give him a chance. We were all young once.” It occurred to me that maybe you needed Frank’s sense of adventure to become an Ed Ciriello.

I met Remi for a final mission on another nondescript residential street. His van with the plumber’s sign was there, but he was nowhere to be seen. I rattled on the door, which slid open. His head appeared from the back. “C’mon in!” he whispered.

We sat in the back, watching for another sorry suburban sinner. “Do you never feel you’re profiting from other people’s misfortunes?” I asked.

“We’re always there for the bad things,” he said. “Everybody has their life. Suddenly there’s a blockage. We’re here to solve that problem so they can move on.

“When I present them with the evidence, clients tell me they’ve been naive, blind, stupid. Those are the words they use. And I throw it back at them. You know what, I tell them, you can’t be a car mechanic, an electrician, a doctor, a lawyer all at once.

“You can’t know everything.”

And, with that, I took my leave. Two years of delving into the secret world of private detectives had shown me that it definitely wasn’t like the books and the movies. Yet, there was still a cryptic morality to

it all that intrigued me. The spirit of Marlowe was not quite dead. It was just where you would least expect to find it, hiding in the back of a fake plumber's van in suburbia