

**DOPPELGÄNGER**  
RELEASING

Presents

# SMASH & GRAB:

The Story of the Pink Panthers



**A Film by Havana Marking**

Starring: Tomislav Benzon, Jasmin Topalusic, Daniel Vivian, Rob Kennedy

UK · 2012 · 90 MINUTES

**Marketing/Publicity Contacts**

Brian Andreotti/ Rebecca Gordon  
Music Box Films  
312.508.5361/ 312.508.5362  
[bandreotti@musicboxfilms.com](mailto:bandreotti@musicboxfilms.com)

**Distribution Contact**

Andrew Carlin  
Music Box Films  
312.508.5360  
[acarlin@musicboxfilms.com](mailto:acarlin@musicboxfilms.com)

## SYNOPSIS

Their crimes resemble high-octane Hollywood action movies: a sports car speeds through a Dubai shopping mall, crashing into the windows of a Graff jewelry store. Masked, gun-wielding men jump out of the car, and stuff fistfuls of diamonds into their satchels before screeching off. In London, they took all of three minutes to make off with \$30 million in diamonds. They are captured – not in person, but on surveillance tapes that record their astonishing lightning strikes with hypnotic accuracy.

Playing out like a noir thriller spiced with cutting-edge animation and shocking real surveillance footage, Havana Marking's *Smash & Grab* is an exclusive all-access pass into the mysterious world of international jewel thieves. Dubbed 'The Pink Panthers,' the formidable Balkan gang has stolen nearly a billion dollars worth of jewels from boutiques in the world's most opulent cities, including Geneva, Paris, London, Geneva, Dubai and Tokyo. Through never-before-seen interviews with key gang members, this provocative documentary delves into the gang's incredible history and introduces the viewer to the global police forces who work furiously to stop them. Beyond the glitz of the Panthers' incredible heists, *Smash & Grab* exposes dark truths about the illicit diamond trade and the world's most ruthless mafia networks.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I first read of the Pink Panthers in 2003 when they pulled off their ambitious Bond St raid (the Graff store). It was the British press that labelled them the Panthers after the Met police force recovered a huge diamond in a tub of face cream – a scene reminiscent of the Peter Sellers films. Although nothing was known of them then, the name stuck and now even Interpol have 'the Pink Panther Working Group'.

In 2010, when the first real information about the thieves became public knowledge it was clear that these were organised thieves, part of a much larger group than was previously imagined. Notably they were all from Serbia, Montenegro and connected states, many from the same impoverished cities and towns. It was also first declared that these were 'the most successful diamond thieves of all time'.

The mythology of the Panthers is informed by the name – they seem from the outside to be exciting and glamorous, slick professionals at ease in Monte Carlo, Paris, Geneva, Tokyo... there are famously 'no victims' in a Panther raid, and it can't be just luck that in over 150 robberies no one has ever been seriously injured. On top of this there is a mythology from the Balkans themselves, that these are gentlemen-crooks of the Robin Hood variety.

I have always been bewildered by the Balkans: for a long time their terrible conflicts dominated our press. Phrases like 'Ethnic cleansing' and 'Balkanisation' seemed linked somehow with the wave of organised crime coming from Eastern Europe in the 1990s, but I could never quite get a grip on it. The story of the Panthers seemed to come directly out of this and I knew I had found the perfect access point to explore and finally understand what happened post-Tito in the region.

I first met a panther in 2010. I was told to sit alone by a deserted war memorial on the outskirts of Podgorica and an unidentified man would pick me up. I wasn't allowed to take my cell phone in case it was bugged. We went to an exclusive beach-side club, and there began my journey. By 2012 I had met four panthers, a courier and fence, all crucial to the trade in stolen diamonds.

It is nonsense to say that these are Robin Hoods. And it is nonsense to say there is *no* victim. While the thieves themselves might be gentlemanly (and they were to me – especially when I became pregnant in the middle of film) the links and networks around them are dark, dangerous and scary. I hope my film explains the context, shatters myths and reveals a wider truth: the West has a much bigger role in this than we like to admit.



## BIOGRAPHIES



### **HAVANA MARKING: DIRECTOR**

A British journalist and filmmaker, Marking has worked in the factual TV and film industry for over 15 years. Her first feature documentary, **Afghan Star**, won both the Directing and Audience awards in Sundance 2009, The Grierson award for 'Best Doc on a Contemporary Issue' and the Prix Italia. The follow up film, '**Silencing The Song**' (for HBO) aired to superb reviews and is due to be released on DVD in the US in the fall.

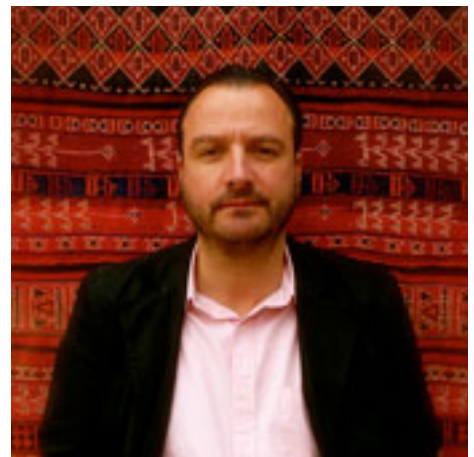
Subsequent credits include **Hell and Back Again** (Executive Producer) – nominated for Academy Award 2010, winner of the Director & Grand Jury Prizes Sundance 2011, **Vote Afghanistan!** (Co-director), **Landina: Miracle Baby of Haiti** (Exec Producer) and **Michael Johnson: Survival of the Fastest** for Channel 4 (Director). Her articles and photographs have been published in UK publications: The Guardian, The Observer and the Telegraph.

### **MIKE LERNER: PRODUCER**

Oscar-nominated producer, Mike Lerner has been producing arts, travel and popular culture documentaries for twenty five years.

He has produced films for many international broadcasters including BBC, Channel Four, Five, ITV, Discovery, HBO, PBS.

He has won numerous awards including, Academy Nomination for Best Documentary Feature, 4 Sundance Awards (Grand Jury, Best Director, Audience, Cinematography) , Grierson Award for Best Documentary, Prix Italia, nominated for 2 Royal Television Society Award and 2 IDA Awards, Cinema Eye Award, Independent Spirit Award, Gotham Independent Film Award, Winner of Alfred Dupont Award, Winner Best Documentary Moscow Film Festival.



### **TONY COMLEY: DIRECTOR OF ANIMATION**

Tony Comley writes and directs animation from an old Police Station in South London. His CV is a cauldron of web design, murder, science fiction, cognitively dissonant art installations and special needs education.

Accolades include a British Animation Award, a Special Distinction from Annecy

animation festival and features in Creative Review & Liberation newspaper, in which he was granted the nick name "The Gangster of Animation". Names he can safely drop include: The BBC, Channel 4, Sky, Nickelodeon and Romford Halal Meat.

Recently he toured Britain in a transforming truck designing and delivering workshops teaching animation to children on behalf of the Tate Gallery and Aardman.

Currently he is developing a TV show about a bat chasing an owl across an endless vista of stars.

## **JONATHAN BAIRSTOW / SHERBET: ANIMATION**

Jonathan Bairstow is managing director of animation production company Sherbet. Through Sherbet he has produced BAFTA winning and BAFTA nominated shorts and recently developed innovative animation and visual fx for documentaries. He was animation producer on the UK's first fully animated documentary for television, 'The Trouble With Love and Sex', for the BBC's Wonderland, which aired in 2011.

[www.sherbet.co.uk](http://www.sherbet.co.uk)

Amongst other projects, he is currently working on development for an animated documentary series for the Sundance Channel and BBC Worldwide and an animated feature with the BFI.

## **SIMON RUSSELL: COMPOSER**

I'm a self taught musician/composer living in London. As a child, I was very keen to experiment with sound - modifying the family piano, removing the frets from my first bass guitar and, much to my parents' annoyance, taking all the family clocks apart to see what made them tick. This curiosity led to my interest in organic found sounds, sampling and electronics and my fascination with how music is put together. Delia Derbyshire and the BBC Radiophonic Workshop were a big influence and steered me towards composing my own soundtracks.

I've composed music for over 60 documentaries/films including many award winning programmes such as Havana Marking's Afghan Star (2 Sundance awards, Grierson) and Baroque; From St Peter's to St Paul's (RTS Award). I've also composed 52 episodes of a new Aardman animation Canimals being shown around the world and recently completed a pilot for Disney.

A full list of credits can be found at [www.simonrussellmusic.com](http://www.simonrussellmusic.com)

## **EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS**

### **MARTIN HERRING / ROAST BEEF PRODUCTIONS**

Martin Herring is a director and co-founder of Roast Beef Productions. For the last 25 years he has been making films for the BBC, Channel Four and Discovery; "Beijing Swings", "What Would Jesus Drive", "Cutting Edge's Black Widow", and "Lonely Planet" are a few of his credits.

### **KAROL MARTESKO-FENSTER / THOUGHT ENGINE**

Karol is the MD of Thought Engine a global media consultancy providing strategic direction and advisory counsel to a diverse slate of clients and partners. Karol is President of S2BN Films and previously was SVP&GM of Film at Babel Networks and Head of Film at Palm Pictures. Most recently Karol collaborated with Michael Cohl on Harry Belafonte's SING YOUR SONG and Emmett Malloy's BIG EASY EXPRESS, and he is a producer on Martin Herring's MALCOLM MCLAREN: SPECTACULAR FAILURE and Elizabeth Bentley's JÄGERSTÄTTER, and an executive producer on Noel Dernesch & Moritz Springer's JOURNEY TO JAH, Daniel McCabe's THIS IS CONGO, James Allen Smith's FLOORED, Phil Cox's THE LOVE HOTEL and THE BENGALI DETECTIVE, and Danfung Dennis' 2012 Academy Award Nominee HELL AND BACK AGAIN. Karol co-founded *FILMMAKER* Magazine, *RES* Magazine and the media content enterprises [indieWIRE.com](http://indieWIRE.com), [conditionone.com](http://conditionone.com), [irontrader.de](http://irontrader.de) and CINELAN.

### **GERNOT SCHAFFLER AND THOMAS BRUNNER / SABOTAGE FILMS**

Sabotage Films was founded 1998 in Vienna, Austria by Thomas Brunner and Gernot Schaffler. Thomas is the financial director as well as head of production and Gernot works between Vienna and Los Angeles looking for new projects for the company and takes care of the in-house art gallery. Sabotage's work reaches from TV commercials, web specials, short films, music videos, and documentary films to high-end art shows, and the company has won multiple awards at advertising festivals from Cannes to New York. Before 1998, Thomas and Gernot worked shoulder-to-shoulder in another production company as Executive Producers for more than 10 years. Gernot and Thomas are also executive producers on Daniel McCabe's THIS IS CONGO, Phil Cox's THE BENGALI DETECTIVE, and Danfung Dennis' 2012 Academy Award Nominee HELL AND BACK AGAIN.

### **About Doppelgänger Releasing**

The new cutting-edge genre label of Music Box Films, Doppelgänger Releasing launched in 2013 and kicked off its slate with EDDIE: THE SLEEPWALKING CANNIBAL and the Cairnes' brothers 100 BLOODY ACRES. Upcoming releases include the Torrente films, starring Santiago Segura. Founded in 2007, Music Box Films has quickly established itself as one of the leading theatrical and home entertainment distributors of foreign language, American independent and documentary films in the US. Past releases include the film adaptations of Stieg Larsson's trilogy of international mega selling novels; the first in the series, THE GIRL WITH THE DRAGON TATTOO, with over \$10 million in US box office, was one of the most popular international releases of the decade. 2012 heralded diverse new titles such as Terence Davies' THE DEEP BLUE SEA, starring Rachel Weisz, and Philippe Falardeau's Academy Award nominated MONSIEUR LAZHAR, one of the top grossing foreign language films of the year. 2013 releases include Cate Shortland's LORE and Baran bo Odar's THE SILENCE, starring Ulrich Thomsen. Music Box Films is independently owned and operated by the Southport Music Box Corporation, which also owns and operates The Music Box Theatre, Chicago's premiere venue for independent and foreign films.

## **CREW AND CAST:**

DIRECTOR  
HAVANA MARKING

PRODUCER  
MIKE LERNER

EDITOR  
JOBY GEE

ORIGINAL MUSIC  
SIMON RUSSELL

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY  
RICHARD GILLESPIE

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER  
MARTIN HERRING

HEAD OF PRODUCTION  
JANET KNIPE

PRODUCTION COORDINATOR/CASTING  
ALEKSANDRA BILIC

ANIMATION AND VISUAL EFFECTS  
Sherbet

ANIMATION AND COMPOSITING  
Tom Bunker  
Helen Dallat  
Craig Essam  
Blanca Martinez  
Zion Pool  
Tom Senior  
Ben Sayer  
Stephen Middleton  
Richard Clements

ANIMATION BACKGROUND ART  
Lucy Sullivan  
Helen Dallat

ANIMATION DIRECTOR  
Tony Comley

ANIMATION PRODUCER



Sarah Essam

**ANIMATION EXECUTIVE PRODUCER**

Jonathan Bairstow

**ADDITIONAL CAMERA:**

Estefania de la Chica

Joshua Weinstein

Juan Pablo Chapela

**RESEARCHER**

Angus Hohenboken

**ASSOCIATE PRODUCER MONTENEGRO**

Jovo Martinovic

**LOCATION PRODUCER SERBIA**

Milena Miletic

**LOCATION PRODUCER DUBAI**

Rosie Kingham

**FACILITATING PRODUCTION COMPANY DUBAI**

**Ti22**

**LOCATION PRODUCER BARCELONA**

Nick Hall

**EDIT ASSISTANTS**

Heloise Revel

Gemma Appleton

**TRANSLATION:**

Vana Goblot

Taghrid Choucair Vizoso

**ARCHIVE RESEARCHER**

Suzana Jovanovska

**ADDITIONAL GRAPHICS**

Danny Carr

**CAST**

MIKE - Tomislav Benzon

LELA - Jasmin Topalusic

MR GREEN - Daniel Vivian

NOVAK - Rob Kennedy

## The Pink Panthers

### A tale of diamonds, thieves, and the Balkans.

by [David Samuels](#) April 12, 2010

On May 19, 2003, a man in his late twenties walked along New Bond Street, in London, and stopped outside the flagship store of Graff, which proudly claims to sell “the most fabulous jewels in the world.” The man, whose image, captured by surveillance cameras, was later studied by detectives on three continents, was five feet eight and blond, with a small waist and the upper body of an acrobat. He spoke to no one, and did not go inside to look at the necklaces and rings on display. After five minutes, the man stepped away from the storefront and continued down the street.

Graff’s clients, who include Oprah Winfrey and Victoria Beckham, prize the store for its colored diamonds, including its yellow stones, which were considered tainted before Graff mounted a successful marketing campaign, and rare blue ones that acquire their tint from traces of boron. The man on the surveillance footage, Predrag Vujosevic, was not a typical Graff customer. Raised in Bijela, a fishing village in Montenegro, he was reputed to be one of the leaders of a spectacularly inventive, and elusive, gang of jewel thieves known as the Pink Panthers. Many elite jewellers, including Chopard and Harry Winston, can be found on this stretch of New Bond Street, which is a few streets north of Buckingham Palace; Vujosevic may have been attracted to Graff because he had a yen for colored diamonds, or because security at the store seemed lax.

On a recent visit to Graff, I was welcomed by a security guard who did not ask if I had an appointment or peek inside my leather satchel. Overt security precautions make wealthy customers uncomfortable. Within the perfumed interior were three customers, all Russian-speaking women. A salesman, named Martin, showed me diamond-solitaire necklaces in the hundred-thousand-dollar range, which, he noted, might make a thoughtful present for my wife. He told me that he had been with Graff since 1973 and had been in the store the day after Vujosevic canvassed it. Around noon, Vujosevic and an accomplice walked in the door and, in less than three minutes, made off with more than thirty million dollars’ worth of diamonds. It was the biggest jewel heist in British history. “We are delighted to serve the whole world,” Martin told me, dryly. “We would just prefer that people pay for what they like.”

According to British police records, Vujosevic, who had been living in Paris, arrived in London two weeks before the robbery, staying at a cheap hotel in Bayswater, near Hyde Park. His travel arrangements had been made by Milan Jovetic, who was from Cetinje, the former royal capital of Montenegro. A week before the heist, Nebojsa Denic—a hulking Serb from Kosovo, who worked cleaning floors in a Swiss hospital—flew in from Zurich. The three men reportedly met up in Isleworth, in west London, and bought a used Vespa Piaggio motor scooter. It was to be Vujosevic’s escape vehicle.

On the day of the heist, Denic, posing as a customer, entered the Graff store wearing a suit and carrying an umbrella. An Elvis-style pompadour wig sat awkwardly on his head, but it did not alarm the clerks, who thought that he was a rock star in disguise or a wealthy man suffering from a disease. Denic asked to examine a twelve-carat diamond ring priced at four hundred and fifty thousand dollars. “It’s too glamorous,” he said, upon inspecting it. “Do you have a smaller one?”

Denic then pulled out a chrome-plated .357 Magnum, yelling, “Everyone on the floor!” Vujosevic, who had just entered the store, smashed open several display cases with a hammer, pulled out a bag, and scooped up forty-seven pieces of diamond jewelry. Both men ran out the door. A security guard pursued Denic, and tried to wrestle away his gun. It went off, and a bullet ricocheted off an air-conditioner, grazing the nose of a woman walking by.

Steve Alexander, a Scotland Yard detective, arrived to find Denic lying subdued on the ground. Alexander, recalling the incident, said that Denic “was very smartly dressed, but with a ridiculous wig. It looked like a cat was lying on his head.”

Scotland Yard launched an investigation. Within days, detectives in London, who often rely on informants, had identified Milan Jovetic, the Montenegrin fixer, as an accomplice. Jovetic and his girlfriend, Ana Stankovic, were renting a flat in Bayswater, and British police tapped their phones, eventually obtaining a warrant to enter their home. During the search, a detective found a jar of face cream in the bathroom. He stuck his finger in the cream, swirling it around until he felt something hard—a blue-diamond ring, from Graff, worth seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars. (Stankovic had hoped to set the blue diamond in her engagement ring.) After this discovery reached the press, the *Daily Mail* and other London newspapers dubbed the robbers the Pink Panthers, for one of the Peter Sellers comedies, in which a similar dodge is used.

Scouring the apartment, the police also found two fake Italian passports, with no names or photographs inside. Italy, Alexander explained, is “the route that you take from Montenegro, if you want your movements to be covert.” Alexander was one of several European detectives who told me that the Panthers maintained logistical bases in Italy. Many detectives said that the Italian police had largely failed to cooperate with their investigations.

Jovetic’s phone records led Scotland Yard to an apartment in Paris, which local police identified as Vujosevic’s home, but he wasn’t there. Alexander went to Paris to visit the Brigade for the Repression of Banditry, a special police unit that investigates

organized crime. Comparing notes, Alexander and Paris detectives concluded that well-dressed criminals with strong Eastern European accents had pulled off some twenty robberies similar to the Graff heist. French police evidence, including footage from security cameras, indicated that Vujosevic had gone on a crime spree across Europe, robbing Castiglione in Paris, a Graff store in Amsterdam, Wempe in Frankfurt, and jewellers in Geneva and Barcelona.

After months of searching, police intercepted Vujosevic as he was driving into France from Italy. A loaded gun was found in his car. Detective Alexander returned to Paris to interrogate his suspect. He described Vujosevic as “a little bloke . . . the kind of guy you wouldn’t notice twice in the street,” adding that “he was very polite, very articulate.” Vujosevic, however, refused to speak about the Graff robbery, the intended destination of the stolen jewels, his criminal history, his upbringing in Montenegro, or anything else that could have helped the police. After months of investigating, detectives were no closer to understanding who had commissioned the robberies, or where the diamonds had gone.

The London robbery was soon followed by dozens of other Pink Panther heists, in Europe and in Asia; the take from these robberies approached a quarter of a billion dollars. In March, 2004, Panthers targeted a jewelry store in Tokyo. Two Serbs, wearing wigs, entered the store and immobilized a clerk with pepper spray. They made off with a necklace containing a hundred-and-twenty-five-carat diamond. That same year, in Paris, Panthers exploited a visit to Chopard by the wife of Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, and stole fourteen million dollars’ worth of jewels from an unguarded display case. In 2005, a Panther team, dressed in flower-print shirts, raided Julian, a jewelry store in Saint-Tropez. The heist, which took place in broad daylight, lasted just minutes. The thieves ran out of the store and down to the harbor, where they escaped in a waiting speedboat.

In frustration, detectives in London, Paris, Brussels, Geneva, and Tokyo, working through the international police agencies Interpol and Europol, began pooling information about the Panthers. DNA data, fingerprint scans, telephone numbers, and other evidence were checked against Interpol databases, and against two maintained by Europol, Mare Nostrum and Furtum. The effort has begun to pay off. Perhaps two dozen Panthers are now imprisoned in Western Europe. But the gang continues to operate—the Panthers are suspected in a recent hit on the Chaumet shop in Paris—and none of its senior members have agreed to cooperate with the police. Seven years after the Graff heist, the exact nature of the Pink Panthers’ organization and operational structure remains a mystery.

Over the past year, I spoke with seventeen detectives, in ten countries, who are tracking the Panthers. Nearly all the detectives told me that the final destination of the loot remains unknown. However, after returning from London, I pursued a tip and visited the New York offices of the Gemological Institute of America, a nonprofit organization, at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Forty-seventh Street, in the diamond district. The institute makes microscopes and other equipment used by diamond brokers and graders, and maintains laboratory offices in Johannesburg, Mumbai, Bangkok, and other cities around the world, where experts evaluate the color, clarity, and size of diamonds.

In an upstairs conference room, I met with Ivy Cutler, one of the institute's most skilled diamond graders. Cutler, a tall, fastidious woman with a beautiful complexion, wore rimless glasses, a black turtleneck, and a blue cardigan with a diamond-tipped pin signifying her thirty years of service to the diamond industry. Most diamonds sold through a big-name store like Cartier or Graff, she explained, have probably been vetted by the institute. (Tiffany assigns grades to its own diamonds.) A series of graders examine each stone to document its distinguishing qualities and determine whether its color has been altered through a chemical process. A grading report is then logged into a database. Of the million or so stones that the institute grades annually, perhaps half are inscribed with microscopic security codes, which allow the institute to match a stone with its grading report, and make it harder to steal. So far that week, Cutler said, she had received fifteen inquiries from law-enforcement officials around the world—and it was only Wednesday.

She took me to a room whose windows were covered with blackout shades. Forty-eight graders sat in cubicles, scrutinizing diamonds through microscopes. The stones arrive at their stations in clear plastic cassettes, and are placed onto the microscopes with tweezers. The job requires many of the same skills needed by a technician in a radiology lab. Some diamonds, Cutler said, have such mesmerizing occlusions that you can get lost staring at them. "It looks like a flower, it looks like a Christmas tree," she explained, her eyes clouding over for a moment. "Only a gemologist, probably, would appreciate that."

I asked Cutler about some diamonds that she had examined a few years ago. "I remember the stones," she said. Her discovery occurred midmorning, around the time that her less obsessive colleagues took a coffee break. She was looking through her microscope at the surface of a four-carat yellow diamond, when something about the stone tugged at her memory. After checking the code against the institute's records, she became even more suspicious. The diamond in question was part of a group of seventeen stones that a client had brought in a week earlier.

Cutler soon determined that all the diamonds had been stolen. She would not reveal the identity of the client, but she told me that the diamonds had made their way from Europe to Israel, and then to New York. The client who bought the stolen stones, she said, had reached a private settlement with the person who sold them, in keeping with normal practice in the diamond trade. "It's really none of our business," she said, when I asked her about the specifics of the settlement. However, she did offer a revelation: the yellow diamonds, which bore microscopic security inscriptions, were among those stolen by Predrag Vujosevic from the Graff store in London.

The detective in Western Europe who is reputed to know the most about the Pink Panthers is André Notredame, a Belgian whose name is not listed in any public directory or police organizational chart. Last spring, I met him in Brussels, at a café near the Bourse. A gray-haired man with a handlebar mustache, he had a doughy face that looked as if it had been pulled and squeezed out of shape. His belly, partially covered by a nylon windbreaker, protruded over the top of his faded jeans. He wore broken-in cop shoes—black, with thick rubber soles.

Notredame believes that the core of the Panther operation consists of between twenty and thirty experienced thieves. Dozens of other facilitators in various European cities, including Brussels, provide logistical assistance. Stolen diamonds can end up in Antwerp. Luxury watches can make their way east, to Serbia and Russia, hidden inside cars. “Some of the money winds up in Serbia,” Notredame said, with a chuckle that ruffled the ends of his mustache. “The Serbian authorities like money investments.” Proceeds are laundered in Belgrade, he said, where they are invested in cafés, restaurants, and real estate.

After a leisurely meal, Notredame pulled out a cigar, and we strolled to the Galeries Royales Saint-Hubert, a covered arcade with eight jewelry shops. Since 2002, he said, the Panthers had robbed a hundred and fifty-two jewelry stores. Most of the heists, he reported, have followed “the same modus operandi.” A well-dressed man enters the store alone and puts down a piece of wood to prop open the security door, allowing a few associates to enter. (High-end jewelry stores tend to admit one customer at a time.) The first man through the door typically has a gun. The others carry hammers and pickaxes, for breaking display cases. The robbers hide the jewelry and watches in backpacks, and leave in a stolen car. “They’re all old cars, ten years old,” he explained. Older cars are less conspicuous, and can be more easily hotwired. Local associates of the Panthers obtain weapons and cars, rent hotel rooms, and make other arrangements.

Occasionally, Notredame said, the Panthers rely on a strategy called *vol au bélier*—meaning that they ram something heavy into a storefront window, such as a shopping cart filled with blocks of concrete. A robbery in Dubai, on April 15, 2007, employed this technique. Two Audi sedans—one black, one white—bashed through the gated entrance of the Wafi Mall. The black Audi then smashed into the front of a jewelry store. Footage of the Dubai heist has been posted on YouTube. In the clip, the Audis are parked on the mall’s polished tile floor. A driver honks twice, and three masked men run out of the store with the jewels; as shoppers stare from overhead balconies, the robbers jump into the getaway cars and speed out of the frame. The store later reported that the stolen items were worth \$3.4 million.

The Dubai thieves set the two Audis on fire and abandoned them, in the hope of destroying evidence that could link them to the crime. They were insufficiently thorough. Local detectives obtained fourteen DNA samples from the vehicles, and on April 19th they sent the data to Interpol headquarters, in Lyons. Two of the samples matched the DNA of men who were wanted for a heist in Liechtenstein. A third profile matched the DNA of a man who had robbed a jewelry store in Switzerland.

The two Audis had been rented, and a phone number on the contract was traced to Bojana Mitic, a twenty-five-year-old blonde from Nis, a city in Serbia. Tracing Mitic’s calls, and the DNA analysis, allowed investigators to identify a group of eight Panthers—six from Serbia, one from Montenegro, and one from Bosnia.

The Bosnian was a thirty-year-old named Dusko Poznan, who was already wanted for several other robberies. Interpol distributed a red alert to law-enforcement affiliates in diamond-selling districts worldwide; an accompanying photograph showed a handsome, dark-haired man with craters of fatigue beneath his eyes. The

alert specifically noted that Poznan, who was fluent in Russian and English, was a suspect in heists in Switzerland and Liechtenstein.

One morning in October, 2008, Poznan came to Monaco, accompanied by a young Serb named Borko Ilincic. They drove a rented Audi A3 into the city, parked, then proceeded on foot. The principality has hundreds of surveillance cameras, and their path through the city was simple to trace. At one point, the men walked toward the bustling Place du Casino, a route that led them past several jewelry stores. A camera captured the men outside one such emporium, Zegg & Cerlati. Then they headed across the plaza, toward Ciribelli, a store that had already been robbed by the Panthers, in 2007. Shielded from the street by an arcade, and lacking double security doors, it must have seemed like an easy target.

While Poznan was crossing the plaza, he was suddenly hit by a car, which injured his ankle. Poznan warily accepted medical assistance, and was sent by ambulance to Princess Grace Hospital, with Ilincic accompanying him. Minutes after they arrived, a Monaco policeman appeared at the hospital and arrested both men. Poznan was extradited to Liechtenstein, where he was convicted of a 2006 robbery. Ilincic is awaiting trial in Switzerland.

Last May, I visited the Monaco police headquarters, which is discreetly situated beneath the principality's famous high cliffs. I met with André Muhlberger, the chief of police, who looks like a cross between a Hollywood star and a cop, with a deep tan, strong shoulders, and bad teeth. He told me that several men had been involved in the 2007 Ciribelli heist, and that two sets of fingerprints had been recovered from the store. Detectives in Monaco identified the fingerprints as belonging to a pair of Serbs in the Panther network, Nicolai Ivanovic and Zoran Kostic. The day before I spoke with Muhlberger, the two men were arrested in Paris for travelling with false passports.

In the fall of 2007, at Monaco's urging, Interpol created the Pink Panther working group. It has met four times, most recently in Bern, Switzerland. Muhlberger said that although fundamental questions about the Panther network remain unanswered, he has some preliminary ideas about where they sell their loot. "There is not one single place, or it would be too easy," Muhlberger said, then added, "There is a region called Kosovo. I won't say more." At the Bern meeting, it was revealed that a Kosovar in possession of stolen diamonds had recently been arrested in New York.

I asked Muhlberger to retell the story of the hit-and-run accident that had so miraculously yielded a prime suspect in the Dubai robbery. "We have the two coming to Monaco around 11 A.M.," Muhlberger said, referring to camera surveillance. At the Place du Casino, "there was a bit of traffic . . . and they crossed a street. While passing a small truck, a car started driving by slowly and hit the ankle of one of them." A policeman went to the hospital to do a sobriety test on the victims and recognized Poznan from the Interpol poster. The policeman, who has been publicly identified only as Alain, described his hospital-room epiphany this way: "In a quarter of a second, I told myself, 'I know him.' "

Muhlberger's account—a mysterious driver appearing out of nowhere to hit one of the most wanted men in Europe, who was taken to a hospital where he was instantly recognized and arrested—sounds implausible, and that may be why a police source suggested to me that Poznan's accident might not have been so accidental. Muhlberger said it was “ridiculous” to think that the Monaco police employed such brutal methods.

In any case, he is working aggressively to disrupt Panther activities in the region. Last June, the Monaco police arrested three men whose only formal crime appears to have consisted of sitting in a black Audi in a parking lot beneath the Monte Carlo Casino while wearing sunglasses. When their documents were checked, one of the men was identified as Vinko Osmakcic, a Serb suspected of participating in jewel heists in Basel, Honolulu, and Las Vegas. The men, after being held briefly on conspiracy charges, were deported. As Muhlberger explained, “In Monaco, we cannot let anything happen.”

Not long ago, Yan Glassey, a detective in Geneva, told me how he had captured Milan Ljepoja, a veteran Panther who had organized the heist in Dubai. In May, 2008, Glassey had been investigating some Russians and Estonians who were stealing luxury watches and fencing them in St. Petersburg. The suspects had stayed at a hotel in Gex, France, just across the border from Switzerland, and on May 29th Glassey and three colleagues met in its lobby to nail down the thieves' timetable. While checking the hotel register at the front desk, Glassey looked up and noticed a man whose face seemed familiar. “I was wondering, Is it someone I met for my job, or in a disco in Geneva?” Glassey recalled. “He goes in a door, turns his head, and suddenly I said, ‘Oh, shit!’ ”

Glassey recognized Ljepoja because he had interrogated him two years earlier, after Ljepoja was arrested at the border between France and Switzerland. Swiss police had taken Ljepoja's fingerprints, which linked him to the 2006 jewelry heist in Liechtenstein. After Glassey questioned him, Ljepoja was sent to Liechtenstein and put in jail. On July 19, 2006, Ljepoja reported that he had a broken hand, and he was rushed to a hospital in an ambulance, which was ambushed by several men. One of them, Glassey said, was Dusko Poznan, of the Dubai heist.

When Glassey caught Ljepoja's eye in the Gex hotel lobby, Ljepoja ran into the parking lot, where he dropped a suitcase he was carrying. Glassey chased him down the street to a school, which was surrounded by a high fence. Ljepoja climbed over the fence, wounding his leg, and began to run through the schoolyard, his pants stained with blood. Children screamed and ran away. Colleagues sent to Glassey's cell phone an image of Ljepoja's mug shot, so that he could make a positive I.D. of the suspect, who was hiding somewhere on the school grounds.

Police dogs eventually arrived on the scene and located Ljepoja, who had concealed himself under some bushes. Glassey pulled out his gun. He recalled Ljepoja's calm reaction: “He stands up, very confident, his pants open at the leg, he's bleeding, and he says, ‘Good job.’ ”



The next day, Glassey interrogated Ljepoja, who, referring to their encounter in the hotel in Gex, said, "I recognized you, too." Glassey made an oblique reference to the Pink Panther robbery in Dubai, telling Ljepoja that his group had "done a good job in the hot place."

"You are speaking about Dubai?" Ljepoja said.

The detective said yes.

"Go on YouTube and put in 'Dubai robbery,'" Ljepoja said, proudly, before being sent back to jail.

Glassey believes that the Panthers originated as a gang from Cetinje, Montenegro, but grew into a wider Balkan collective that pulls off heists, fences loot, and launders money. He said that orders for merchandise most likely come from clients in wealthy European countries: France, Italy, Switzerland, Russia.

Glassey and I discussed something that I had recently seen at the offices of the French Judicial Police, just west of Paris. An investigator there, Bruno Cadiou, had allowed me to examine a chart, produced by a major European police agency, that displayed a dizzying series of links between Panthers, their cars, and their mobile phones. For example, the chart showed that a Serb named Dejan had wired money to a man calling himself Ranko Spahic, who was arrested in 2005 for involvement in six robberies in France. Spahic, in turn, used a cell phone that was connected, by an array of intersecting lines, to an Italian cell phone that had placed calls to the participants in the 2004 Tokyo heist. In an accompanying dossier, I noticed a name, Esko, that was linked to Rifat Hadziahmetovic—the Montenegrin suspect in the Dubai robbery. "Esko is the husband of Rifat's sister," Cadiou explained. Pointing at a photo, he noted, "There's the one who hid the jewels they stole in Tokyo in her cunt." The dossier indicated that those jewels, which were taken in a 2007 heist, wound up in a jewelry store outside Rome.

Glassey said that the chart was accurate in its suggestion that Italy is an important operational hub for the Panthers. "But no information comes from Italy," he complained. "Perhaps they are not interested in the Pink activity." Lately, the Italians have begun to yield to foreign pressure, attending Interpol meetings and arresting a fence who was handling Panther loot. But the group's other arrangements in Italy remain, as yet, undisturbed. As Glassey put it, "All the groups have contacts or apartments in Milan."

One of the most important Panthers to have been caught is Dragan Mikic, a burly native of Belgrade. During the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo, he avoided serving in the Serbian Army, taking criminal jobs instead. He grew into a thief with powerful underworld connections. In June, 2001, he robbed a jewelry store in Biarritz. (He and his accomplices painted a bench outside the store, to keep potential witnesses from sitting down on it.) A month later, he led a group that rammed a Range Rover into the storefront of the Van Cleef & Arpels in Cannes, then ran off with jewels stuffed in golf bags. The Range Rover, which was left at the scene, yielded traces of Mikic's DNA. And on January 31, 2003, Mikic and two other Serbs robbed Doux, a jewelry

store in the French ski-resort town of Courchevel. Brandishing fake guns, they made off with half a million dollars' worth of jewels.

Mikic was arrested the next day in Albertville, a neighboring Alpine town, after he aroused a transit clerk's suspicions by buying a train ticket with a five-hundred-euro note. Surveillance cameras revealed that he had left a large bag on the platform: it contained the stolen jewels, two cannisters of tear gas, and a Serbian passport in the name of Milan Kilibarda. Mikic was taken to jail, where Gilbert Lafaye, a local prosecutor, was impressed by his physical size and strength, and by his intimidating aura. "He had an ironic grin on his face," Lafaye told me, recalling that Mikic didn't say very much. "These guys don't care about being put into jail. They know they are going to escape."

After a hearing on November 17, 2003, Mikic was being escorted to an armored car when he broke away from his guards. He ran out of the parking lot and crossed a highway, heading toward a primary school. The officer who had been guarding him shot Mikic in the leg. The Panther was sent to a more secure prison, in Villefranche-sur-Saône.

One afternoon, two men pulled up outside the prison, in a white truck that had three ladders in its cargo bed. They got out of the truck, and one of them placed a ladder against the prison wall, climbed to the top, and began firing a Kalashnikov at the guard tower. The second man hurled one of the ladders, as well as a pair of wire cutters, over the prison wall, where Mikic was waiting. Mikic cut through a roll of barbed wire lining the perimeter of the prison yard and climbed up the wall. The third ladder had been positioned so that he could descend to freedom. He has not been seen since. His skills must be particularly prized by the Panthers; of all the gang members sent to Western European jails, he is the only one to have received such elaborate assistance. In 2008, he was convicted in absentia for the Courchevel heist and several other robberies, and sentenced to fifteen years in prison.

A police investigation later revealed that, while Mikic was in prison, he received Western Union wire transfers worth thousands of dollars from Milan Markovic, a Serb who was living in Austria. Using an alias, Markovic had purchased the cell phone that Mikic used while planning the Courchevel heist. A week before the robbery, Mikic placed calls from a Sofitel hotel outside Paris to Markovic's phone and to a number in Belgrade. Investigators tried without success to establish a link between Markovic and a higher authority in Belgrade. Lafaye doubts that he'll ever figure out who ordered the Courchevel heist. The Panthers' organizational structure, he said, was "like an octopus."

One of Mikic's deputies in the Courchevel robbery was a Serb named Boban Stojkovic. He is now serving a six-year sentence for the crime. Michel Jugnet, a lawyer in Albertville, who represents Stojkovic, said, "These are people who were involved in the Balkan wars in one way or another." The robbers, he said, came from Belgrade, and had known each other since they were young. Jugnet said that Stojkovic had done jobs with criminal associates from the former Yugoslavia for about a decade, and estimated that his total profits amounted to less than a hundred thousand dollars. Indeed, one of Jugnet's colleagues, Emmanuel Auvergne-

Rey, portrayed Stojkovic's actions as born of necessity, not greed. "The war in Yugoslavia, we Europeans saw it from afar," Auvergne-Rey said. "They arrived in Europe, and Europe did not welcome them."

Criminal gangs became dominant forces in Serbia during the Balkan conflicts of the nineteen-nineties, and they were further empowered by Western sanctions, which gave them a stranglehold on the markets for gasoline, cigarettes, and other staples. After Slobodan Milosevic became President, in 1989, smuggling operations directed by the Serbian state pumped billions of dollars into the bank accounts of political élites. As Dejan Anastasijevic, an investigative reporter for the Belgrade newsweekly *Vreme*, told me, "Milosevic, apart from being a very brutal autocrat, essentially criminalized the state completely." Things got so bad that, by the late nineties, the Zemun clan, one of Serbia's top drug-peddling gangs, had essentially merged with the J.S.O.—an élite special-operations unit that had its own artillery, armored vehicles, and helicopters. Together, the Zemun clan and the J.S.O. moved each month about a hundred million dollars' worth of heroin and other drugs provided by Bulgarian, Albanian, and Bolivian cartels. When Milosevic was removed from power, in 2000, the climate of corruption that he had fostered remained remarkably intact. Meanwhile, a generation of young people, who had grown up in a state run by thieves, murderers, and other criminals, went looking for work outside Serbia's borders.

In 1974, a publisher in Belgrade had a success with "Gorilla," a sordid, semi-incoherent novel inspired by the life of a Serbian thug named Stefan Markovic. After immigrating to Paris, Markovic served as a bodyguard for the actor Alain Delon, who starred in the 1967 film "Le Samouraï," Jean-Pierre Melville's classic gangster noir. In 1968, Markovic's corpse was found in a garbage dump outside Paris. A friend of Delon's, the Corsican gangster François Marcantoni, was indicted, but there was insufficient evidence to convict him of the murder; Delon was questioned but never charged. "Gorilla" is a touchstone for many Serbian criminals who move to the West. As one such gang member told me, "Every mafioso, if they read one book, it's this one."

The story begins with the hero, Stefan Ratarac—the alter ego of Markovic—being told by Alain Dupré, a prominent French actor, to beat up a journalist. Ratarac succeeds at this mission, and soon takes up residence on the ground floor of Dupré's house, where he follows the whims of his master. Ratarac is easily offended and needlessly aggressive. In one passage, he torments a Russian cabdriver. "Why do you live this pathetic life?" Ratarac demands. He asks the cabdriver if he is Russian. "I know one Russian woman here in Paris," he says. "She's one good fuck. Is she related to you?"

The narrator explains that Ratarac's "game came out of an unexplainable contempt." The bodyguard "despised small people who earned their everyday bread in a difficult way. . . . Why do they sing in church choirs and light candles? Why didn't they steal, rob, fuck rich Paris ladies, beat and kill?" Living in the shadow of a rich Frenchman humiliates Ratarac, and he cultivates his resentment: he hates the poor for embodying weakness, and hates the rich for having what he can't have.

The movie star and his friends engage in orgies, and Ratarac secretly films one, in the hope of blackmailing the participants. The actor confronts him, saying, "Why are you doing this? It's stupid." Ratarac responds, "It's stupid to live the way I live! I'm wearing your shirts. Even your underwear. And it's been like that for years."

"Gorilla" channels the rage that many young Serbian men must have felt for the European Union, which tantalized them with its wealth yet forbade them legal entry. The E.U. failed to stop the carnage in the Balkans, and then it applied sanctions to the recalcitrant Serbs and curtailed immigration. The invisible wall erected by the West kept the criminal élites of Serbia rich and the rest of the defeated country poor.

During a recent trip to Paris, I met with a man who promotes Balkan music, a job that brings him into close contact with gangsters. He agreed to introduce me to a few of his acquaintances. At a three-story dance club in Belleville, off the Rue de Ménilmontant, I met with two Serbs. One of them, who asked to be called Eugene, was well over six feet tall and wore a black motorcycle jacket. The nature of his work, he explained in English, had allowed him to witness a number of Panther operations. (He insisted that he had not participated in any of these crimes.) He confirmed the broad assessment of most detectives: the Panthers are a loose-knit group that maintains logistical support throughout Europe. Eugene specifically mentioned France, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, and Italy. "These are little organizations," he explained. Many Panthers are junkies, he said, and some have wives and children. It's wrong to speak of Panthers as Serbian, he emphasized: they are the children of a country that doesn't exist anymore. Stubbing out a cigarette, he said, "They don't give a fuck."

The second Serb, who asked to be identified as Boris, was fair-haired and shy. He kept ducking his head into the collar of his windbreaker. "I saw one operation," he said, taking a swig of brandy. "It was two guys on motorcycles." He said that there was no single commander: "There *is* no brain. They think together."

Eugene broke in. "They hate everybody," he said. "They hate Germany, the Vatican, the U.S.A., their own governments. They're junkies who hate. You get a call from a guy, you meet ten other guys, and you get paid." The smaller and more self-contained the groups were, the safer it was for everyone. "Some are cousins," he said. "Some are good friends. All of them will be in prison in five or ten years."

A few days later, I received a call instructing me to go to a fountain in the Latin Quarter. When I arrived, Boris was standing there. We waited together for ten minutes, until Boris's cell phone rang. After he answered the call, he explained that a friend was willing to meet us, but considered the fountain too exposed a venue. We would meet instead on a side street near the Hôtel de Ville. Crossing the Seine on foot, we entered the narrow streets of the Marais. After a few minutes, Boris pointed at a battered Honda and said, "That's him."

I got in the back of the Honda, which smelled like sweat and old clothes. The man at the wheel was huge and unshaven. He began driving northeast, toward the Père Lachaise cemetery. Speaking in a mixture of French and English, he told me that he

worked as a bodyguard for a variety of clients—French singers, wealthy Americans, Serbs in need of protection. We arrived at a quiet Serbian bar near the cemetery, and settled in for the evening. I was told that later we might visit an elder of the Serbian crime scene in Paris. While we waited, a lot of alcohol was consumed.

At one point, the bodyguard told me that there were fewer than sixty Panthers, without saying exactly how he came by such specialized knowledge. “They don’t know each other, but at a higher level it is organized,” he said. I noticed that everyone in the bar treated the bodyguard as if he were someone important. I asked him whether Predrag Vujosevic, of the Graff heist, ran the Panthers. There is no leader, he answered. But, he added, “There was one who brought organization after the war.” I excused myself to go to the bathroom, saying that the drinking had taken its toll. Inside the stall, I scribbled notes on a scrap of paper. When I returned, the atmosphere around the table had changed. The meeting with the crime boss had been cancelled. If I wanted to learn more, the bodyguard told me, I should go to Serbia.

At night in Belgrade, the lights still flicker on and off. The city is clean but poor, its streets virtually bare of video-screen billboards and other markers of information-age capitalism. In the city center, the old Defense Ministry lies in ruins, one of many piles of rubble from the 1999 NATO bombings which no one has bothered to clean up.

I visited the city last August, staying in a Yugoslav-era hotel room that smelled like cooking gas and sour carpet. One day, an ex-police detective met me for lunch at a downtown café. He arrived bleary-eyed, after an all-night shift as the chief of security at a casino. It was honorable work, he explained, especially when compared with his job on the Belgrade police force. He had left the force, he said, because the criminal charges he filed were regularly torn up by his commanding officers, who received bags of cash from gang members. “It was a joke,” he said. Individual officers had price lists for their services. The business cards of high-ranking drug-enforcement officers were routinely found in the wallets of arrested drug dealers.

While the rest of the Balkans endured mass killings and ethnic cleansing directed by the government of Slobodan Milosevic, ordinary Serbs saw their society destroyed through a campaign of economic manipulation. In 1992, the Serbian government established de-facto monopolies on the sale of wheat, corn, flour, sugar, and cooking oil. Milosevic, who had served as the head of the Belgrade Bank, more or less engineered what the Serbian economist Mladjan Dinkic has called “one of the most destructive hyperinflationary crises in human history,” in order to concentrate economic power in the hands of his criminal clique.

By January, 1994, when the Bosnian war was at its height, Serbia had experienced hyperinflation for twenty-four months. The monthly rate of inflation was 313,563,558 per cent. By comparison, the infamous hyperinflation that beset Germany in the Weimar years and helped bring Hitler to power lasted for sixteen months and reached a comparatively modest 32,400 per cent. Extended hyperinflation helped Milosevic cement his power over a population that found itself

unable to buy basic necessities without resorting to the black market, which was controlled by criminals and directed by the state.

The hunger induced by hyperinflation led ordinary Serbs to draw out foreign currency from pillowcases and bank accounts. Meanwhile, Milosevic set up a parallel banking system, funded by worthless bills printed on state presses. On the street, these bills were instantly exchanged for Deutsche marks, dollars, and other forms of legal tender through teams of street-level money changers, who funnelled the proceeds to private savings institutions and six state-run banks. Many currency dealers worked directly for the state, in a vast system of theft organized by the Serbian government. The foreign-currency reserves accumulated by the Serbian state did not go to fund the regime's program of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia or warfare in Kosovo, as one might have expected. Rather, as Zlatan Perucic, a director of the Belgrade Bank under Milosevic, has said, "much of it went abroad." Every week, briefcases and duffelbags stuffed with foreign currency were sent from Belgrade to banks in Cyprus, Greece, and Israel. Before sanctions, the state shipped off tens of millions of Deutsche marks packed into diplomatic baggage marked "Do Not Open." After sanctions, it spirited the cash across the border into Romania, then flew it to Cyprus.

Once the Serbian state had transformed itself into a criminal enterprise, many Serbs turned themselves, willingly or reluctantly, into criminals. The ex-detective, when asked about the Panthers, said, "The recruitment centers are here in Serbia." When I brought up the idea that many Panthers seemed more like ordinary Serbs than like specialized thieves, he mentioned Djordje Rasovic, who led the 2004 Tokyo heist. Rasovic was not exactly a rich man, he said, laughing: "For a living, he grows blackberries in Arilje."

Later that day, I met Milos Vasic, who joined the Belgrade police force in 1967. "Belgrade was such a peaceful city then," he recalled. After two years as a cop, he became a reporter. One of the founders of *Vreme*, he often writes about organized crime. Milosevic's wars, he said, contributed to the criminalization of Serbia. "In my local police station, fifteen cops out of fifty got themselves killed in Croatia and Bosnia," he told me, as we sat outside and drank beer. "You went for a three-month shift or else you were fired." Felons, meanwhile, were released from prison to join the front lines; those who survived were allowed to remain at large.

Vasic had spent years documenting the Milosevic regime's corruption. He told me that in March, 2001, soon after the regime's collapse, six hundred and sixty kilos of ninety-three-per-cent-pure heroin, with a street value of more than a hundred million dollars, was discovered in a Belgrade bank, in a vault rented by state security officials. "Why the hell would somebody sit on so many kilos for so many years?" Vasic asked, before answering his own question. "It was their bank account."

Even more lucrative was the trade in cigarettes, Vasic said. By 1993, cigarettes, which were subject to excise taxes, had become so expensive in Serbia that legal sales effectively vanished. The black market offered consumers a cheaper alternative, but one that was still highly profitable for the seller. Vasic described how the scheme worked. A Serbian dealer purchased cigarettes wholesale in Western

Europe, for a few cents a pack. Then, he explained, “You load your legally chartered Ukrainian or Russian plane in Rotterdam.” The cigarettes were shipped to Montenegro, where fake excise marks were applied to the cigarette packs, to make them look like a legitimate product. The cigarettes were then sold for about three dollars a pack, with the government and its gangster friends pocketing the profits.

Western governments were complicit in the Serbian corruption. German troops and other peacekeepers on Serbia’s borders were notorious for turning a blind eye to smuggling, and even for profiting from it. I recently communicated with a former British Royal Marine who had served in the Balkans. The marine often visited the city of Nis, and he said that his superiors regularly provided him with a thousand dollars to elicit intelligence from local Serbs. A decaying industrial city, Nis was strategically important for its proximity to Kosovo and to the main smuggling route connecting Serbia to Asia Minor and Western Europe.

The marine, who had participated in peacekeeping operations in Bosnia, said that he accompanied NATO officers to several meetings with Serbian officials in Nis and other cities. NATO commanders, he claimed, regularly traded information about the disposition of secessionist forces inside Kosovo; in return, the Serbs asked NATO to overlook shipments of fuel oil and other commodities whose importation violated Western sanctions. Some of those requests were formal, he said; others involved cash changing hands at much lower levels of authority.

While in Nis, the marine said, he often hung out with Serbian recruits and paramilitaries: “We would go, shoot off a few rounds, and talk about tactics.” The Serbs used derelict apartment towers in Nis for sniper training, he said, and he occasionally gave them tips. Many of the men he trained did not strike him as normal soldiers. “They would pick your pocket as a joke and then give you your wallet back,” he said, laughing. (Milos Oparnica, the head of Interpol in Belgrade, dismissed the marine’s account as “Hollywood nonsense.”)

The man eventually left the Royal Marines and got a job as a bodyguard at a luxury hotel in Paris. One night, he claimed, he went out drinking and ran into some of the Serbs he had traded war stories and tactical advice with in Nis. The Serbs told him that they were now in the business of robbing jewelry stores. They seemed serious—sober, even—and the improvement in their appearance and demeanor was striking. “When I knew them in uniform, they acted like criminals,” he said. “When they were criminals, they acted more like soldiers.” He gave them his phone number and agreed to stay in touch.

A few years later, the man said, he was living in London, when he got a call from two of the Serbs. They went out drinking again. “Then Graff got robbed,” he explained. Two of the people involved in the robbery contacted him, and stayed with him before they fled the country. In exchange for his hospitality, they gave him a diamond brooch, which he offered to a jeweller in Brighton, through a middleman. The jeweller, he said, gave him what he described as a “nice piece of money.” The middleman affirmed that the transaction took place. The jeweller has declined repeated requests for an interview.

To better understand how young men from the south of Serbia might find their way to luxury shopping districts in Tokyo and Dubai, I decided to drive to Nis. According to Milos Oparnica, of Interpol, three main groups of Panthers came from Serbia. The Nis faction was, apparently, the most foolhardy: many of its first generation of operatives are currently imprisoned in Western Europe.

I arrived in Nis midmorning. The highway leading into town was empty, and lined with stores selling motorbikes and diet supplements. The city felt far removed from Belgrade, with its Austro-Hungarian façades and well-ordered criminality. Nis was wilder, and had more of an ethnic mix: Albanians, Macedonians, Gypsies. The city's most famous landmark is the Skull Tower, which was built by the Turks, in 1809, out of quicklime, sand, and nine hundred and fifty-two skulls of Serbian fighters. On the uneven sidewalks, girls in heavy makeup tottered along in high heels, their loutish boyfriends following closely behind.

Across the Nisava River were the decaying apartment blocks where Serbian snipers had once practiced with the former Royal Marine. The buildings, fifteen stories high, were concrete slabs daubed with soccer graffiti and nationalist slogans. Groups of young men drank beer in the street. One of them, a Serb, had a T-shirt emblazoned with a brace of pistols and the word "Wanted," in gaudy silver lettering. A brand-new Audi was parked nearby. Audis are favored by young Serbian gangsters, which may explain the rented cars in the video of the Dubai heist.

Men between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five appeared to be missing from the city. Aside from the motorcycle-repair shops, the busiest places in town were the slot-machine parlors. I counted four of them within a hundred feet of the mayor's office, which is in a handsome, decaying stone house near the river.

The mayor, Milos Simonovic, is a bright-eyed thirty-six-year-old. He grew up in Nis, which used to be the center of the electronics and engineering industries in Yugoslavia, employing thirty thousand engineers and skilled manufacturing workers. "We had coöperation with Philips, with Siemens, with I.B.M., and all other famous companies of the world," he recalled. "We produced a personal computer called—I can't remember the name, but it was two years after Commodore 64."

Now, out of a total population of three hundred thousand, thirty-three thousand adults in Nis are unemployed. The anchor of the local economy is a cigarette plant. Drug smuggling is also popular. "Nis was really a good place to have this merger between authorities and criminals," Simonovic explained. Many younger citizens of Nis, having watched their parents lose their jobs, and growing up in an atmosphere of wholesale corruption, have embraced the idea of going to Western Europe and becoming thieves. They think, Simonovic said, that "it's really good to be a criminal, because you can go in E.U. or some other country to make some money. Then you get back here and you have cars, you have buildings and other things. It's really, really good."

Zoran Zivkovic, who is forty-nine, was the mayor of Nis under Milosevic, as well as a leader of the opposition movement that eventually toppled the regime. After Milosevic's successor, Zoran Djindjic, was assassinated, in 2003, Zivkovic became



Prime Minister, and put into action a plan called Operation Sabre, designed to decapitate the Serbian Mafia and sever its connections with the state. Nearly four thousand suspects were charged with criminal activity, and tens of thousands of weapons were seized, along with hundreds of kilos of explosives. I met with Zivkovic, who is now a businessman, in his clean, modern office, where bottles of wine from a vineyard that he owns were on display. He wore a navy-blue blazer and had a burnished complexion, looking less like a politician than like a Mediterranean yachtsman who had somehow got marooned in the middle of Serbia.

“By definition, organized crime is connected with the state,” Zivkovic said, in a charmingly pedantic way. For years, he said, criminal clans in Serbia had their own police officers, lawyers, judges, doctors, journalists, and financial advisers. He spoke of a doctor in Belgrade: “If somebody was to be eliminated from the gang and survived the shoot-out, the doctor’s job was to give him a lethal injection when he reaches the hospital.” Zivkovic readily admitted that few of the people who were picked up in Operation Sabre remained in prison. He told me that obdurate forces within the Serbian establishment “are determined to keep Serbia in this Balkan state of isolation, because this is the only Serbia that suits them.”

Other police sources in Nis provided me with tantalizing new information about the Panthers. I learned that Milan Ljepoja, the Panther member who was arrested in the Gex schoolyard, had returned to Nis, his home town, after the Dubai robbery, and spent some of his money. He bought a number of adjacent shops in the city’s historic district, and converted the space into a night club, which opened before his 2008 arrest. He also became notorious in Nis for hosting what one investigator described as “orgies.”

Police investigators in Nis also told me about a friend of Ljepoja’s, who used to run a local cell-phone shop, in the Underground shopping center. A few months before the Dubai heist, the friend moved to Dubai and opened a new cell-phone shop. The Dubai police took notice of this curious timing. Examining business records, they determined that right after the robbery large amounts of money began flowing through the Serbian-owned shop. According to the Nis investigators, the friend is now in jail in Dubai.

The police headquarters in Nis is at the end of a tree-lined street where young men promenade in an informal uniform of Porsche sunglasses, white T-shirts, and black sweatpants. One such man had protruding from his waistband the butt of a Makarov pistol—the standard sidearm of the countries of the former Soviet bloc—but nobody seemed to mind.

When I visited, the police chief was Zoran Stojanovic, who sat at his desk with a stack of photos that he had prepared for my visit. He had large, gnarled features and wore a socialist gray suit. He initially declined to talk to me about the Pink Panthers. Instead, he delivered a lecture on the destruction wrought by NATO’s bombing of the region, and on the suffering of the Serbian people under the aggression of Kosovo Albanians and others.

“Cluster bombs were thrown into the center of the city,” he said. “When we look at the photos now, it is horrific.” I was handed an album of mortuary photographs. “Only if you have a strong stomach should you look at this,” he warned. Bloody cadavers filled with shrapnel had been stretched out before a camera. There was a photograph of Zivorad and Vera Ilic, an elderly couple, who died on May 7, 1999, from a cluster-bomb attack, which mutilated their bodies. The tone in the police chief’s voice as he described these tragedies was familiar to me from the Bosnian war: the attention lavished on Serbian victimhood is part of a doggedly ethnocentric cosmology that is the product of genuine suffering.

Coffee and orange juice were served. “Throughout all our tragedies, sufferings, wars, in all our history, Serbia never attacked anybody,” the police chief said. “We were defending ourselves against the Ottoman Empire, against the Austro-Hungarian Empire, defending ourselves against Hitler’s tyranny, defending ourselves against the separatist gangs in Kosovo.”

Now that I had seen the photos and listened to his lecture, he was happy to talk about criminals in his city. But our conversation would be short, he added, because there were no criminals in Nis. When I asked him about some young men I had seen outside his police station, holding the keys to new Audis, he told me that they were entrepreneurs. “The sorts of business that the young people you met are dealing with include electronics, consulting, and so on,” he explained. I asked him whether it was normal for entrepreneurs in Nis to carry Makarov pistols in their sweatpants. He shook his head amiably. “The guys with the sweatpants and sunglasses are not in the electronics business,” he admitted, adding, “This area is also very good for agricultural activities.” I asked him whether these activities included transporting heroin. He frowned. “If you were here during sanctions, you couldn’t survive for five days,” he said. “Let’s just say that the people who live here are very adaptable to difficult conditions.”

Stojanovic eventually allowed that some citizens of Nis had gone to live in Western Europe and worked as thieves. They made new contacts in the underworld and improved their material standing. Some of these criminals returned to Nis, where they attracted attention by driving luxury cars and wearing expensive clothing. “It is quite possible that they got connected with various people in the jewelry business in Western Europe,” he said. Though these people may have broken laws in the West, he said, in Nis they were simply spending money and enjoying themselves. In this way, they had become role models for other young people. “We have a saying,” Stojanovic said. “‘Nice and sweet, but short.’”

He thumbed through the police records of men who had been identified as Panthers by Interpol. “One of these bosses that the West is so impressed by—when he was here, he committed very petty crimes,” he said. “Car theft. Not even taking cars, but stealing things from *inside* the car.” I asked him if he was speaking of Milan Ljepoja, and he nodded. “In Europe, he is considered a big boss,” he said. “Once he gets hold of a large amount of money, he comes back to Nis to spend the money and show off. We can’t do anything, because he’s not doing anything illegal.” He told me that Interpol sends him some ten requests a day for information about citizens of Nis.

He abruptly changed the subject. “Do you know why Leskovac is the only city in Serbia without any Jews?” he asked me. He had obviously told this story before, and he spoke in a theatrical manner, his Adam’s apple bobbing above his collar.

“Many years ago, a Jewish man with his family came into town with the intent of settling in Leskovac,” he began. The Jew was poor and had nothing to eat, so he went to a peasant and asked him if he might borrow an egg. “The Serb gave him eggs gladly, as many as the Jew guy wanted,” he continued. “But before he gave him the eggs he put an egg on the scale and weighed it, and marked down the weight. When the Jew guy saw that the Serb had weighed all the eggs, so that he would have to return the same weight, he said to himself, ‘This is no place for us, let’s move on.’ ”

He watched my face intently, to see if the story’s meaning had sunk in. Arching his bushy eyebrows, he explained, “If an uneducated Serb could think in such a profound way back then, it is not impossible that, even today, there might be uneducated people in this area who can use their intelligence in surprising ways.”

Six years ago, a young woman from Nis, two Serbian men, and a Scottish accomplice became internationally notorious, after they stole the Comtesse de Vendôme necklace, studded with a hundred and sixteen diamonds, from a Tokyo boutique. The heist, which took place on March 5, 2004, was the greatest robbery in the history of Japan.

Neither of the Serbian men, Djordje Rasovic and Aleksandar Radulovic, spoke Japanese or had been to Japan before. The boutique, which was called Le Supre-Diamant Couture de Maki, was in the Ginza district, and was owned by a company rumored to be experiencing financial difficulties. As the men robbed the store, the young woman, Snezana Panajotovic, was positioned in a café across the street, acting as a lookout. Sitting with her was Dorothy Fasola, a Scottish woman who had been convicted in Italy for stealing gold. Rasovic and Radulovic fled on motorbikes. That day, two of the thieves took an Air France flight to Paris; the two others left the country shortly thereafter.

Following the theft, the Tokyo police reconstructed the crime, enlisting the help of more than a hundred investigators. The resulting dossier is filled with the kind of precise, illuminating detail found in great crime fiction. While the Japanese police refused to give me the dossier, they did make copies available at the 2009 Pink Panther working-group conference, in Monaco. Several detectives who saw it told me that the Tokyo dossier was a masterpiece of police work. Some of them allowed me to see English-language versions and take notes. As impressive as it is, the Japanese dossier raises as many questions as it answers about who the Panthers are, how they work, and who is protecting them.

The gang members arrived in Japan toward the end of February, 2004. They travelled on valid passports. Dorothy Fasola arrived in Tokyo first, made hotel reservations for the group, and bought four cell phones: gold-colored ones for Radulovic and Rasovic; a light-red one for Panajotovic; a blue one for herself. The call records for Fasola’s cell phone, 090 63 48 71 30, indicate that she spoke with Rasovic three hours before the robbery. (Fasola has denied involvement in the crime.)

Djordje Rasovic, borrowing the identity of a Czech engineer, had entered Japan through Osaka's airport. Snezana Panajotovic flew into Tokyo, also travelling as a Czech citizen. Aleksandar Radulovic also went to Tokyo, using a Croatian passport. Radulovic stayed at the Odakyu Hotel Century Southern Tower. A Japanese forensics team later found his fingerprints on a sample-size bottle of Wella shampoo.

Radulovic visited the Maki boutique for the first time on February 24th. In accented English, he asked a clerk to be taken up to the third floor, where the Comtesse de Vendôme was kept in a glass display case, protected only by an electronic alarm. He expressed enthusiasm for it, and made a point of photographing the necklace. Several days later, he visited the store again, with Panajotovic. The pair, acting like lovers, bought a necklace and a silver spoon.

On March 5th, at 11:45 A.M., Radulovic and Rasovic entered the store. Radulovic was wearing a beige coat and brown leather gloves; he carried a bag bearing the Cartier logo, and had disguised himself with a light-brown wig and sunglasses. Rasovic wore dark clothes and a shoulder-length wig. Making his way up to the second floor, Radulovic pulled out a camera and took pictures of a clerk named Ryu Takagi, while repeating the words "Perfect! Great!"

As he approached the cabinet housing the necklace, Radulovic took out a piece of paper—the surveillance tape records that the gesture occurred at 11:46:21. Takagi tilted his head down, to see what his customer was writing. Radulovic punched Takagi and squirted pepper spray into his eyes. "He started pushing me toward the bathroom, hitting me in the head the whole time," Takagi later testified. "He closed the door, and then I heard the glass break. When I pulled myself together and washed my eyes, I called the police on my cell phone." By that time, the Comtesse de Vendôme had vanished, and the store—or, rather, its insurance company, Nipponkoa—was out some thirty-three million dollars.

Aleksandar Radulovic is now in prison in Serbia, having been arrested in Copenhagen, for attempted robbery. Danish police had identified Radulovic as one of the Panthers wanted in the Tokyo heist and shipped him back to Belgrade to be tried. At his trial, he claimed that the Tokyo heist had been commissioned by the shop's owner, who needed the insurance money; the necklace was returned to the store's manager at a Dumpster near a fish shop, in exchange for a bag containing a hundred thousand dollars. Radulovic compared the necklace to the work of Dali and Chagall, and wondered why it had been kept in an ordinary glass cabinet. Neither the Japanese authorities nor the Serbian courts gave credence to Radulovic's version of events, but it has been reported that the Maki company has filed for bankruptcy. (Company executives did not respond to my inquiries.) Aleksandar Zaric, Radulovic's lawyer, told me that he believes the Comtesse de Vendôme had subsequently been stripped, and its gems recut and sold through dealers in Europe and Israel.

Dorothy Fasola, using her blue phone, made frequent calls to Italy while in Tokyo. She and Radulovic also called a phone number in Colombo, Sri Lanka, a place where neither had any prior connection. Police sources told me that a Montenegrin Serb named Zdravko Radonjic was visiting Colombo when the calls were placed from

Tokyo—a notable coincidence, they observed, given that Radonjic had previously been involved in robbing jewelry stores in Japan.

Two years after the Tokyo heist, Radonjic was arrested at the Belgrade airport, carrying a false passport and a one-way ticket to Beirut. Milos Oparnica, of Interpol, told me that Radonjic had coordinated more than a dozen robberies in Japan, and that there was evidence connecting him to cocaine that was smuggled from South America to Western Europe. While Radonjic was incarcerated, he remained in communication with the outside world. According to a Serbian newspaper, a prison guard was charged last year with delivering two mobile phones to Radonjic, in return for a thousand-dollar bribe. Radonjic was recently released from prison.

Lidija Radulovic is tall, with a curved nose and long brown hair. I met her for lunch in Belgrade. Forty-nine, she wore skintight pants and a low-cut black sweater, and radiated the sex appeal of a rock star's girlfriend. She met Aleksandar Radulovic, of the Tokyo heist, at a party in Belgrade twelve years ago. They began dating, and soon married. Early on in the relationship, he became a thief. "He used to rob with the same group most of the time," she said, offering me a cigarette. "He did it for money and excitement, and so we could continue living a fun life in Belgrade. The fun always came first."

Radulovic had a sister in Munich, and he and Lidija liked to travel abroad—to Antwerp, the Greek islands. Radulovic was in France when the call came for the Tokyo job. The man who called, she claimed, was from the jewelry store itself. At the trial, she had been surprised by the precision of Japanese witnesses, who had recalled oddly specific details, like the color of Radulovic's shoelaces. Japanese police investigators, she claimed, had refused to supply basic information, such as the amount paid by the insurance company to the jeweller. The implication was that a small crime was being used to cover up a larger crime.

Lidija said that her husband was very clever, even though he lacked a formal education. "I think he's passed through all literature from the philosophical faculty at university . . . Serbian medieval writers, especially," she told me. "He's reading good books—Nobel Prize winners."

I had wanted to talk to Radulovic, but arranging a visit proved difficult, as he had not been a model prisoner: he had tried to escape while being transported from the Belgrade airport to jail. Through Lidija, he answered questions about his life. He had become an apprentice thief, he said, after leaving Serbia for Germany, in the late nineties. "I met many different people," he explained. "Among them were those who had already been in these kinds of job." The appeal of the life, he added, was "money and adrenaline. While you are young, adrenaline is a good hook." He portrayed the Panthers as a flexible organization that provides information on targets, for a percentage of the take, and expects thieves to accomplish local surveillance on their own. "The one who is doing the action should always scout the target," he said. "In Japan, I scouted the target: went to the jewelry, saw that showcase." He met Rasovic, his accomplice, through mutual acquaintances before they travelled to Japan to commit the robbery. But they were not particularly close.

Radulovic said that he was a voracious reader. He loved comic books, “psychology, historical books, biographies, biographies of saints, to popular science. From the ancient world and alchemy to sci-fi!” He was a particular admirer of “The Gulag Archipelago.” Being in prison had given him time to reflect, and he now regretted his crimes. The media, he said, “make a huge mistake by making of all this some movie-like and attractive story, that is easy to identify with, although there is nothing heroic in it! I made some choices for my own reasons, but it is absolutely unacceptable to let some kids out there identify with such a story.”

Milutin Dacovic, known to his friends as Daca, is a retired criminal. These days, he can usually be found in the back of an Italian restaurant that he owns, in Belgrade. He built the restaurant with the proceeds of his career as a thief in Italy. During those years, he was the trusted companion of the legendary Serbian gangster Ljuba. Together, Daca and Ljuba helped open up Italy to criminals from the Balkans.

In front of his restaurant, which is at the base of a cement-block tower, Daca has created a small Italianate square, which he has named Piazza d’Italia. Inside, the restaurant resembles an old Roman taverna that caters to tourists; it has a mirrored bar and is decorated with bric-a-brac related to the “Godfather” movies. Born and raised in Belgrade, Daca is a partisan of his city, particularly of its old traditions. When he heard my Serbian translator’s accent, he said to her, “You speak like someone who didn’t learn the Serbian language in the Belgrade of today, where youngsters swallow the letters, put accents in the wrong places, and generally speak like monkeys.” He was dressed in jeans and a cream-colored Italian cashmere pullover that buttoned at the neck. As we spoke, he sometimes tugged at the crotch of his trousers, forgetting that a woman was present. He is the only Serb I have met who speaks with a full array of Roman inflections, grimaces, and hand gestures.

Daca was originally inspired to travel to Western Europe, he told me, by the stories that filtered back to Belgrade about his childhood hero—Stefan Markovic, the bodyguard whose life inspired “Gorilla.” He originally left Serbia to work with Markovic in Paris, and he confirmed many of the anecdotes in the book. Markovic’s death, he said, was even less romantic than the fictionalized version. He recalled that when Markovic disappeared he made inquiries among Corsican gangsters. “Your friend is in the garbage, with the other trash,” they told him. Daca is no longer enamored of Markovic and his circle. “They had ketchup for brains,” he told me. For emphasis, he squirted some ketchup on his left hand, then licked it off. On the back of that hand was a tattoo of a rose. His body was covered in tattoos.

Daca was a generous and intelligent companion, and it was easy to see how he could have used his intelligence and charisma, and Ljuba’s muscle, to create an empire for himself in Italy, drawing in other criminals from the Balkans. He estimated that his original group of five members grew to include a hundred or so criminals, all from Belgrade. When I asked him how many of them were still alive, he said four or five, at most, miming the gestures for shooting up heroin, sniffing cocaine, and firing a gun.

Members of the Panthers occasionally visit his restaurant. “I support them with all my heart,” he said. “I have no desire to put any of them in trouble.” His table talk

was flecked with thief's slang: diamonds were "small glass"; a new recruit was a "lizard"; a thief with great hands was a "violinist." Some terms suggested how ancient, and culturally ingrained, organized crime is in the Balkans. The person who distracted the security guard was a *zavodnik*, or seducer, and the muscle was the *magare*, or donkey. The person who arranged logistics was a *jatak*—a term that originally referred to Serbs who sheltered rebels against Ottoman rule. A crooked jeweller who bought stolen stones was a *sis*a, or tit.

One afternoon, a tall, good-looking man, wearing a tight black T-shirt and expensive black pants, stopped by the Piazza d'Italia to speak with Daca. He said that he lived in Denmark, and worked in Holland, Switzerland, and France. He spoke with Daca in shorthand, but it was clear that their conversation touched on Italy. The man said that there was no central organization of thieves in Belgrade. "I am on my own," he emphasized.

Daca nodded and said, "There is an organization, but it is not formal." He explained that though friends recommend friends for jobs, and nobody inside the circle knows everyone else, there is a central hierarchy that determines how jobs are set up—and who pays for expenses. He told me that the Tokyo heist cost about a hundred thousand dollars. The organizing syndicate, Daca said, determined who got to hold the goods, and where the money went. The man from Denmark looked nervous, but Daca calmed him down.

Panther groups, Daca went on, are based outside Serbia. The countries he mentioned had become familiar: Italy, France, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Switzerland. Thieves often returned home to Montenegro or Serbia, where they were "on call" for future jobs. Panthers who got arrested, he said, were often turned in by their employers, as a way of trimming the workforce, or keeping the heat from the police at manageable levels. The higher ranks of the Panther organization, Daca said, included a number of Serbian ex-soldiers who were currently living in Scandinavian countries. But the diamond trafficking was directed mainly by criminals from Italy, Russia, Israel, and Holland.

Daca, who has not been involved in any Panther crimes, explained why he supported the group's work. As he put it, "They are bringing money into this country, contrary to our so-called political élite." He added, "Whatever they get from the action—and this is a very small percentage of the take—they bring here."

Ljubica Vujosevic lives in a crumbling apartment block in Bijela, the Montenegrin fishing village. The building is near a rusting shipyard that provided a poor but steady living for local men during the era of Josip Broz Tito, the Communist dictator of Yugoslavia. When I visited Ljubica, a burned-out light bulb hung in the dark concrete hallway outside her door.

Ljubica is the mother of Predrag Vujosevic, the Panther who carried off a bag of diamonds from the Graff store in London. In her early fifties, she has had operations on both hips and on her kidneys. Her eyes are sea blue, and her face was once beautiful, but it is now heavily lined. Her outfit suggested that she had started to dress for the occasion, in a pretty green argyle short-sleeved shirt and a gold

necklace, but then gave up, throwing on a pair of gray sweatpants and house slippers.

I sat at her kitchen table while she paced for two hours in front of a bookshelf that holds her keepsakes. There was a horse made of gold wire, a bottle of sparkling wine, and three painted monkeys that pantomimed a creed that is common to mothers and thieves alike: see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. "The cross I wear around my neck I got from him," Ljubica said, tilting her head toward a picture of her son, atop a boxy television set. "He got the cross from one of the prisoners, and said I should keep it until he gets out of jail."

She was aware that, after the Graff heist, the London press had portrayed her son, whom she calls by the diminutive Pedja, as the Panthers' leader. "They make it seem like he was the strongest of them all," she said, wonderingly. It did not look as though much money had been funnelled in Ljubica's direction.

"It was a great sort of trouble that made him go the way that he went," Ljubica said. When Vujosevic was small, they lived up in the hills, and walked for an hour into town to buy groceries. He loved soccer, but spent his days lifting weights and exercising, keeping track of how much he lifted and how far he ran. He washed his sneakers and ironed his shirts, and cleaned under his bed without being asked.

Then he began spending nights away from home, usually in Cetinje. Ljubica and her husband, who worked in the shipyard, tried to prevent their son from leaving Bijela, but he told them he wanted to earn a real living. "What did he earn in the end?" his mother said, her expression turning sour. "He earned nine years." Vujosevic left home for good at the age of twenty-five, after he fell asleep at the wheel of his car early one morning, and crashed into another driver, killing him. Before the trial, he escaped to Italy, and his parents didn't hear from him for six months. "I'm O.K.," he said, when he finally called home. "I'm starting to get a better feeling for the place. Things are getting better." Sometimes he called from Italy, and sometimes he called from France. The calls were usually very short, and often sounded as though they were coming from the street. He occasionally sent postcards: "I am well. I am healthy. Kisses. Pedja."

His mother pointed at the photograph atop the television and said, "This is a picture of him from Paris." It shows a blond, unsmiling young man in a red sweater, looking like a Soviet-era Olympian. After Vujosevic was arrested on the French-Italian border, in 2005, his parents learned the news from the parents of his girlfriend. Vujosevic was tried in Paris, for crimes that he committed in France. In the courtroom, Vujosevic said that there were people above him who gave orders, but he never mentioned their names.

Ljubica's husband wanted to visit Vujosevic in prison, but then something went wrong with his heart, and he died. Afterward, Vujosevic wrote his mother the first proper letter he'd ever written her, asking that it be read at his father's grave. It said, in part, "May you rest in peace. Sorry that I couldn't come. I am too far away. Eternal glory for you, from your son, who loves you very much." So it was not true, she said, that her son was a person without feelings.



Last year, Ljubica went to visit her son in jail; he had been refusing to eat, and was perilously thin. Since that visit, she said, she had spoken to him on the phone once every two months, for fifteen minutes at a time. “I always lie to him and tell him that I am fine,” she said. “I just want to see him one more time, and then I can die.” Vujosevic was scheduled to call her in fifteen minutes, she said.

Her cell phone remained silent. After a time, I got up to leave. She promised that when Vujosevic called she would ask him the names of the men who had received the diamonds.

Montenegro is a beautiful, forbidding country of six hundred thousand people. It shares borders with Serbia, Albania, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, making it one of the leading centers for smuggling in the Balkans. Along the coast, its high mountains plunge, like a stage curtain, down to the Adriatic Sea. The climate is almost tropical, with kiwi and lemon trees growing by the side of the roads. The country looks like a movie-set version of the South of France, except that most of the beaches are two feet wide and covered in cement.

As I drove along the coast toward Podgorica, the capital, the car radio began emitting an awful droning sound—the traditional one-stringed bowed instrument known as the *gusle*. Traditional songs employing the instrument praise the manhood, honesty, and bravery displayed by Serbs who fought the Turks; more recent songs are dedicated to Radovan Karadzic and other Serbian criminals, who are praised for their heroism during and after the Bosnian wars. The Montenegrins boast that no other country has conquered them, overlooking the fact that their rocky soil would hardly have been worth the trouble. Now their land is more valuable: wealthy Russians have begun buying vacation homes here.

In Montenegro, banditry may be even more deeply entrenched than it is in Serbia. According to a report issued in 2005 by the D.I.A., the anti-Mafia unit of the Italian federal police, Montenegro’s hospitality to organized crime is so remarkable as to merit comparison to the legendary pirates’ paradise of Tortuga. The most rapacious pirate in Montenegro, the report alleges, is Milo Djukanovic, who, for eighteen of the past nineteen years, has served as either the country’s President or its Prime Minister. In the report, Giuseppe Scelsi, a prosecutor in Bari, Italy—which is directly across the Adriatic from the Montenegrin port of Bar—accuses Djukanovic of having “promoted, run, set up, and participated in a Mafia-type association,” turning Montenegro into a “paradise for illicit trafficking.”

The police report is filled with lurid evidence, including excerpts from twenty months’ worth of wiretapped phone calls between Djukanovic and his mistress. Its tone is damning. “Milo Djukanovic was absolutely aware of what was going on in Montenegro,” the report states. “He was aware since he was involved in it, and had a direct interest in it. He was personally aware of the huge amount of money, in hard currency, drawn from illicit tobacco trafficking by Italian organized crime. His greed for riches made him so unprincipled that he came to resemble his criminal associates. He went so far as to assure protection to fugitives wanted in Italy, disregarding the most basic legal norms. He did so through the state security apparatus.” Djukanovic’s activities generated impressive profits. Between 1994 and

2002, the report claims, smugglers using large speedboats sent approximately a billion cigarettes a month from Montenegrin ports to Italy's eastern coast. Once in Italy, the cigarettes were sold by Mafia syndicates, and the profits were laundered through front companies with bank accounts in Switzerland, Liechtenstein, and Cyprus.

In 2006, Ratko Knezevic, a former top Montenegrin diplomat in Washington, wrote an exposé of the country's smuggling activities. It was his master's thesis for the London Business School. According to his analysis, by the end of the nineteen-nineties "the Montenegrin government was earning as much as \$700 million annually from the clandestine cigarette trade." Last year, Knezevic confirmed the details of his thesis to *Vijesti*, a Montenegrin daily. "That was the worst-kept Montenegrin secret," he told the paper, adding that "as Mr. Djukanovic's adviser and chief of the Montenegrin Mission in the U.S., of course I knew even more." Knezevic suggested to the paper that at least seven people associated with the trade had been murdered. The Montenegrin government declined to comment for this article; Djukanovic has called Knezevic a "pathological liar" and a "narcissist."

Entering Podgorica, I drove past a series of anti-corruption billboards that the government has erected, in an Orwellian gesture. One billboard depicted a man with a pixellated face and the not entirely reassuring motto "Report Corruption: The Rest Is Our Job." The capital was a lively place, with new sedans and Mercedes S.U.V.s rolling through the streets. The men had tattoos on their arms, and the women were disconcertingly tall. The city had energetic night life. Dance clubs stayed open until four in the morning, and the amount of wealth on display was striking, given that the only people who seemed to be working were waiters, along with old women selling melons by the road.

One evening, I visited the Podgorica police headquarters. The parking lot was empty except for two bored guards and an Interpol night-duty officer, who, after a week of phone calls, had agreed to see me when nobody else was in the building. He ushered me into a half-empty office with a fax machine, then excused himself, returning with glasses of syrupy orange juice.

Our conversation was interrupted every five minutes by the hum of the fax machine. When the transmission was complete, the duty officer lifted the paper out of the machine, and placed it face down on top of his desk. Looking through the backs of the paper, I could see photocopies of passports from all over Europe. I asked him about Vladimir Lekic, a thirty-four-year-old reputed Panther, who had recently been arrested in his home town of Cetinje. He stood accused of stealing watches worth \$1.4 million from a Frankfurt jewelry store in 2003. I asked why the arrest had taken so long. "If Germany had sent this evidence earlier, then we would have arrested him earlier," he replied, adding that Lekic was one of the least active Panthers in Interpol's database.

The sudden arrest of a semi-retired Panther for a six-year-old crime seemed peculiar. Then I recalled an earlier meeting with representatives of the Interior Ministry. They had shown me a black binder containing the two thousand questions that Montenegro must answer as part of the process for admission to the European

Union. When I suggested to the Interpol officer that the arrest of Lekic was connected to Montenegro's application to the E.U., he nodded. Gaining admission, he said, "is very important to us."

After a few days in Podgorica, I headed off into the mountains, toward Cetinje. One-lane roads curled around shattered white boulders and tenacious green foliage that reminded me of the Judean hills. Insect life was so loud that when you parked the car and got out it sounded as if you had suddenly tuned into a radio frequency from another planet.

Cetinje is in a valley between green mountains and the Adriatic Sea. Founded in the fifteenth century, it is the historic center of Montenegro. It is also home to approximately half the Pink Panthers who have been arrested in Western Europe. Montenegro's past and present came together in Cetinje. Across from the town hall, a weathered nineteenth-century structure, was a new shop, called Mega Market. It was owned by Cedo Jovetic, the father of Milan Jovetic, the Montenegrin who handled the logistics for the Graff robbery. Cedo, a gruff man in his seventies, was at his home, near the store. He was not interested in talking with a foreign reporter about the Panthers or about the current whereabouts of his son. "I won't allow you to ask me questions about my private life or my family," he said.

I headed to the town hall of the most notorious nest of thieves in the Balkans. It was guarded by a double-headed royal eagle with a lion emblazoned on its shield. I walked up the central staircase and down a long hallway. Mayor Milovan Jankovic greeted me in his office. Sixty-four years old, he was wearing a blue shirt and a black jacket. His large nose was matched by elephantine ears and big bags under his eyes, which combined to give his face the mournful aspect of a Balkan Lyndon Johnson. Before he became mayor, he had worked as an anesthesiologist and as the secretary-general of the Red Cross in Serbia and Montenegro.

He offered me a morning brandy and gave an approving smile as he watched me drink. In Tito's time, he said, there had been a factory in Cetinje that built refrigerators and washing machines, and another that made elegant shoes for export. The Galenika pharmaceutical company, a Belgrade-based firm, also had a factory here. "But during the war all of these enterprises were practically closed," he said. "All the jobs disappeared." The town now had a seventeen-per-cent unemployment rate for young people, most of whom aimed to become chauffeurs or security guards. "The problem is that we don't have very highly educated people," he lamented. "Long ago, we did have. Now nobody wants to do anything that involves thinking."

I asked him why Emmanuel Leclaire, the head of Interpol's organized-crime division, had told me to visit Cetinje. "Honestly, I can't really talk about it," he said. After two more brandies, he decided otherwise, and told me a funny story of the time that the Italian clothing designer Gianni Versace visited Cetinje and noticed people wearing stolen Versace clothes and knockoffs. "Let them wear it," the designer is reputed to have said. "It's good advertising."

Stealing from the West was so ingrained in the local culture that it approached a form of patriotism. “There is a song about the guys who steal clothes here,” the Mayor told me. “It goes, ‘We don’t steal from Montenegro, we steal *for* Montenegro.’ ” Many of the Pink Panthers from Cetinje had left the country when they were twenty or younger, because there was no work to be found. In Belgrade and beyond, the Mayor said, “they remained connected to each other, because they came from the same place.”

That evening, I wrote an e-mail to Leclaire, asking him why Interpol, in its investigation of the Pink Panthers, had focussed its energy on nationals of poor Balkan countries outside the E.U., while largely ignoring Panther associates from E.U. countries who profited from the more lucrative traffic in stolen diamonds and watches. Leclaire responded an hour later. He said that he found my question “shocking,” and denied that Interpol paid any attention to the national origin of the people it pursues. The statement made little sense, however, given that Interpol’s Pink Panther working group specifically targets jewel thieves from the former Yugoslavia.

Soon afterward, I queried intelligence officials in a neighboring country, who were intimately familiar with smuggling practices along the Adriatic coast. Eastern Europe and Western Europe, one of the officials said, had become criminally intertwined. “Speedboats leave, and in forty minutes the heroin is in Italy,” he explained. “The chain of work for transporting drugs to Italy had very strong links with politics and with police.”

A second official told me that stolen jewels and watches from Panther robberies had recently been recovered in the Albanian city of Lac. Criminals throughout the Balkans, the official added, were working closely together. And Montenegrin criminals operating in Western Europe could count on Italian Mafia groups for assistance and protection.

Italian criminals have invested large sums of money in Montenegro and other Balkan states. At one point, dozens of wanted Italian Mafia leaders lived openly in Montenegro, a situation that even the Italian government eventually found intolerable. While the Balkan gangs have not formally merged with the Mafia syndicates, the second official said, “the information we have shows there is coöperation and interaction.” In other words, Balkan gangs cut the Mafia in on deals, in exchange for logistical support and protection from police and judges. As he put it, “It’s a relationship based on partnership.”

Outside my hotel room in Podgorica, a black Mercedes sedan pulled up. The driver was a middle-aged man with thinning hair and a powerful build. He got out of the car, went into the café across the street, and ordered a beer. When he finished drinking it, he got out a pack of cigarettes and started to smoke. Three hours later, he was still there. I had seen him doing the same thing on previous afternoons.

The night before, a local translator had come to my hotel room and asked me to join him for a beer. The request struck me as odd, since we had met earlier in the day, and concluded our business together. At a nearby café, he said that he had

something important to tell me. The hotel where I was staying had once been owned by a famous gangster. The phones were tapped, and there were microphones in the hotel rooms.

My cell phone rang, and I stepped outside my room to answer it. The call was from the go-between for a Panther I had been trying for days to meet. He gave me precise instructions. I was not to bring a tape recorder. I was to leave my phone at the hotel. I was to be dropped off at a point on a mountain road, on the way to the resort town of Budva. My driver could park in a nearby town and wait for me. I was to wear loose-fitting clothing, as I would be asked to remove my shirt, my pants, and my shoes. After I was searched, I would be taken to a restaurant where the Panther felt safe. When the meeting was over, I would be allowed to use a phone, so that I could call my driver.

While being driven to the mountain road, I sent myself an e-mail, recording whom I was meeting and where I was going. A sign marked the spot on the road where I was to wait. "I can wait near the bottom of the road," my driver suggested. I said that it was better to follow the instructions. If he didn't hear from me in two hours, I said, he should be concerned.

The rendezvous went as planned. I found myself sitting alone in a restaurant whose name translates as Water in the Rock. The soup was excellent. I looked up, and Novak, as my visitor called himself, was standing just over my left shoulder. He wore a white T-shirt and was trim and fit, with curly black hair. He confirmed his birthplace (Cetinje) and the year of his birth (1967). He said that on another occasion he could show me some "white glasses." I was confused, until I recalled that "glass" was thief's slang for diamonds. He had recently returned from a trip to Europe, he said, flashing perfect white teeth. In addition to English and Serbo-Croatian, he also spoke Russian, Italian, French, German, and Czech. Languages were important in his work, but not as important as a sense of discretion. That is what kept you alive, he said. "When we go out, we dress nice, in suits," he said. He paused. "Here we are quiet. We drive rentals."

I asked him about some robberies that he had pulled off in the South of France. He laughed. "I grew up driving these roads," he said. "I can drive a hundred and sixty kilometres an hour at night in the mountains, and I am not afraid. I like the South of France!"

It was Predrag Vujosevic, he said, who had given his group some of its first jobs. His first Panther assignment was as a getaway driver for a jewelry-store robbery in Paris. He and his crew honed their skills at thievery until they became an established address for orders from Belgrade. Though Novak was cagey about the details, he implied that there was a centralized system for picking targets and assigning crews to jobs. There were four main Panther groups, originating from a single group of diamond thieves from Montenegro. Half the Belgrade group was made up of thieves from Cetinje who had moved to Serbia. The Nis group, he said, "was doing jobs for Greece and Turkey." The Serbians wanted things too fast and tried to do jobs that were too ambitious, which is why they tended to get caught. He was more careful. When he stopped to take a sip of Czech beer, he held the glass with a napkin. When

he finished drinking, he wiped the lip of the glass, in a way that suggested that such actions were a normal part of his routine.

I asked him how his Panther group came into being. “We grew up together,” he said. “We all come from normal families. Our parents are normal people. They are not in this kind of life.” The thieves in his group had gone to Italy together and saw how people lived there: “Some of us went insane and tried to have everything at once.” The greedy ones wound up with long prison terms or worse, he said. Others spent two or three years in Italian jails. He said that the gang began stealing during the era of Western sanctions; some of its members had connections to the Serbian security services, which provided protection.

Some of the early tips for heist jobs came from a male model from the Balkans who lived in Antwerp and knew some Jewish diamond dealers there. His group also generated their own information. “We have our bird-watchers,” he said, whistling a cheery tune. “We have guys whose job it is to travel around and collect tips.” Yachts were appealing targets. Russians who remained in a Western European city for a long time were probably in trouble at home, and would be reluctant to report a theft to the police. The central authority over his group had a computer guy who scanned the registries of expensive items, like planes and boats. It also employed a technician who created devices for bypassing alarm systems. “His father is one of the most famous engineers in Serbia!” he boasted. “He makes things for us.”

After a robbery, the jewels were handed off to a member of the team, who then drove to a rendezvous near a highway. The diamonds would be inspected by the buyer. Sometimes, a truck outfitted with a mobile grading lab came to the meeting spot. He suggested that many of the jewels were recut in Antwerp and then shipped to Israel, where they reentered the legitimate diamond market as “new” stones. Most of the jewels stayed in Europe, Novak said, adding that contraband was often shipped by speedboat. “You can charter one for two Rolex,” he said. Crossing the Adriatic, you were met by a fisherman on the Italian side, several miles off the coast.

I asked him about Zeljko Obradovic, who lived nearby, and was allegedly responsible for a string of Panther robberies in France and a big heist in Bahrain. A number of sources had hinted that Obradovic was the legendary thief who had organized the Panthers after the war. Was he really that important? Could he help me meet him? Novak shook his head.

Remaining seated, he wiped his glass with his napkin, then wiped down the arms of the chair. He stood up with the napkin still in his hand, neatly folded it in half, and put it in his pocket, like a magician at the end of his act. When I tried to stand up to shake his hand, he gently squeezed my shoulder, so that I knew to stay in my chair. “I hope to see you again soon,” he said. When I came back to Montenegro, he added, he would show me some “white glass” and, perhaps, a Cézanne.

He took a few steps toward the restaurant’s porch, where I glanced at two waiters who were about to seat a party of three guests. When I turned back to look at Novak, he had disappeared. It was a trick that only an experienced thief could pull off, I thought—to appear out of thin air, and then vanish, along with his napkin.

Stealing diamonds is a serious crime, but as I paid the check it was difficult for me not to sympathize with these desperate and inventive men. The Pink Panthers were taking revenge on a world that had robbed them blind. ♦