



Trouble in paradise: the town of Annecy, in southeastern France.

CRIME AND SCANDAL

When Family Secrets Turn Deadly

A pedophilia-fueled murder in an idyllic town shocks France



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Nestled in the shadow of Mont Blanc, in the Haute-Savoie region of eastern France, the city of Annecy has been described as the “Pearl of the French Alps,” and for good reason. Although far inland, Annecy has an oceanic climate, yielding breezy summers and mild winters. You can bike or paraglide. You can ski the mountains or ski on its lake. You can play golf. You can play the casinos in black-tie. You can soak in the nearby thermal baths of Aix-les-Bains. There’s a slew of restaurants that ooze fondue.

Annecy is a small place, where people know each other’s business. Since the late 1950s, its population has been capped at 50,000. A recent poll cited it as the best city to live in in France. The air is pure. The water’s clear. The place is something a child would draw up when imagining the perfect setting for a fairy tale.

And yet the paradise *sur terre* was shattered in 2020 by the grisly murder of Morgane Nauwelaers, a 33-year-old psychologist who was gunned down in her office by Albert Blanc, a 77-year-old retiree. The subsequent murder trial which just concluded revealed a twisted story of multi-generational incest and riveted France—not just because it involved a father desperate to keep a family secret from spilling into public, but because it also forced some to wonder if the country’s lax attitude toward pedophilia didn’t play a role in the crime as well.

“I Wanted to Just Scare Her”

In June, a local court convicted Blanc of murdering Nauwelaers. Prosecutors maintained Blanc was eager to prevent her from notifying police about allegations of incest made against him by his daughter.

During the trial, the prosecution stated that Nauwelaers had been treating Blanc’s 43-year-old daughter, Malaurie, who told her during therapy that Blanc not only sexually abused her as a child—but that Blanc had also been abusing his 15-year-old granddaughter. Just as Nauwelaers was preparing to alert authorities in August of 2020, Blanc stormed into her office with a sawed-off rifle.

That afternoon, reports of a shooting quickly spread throughout Annecy. Military personnel cordoned off the area, and by the next day patients and neighbors gathered

outside the office in the center of town to lay flowers and leave notes of sympathy. Many were still in shock.

“She was doing something courageous,” one person said to BFM TV, a French station. “She gave her life for this. And that touches me very much.”

For most in Annecy, the shooting was an open-and-shut case, especially since there was a witness who placed Blanc at the scene of the killing: Louis François—Nauwelaers’s husband and the father of their 14-month-old son.

François told the court that, prior to her death, his wife seemed bothered by her patient’s revelations and that, as required by French law, “she knew she had to let the police know.”



A photo of Morgane Nauwelaers at a makeshift memorial.

François, who is a psychologist as well, shared an office with Nauwelaers, and in his testimony he described the moment he saw Blanc: “During the session my patient asked if they could go to the toilet. When they got up, they left the door of my office open. I could see a man walking towards me.... I asked him if he had a meeting. He told me yes, and pointed to Morgane’s office. Five minutes later there was a gunshot. My first thought was that a patient had committed suicide. I ran out and found Morgane on the ground.”

François chased Blanc and caught him outside, where he punched him and seized his gun, all while frantically calling out to others for help.

“I heard a lot of screaming,” says Geraldine, whose clothing boutique is next to Nauwelaers’s office building. “People started running into my store. I looked out our storefront window and saw a man coming out of the building with a rifle perched on his shoulder, like a hunter. I then ran to the other part of the store and opened the back door, where I saw [François] on his knees, covered in blood, pointing, ‘He killed my wife.’ The whole scene still gives me goose bumps.”

When François rushed back to check on his wife, Blanc fled to a nearby shopping mall, his clothes soiled with Nauwelaers’s blood.

“He was walking calmly, and we could follow him just by the blood marks, but no security had stopped him,” says a man named Christophe, a former firefighter who was one of the first to spot Blanc. A first responder on the night of the Bataclan attack, in Paris, Christophe tracked Blanc to the parking lot and wrestled him down until the police arrived. “The mall was crowded,” Christophe says. “I was afraid he was going to pull another gun out of his bag.”

Just as Nauwelaers was preparing to alert authorities in August of 2020, Blanc stormed into her office with a sawed-off rifle.

In court, Blanc attempted to explain the unexplainable: “At the start, I wanted to just scare her, and talk. But once I was in her office, I couldn’t get an explanation, because she ran. At that point, I understood it was over. I panicked.” Terrified by the rifle-wielding stranger in her office, Nauwelaers tried to hide behind her desk. Blanc pulled the trigger.

François later told the court what he saw upon his return to his wife’s office. “The entire lower part of her face had been blown off. I put her on her side and tried to free her trachea, telling her to breathe, ordering her not to die. And yet at the same time, there was a part of me that understood it was lethal. There wasn’t much left except for a hole in her trachea trying to breathe.”

Blanc’s claim that he only meant to scare Nauwelaers, and that his gun was fired accidentally, was attacked by Line Bonnet-Mathis, a lawyer for the prosecution. To her, Blanc’s motive was clear: “The accused was determined to execute the psychologist, and he left her no chance of survival when he aimed at her head from 53 centimeters away.”

Bonnet-Mathis went on to argue that Blanc’s attack was entirely pre-meditated: he had scouted Nauwelaers’s office during the weeks preceding the crime; he had rented a car the day of the murder; he had left his cell phone behind on purpose; he had sawed off the end of his rifle so he could hide it in his gym bag and loaded it with two rounds, while stuffing additional shells into his pockets. Experts also testified that to shoot the model of gun Blanc used, a certain amount of extra, focused force had to be applied, thus debunking Blanc’s claim of a misfire. In addition, a scrub of Blanc’s computer showed Internet searches of: “Morgane Nauwelaers,” “pedophilia,” and “verdicts rendered on incest.”



Albert Blanc in custody after the murder of
Nauwelaers, on August 26, 2020.

Despite so much pre-meditated behavior, Blanc strangely had no previous criminal record. A former architect and commercial shopfitter and real-estate developer, he closed his company, Codemag, in 2006 to become a full-time investor.

Yet a court-appointed psychologist testified Blanc demonstrated “extremely dangerous criminal behavior.” The psychologist continued: “During our meeting, Mr. Blanc showed no regret, nor remorse. Instead, he seemed upset Morgane’s husband punched him. He also described Madame Nauwelaers as ‘stubborn and determined to ruin him’ and that ‘she wouldn’t listen to reason.’”

Speaking before the judge, Blanc did little to refute the psychologist’s report. Instead, he seemed to reinforce its assessment of him. He told the court that he had little empathy for the victim, that he “shot her out of spite,” and that he felt “a sense of injustice” by all the revelations.

“All I know is that [Nauwelaers] had taken my daughter into her care to cure her, and that my daughter had come out in a truly lamentable state,” he said. “A daughter who loves her father cannot denounce him.”

By that point in the trial, it seemed Blanc was finished. The accretion of facts made the charge of pre-meditated murder cut-and-dried in the eyes of many observers.

Yet the story became even more twisted when Blanc's daughter Malaurie took the stand.

“The accused was determined to execute the psychologist, and he left her no chance of survival when he aimed at her head from 53 centimeters away.”

“At the end of September 2019, I decided to get therapy because I was close to a burnout,” Malaurie testified. “In 2017, my daughter had confided to me that my father had touched her improperly. I asked him for an explanation, and he said he was sorry, and he'd never do it again. And he never did. And for me, Madame Nauwelaers's plan of going to the authorities was a catastrophe. My son was going to know. My husband was going to find out. I was afraid my family would blow up. So, no. I didn't do what was needed to be done.”

So, rather than wait for “what needed to be done”—for Nauwelaers to alert the proper authorities—Malaurie decided to tip off her father because, as she told the court, “it seemed normal for him to know.”

“Are you aware that you yourself were a victim of an incestuous father?” asked the prosecutor, Bonnet-Mathis.

Silence.

“You were anorexic during adolescence. You faced difficulties as an adult. Have you made the link with what happened with your father?”

“I never made the link,” replied Malaurie. “Today I understand. I understand better. But at the time, it was ok for me that he apologize.”

“Are you getting psychological treatment right now?”

“No.”

Malaurie later described Blanc as “bothered.”

“Bothered by what?” asked François-Xavier Manteaux, the presiding judge.

“The consequences.”

“For whom?”

Malaurie didn’t respond.

“With my daughter, it was different”

Nauwelaers’ husband testified that his wife was troubled by Malaurie’s revelations, especially those regarding the abuse of a minor, and knew that as required by French law “she had to let the police know.”

But what Nauwelaers did not know was that in this case the father, daughter, and the mother may have been in league against her.

It’s a dynamic that is not unusual in such cases of abuse.

“Depending on the family configuration, either the member who reveals the truth is considered a traitor, and then suffers from a form of exclusion; or the professional is seen as the enemy who has attacked the family,” says Patrick-Ange Raoult, the general secretary for the National Union of Psychologists. According to Raoult, the “therapist as threat” dynamic is prevalent in many cases when family secrets are revealed during therapy. “There are times when it can go as far as paranoid perceptions, on which someone, as in this case, actually acts.”

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asked him for an explanation, and he said he was sorry, and he'd never do it again.”

When Blanc's tall and elegant wife, Arlette, testified before the judge, she claimed that during the month leading up to the murder, she had no communication with her husband regarding the allegations of pedophilia. And when she did find out, she said, she asked for a divorce.



Mourners outside Nauwelaers's office, in Annecy, France.

Yet, according to the regional daily *Le Dauphiné Libéré*, this was not the case. The paper reported that during the family holiday to Brittany that summer, Arlette and her husband were in constant contact (he had stayed behind, claiming he had the coronavirus), and he admitted to her via text that he was “devastated by the pain I’ve caused you,” and said the time away from the family would help him “prepare next steps.”

Presented with these and other incriminating text messages, the normally reserved Arlette looked rattled.

The judge then read one of the texts to the court: “No change. She’s super stubborn and determined.”

The judge paused, then looked at Arlette and asked, “The *she* you’re referring to in the text is who?”

Arlette had no answer.

Yet one thing seemed clear: While Arlette was texting with her husband, Malaurie was also working the phones—calling Nauwelaers relentlessly, pleading with her not to go to the authorities. At one point, Malaurie even put her daughter on the phone, so she could beg Nauwelaers “not to hurt her Papy.”

Le Monde reported that, after Malaurie’s final session with Nauwelaers, on August 24, she called her father and told him her therapist was going to notify the police immediately. She also gave him Nauwelaers’s name and address.

Two days later, Blanc left his hedgerow-lined home in Chambéry, 30 miles south of Annecy, and drove to the city center, where he changed license plates with another car in a parking lot. Minutes later, he entered Nauwelaers’s office.

Despite his daughter’s efforts to shield him, Albert Blanc was convicted of murder. Yet while he stood before the judge for sentencing, asking for leniency, Blanc displayed no remorse for his crime. In his remarks he not only seemed oblivious to the trauma he’d caused his daughter and granddaughter, he also appeared to rationalize his behavior.

Referring to his relationship with his daughter, he told the judge, “We were used to breaking the law, the way you run a red light. With my daughter, it was different. I was going to tell her a story in her bed, and, once, I caressed her [genitalia]. She stiffened. It stopped there. I was wrong not to discuss it with her. When it stays in the family between us, it’s private. But as soon as you go to the police, it’s public and takes on another dimension. I felt cornered.”

Blanc then considered how sex with minors is perceived in France—a country where esteemed writers such as Gabriel Matzneff can openly boast about their relationships with under-age children and still be revered in society. Blanc also revealed what may have been the tragic roots of his crimes.

“As far as pedophilia goes,” Blanc said, “we [as a society] mix everything now. You have guys like Fourniret [Michel Fourniret was a renowned French serial killer and rapist], and then you have people like me. Of course, it’s condemned in the eyes of the law, but that depends on eras. At this moment, we give so much credence to what women and children claim. I don’t recognize this society anymore that denounces sexual violence with hashtags. When I was a kid, a fisherman asked me several times to show him my private parts. It traumatized me. My sister was ten years older than me and when we slept together in the same room she told me, ‘Come here, we’re going to enter your little car into the garage.’ So, I entered my little car into the garage. It didn’t traumatize me.”

Blanc was swiftly sentenced to 30 years in prison. The court also accorded Nauwelaers’s 3-year-old son the status of Pupille de la Nation (Pupil of the Nation), a rare title given to children of soldiers killed in war, or of parents killed by terrorism. As Bonnet-Mathis told the court, “Morgane Nauwelaers died for The Republic, by insisting on following its rules.” Such a designation ensures the coverage of any medical bills, schooling, and job training during the person’s childhood and young-adult life, along with loans and tax benefits throughout one’s lifetime.

For their roles, Arlette and Malaurie have not been charged. “No link could be established that they could have known [Blanc’s] intentions,” said Marjorie Berruex, the lawyer for Nauwelaers’s husband.

After her last session with Malaurie, Morgane Nauwelaers wrote the following in her notebook: “Alert authorities first, then 2 steps: Make the daughter understand she’s protecting her own daughter. Get the father help and have him confront his acts.”

Next to the note, she’d drawn a rough sketch of a woman, her mouth sewn shut.

It was two days before Blanc’s fateful visit.

For some, the killing has transformed Annecy. “A lot of fear has seeped in,” says Amandine Dupenloup, who works at a pharmacy down the street from the murder.

At 68 Rue Carnot, the gold plaque inscribed MORGANE NAUWELAERS-PSYCHOLOGUE that hung in the entryway has long since been removed, along with her husband's. Their offices, according to neighbors, are still vacant.

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Photos: Mauritius Images GmbH/Alamy (Annecy); Jean-Baptiste Serron/*L'Essor Savoyard* (memorial, mourners)