

# SHATTERED

BY LESSER OF 2 WEEVILS - 2022

Episode 1

**Voicemail recording:** Hi, honey. It's—it's Mom. Hi. I know we haven't spoken in awhile, and I just wanted to check you were okay. Okay, I love you. E-mail or call me, please. Bye.

**Voicemail recording:** Hi, hi. Dad and me are getting a little worried. We called your work, but they said you don't work there anymore? You know, if you need money, you can just give us a call. Please get back in touch. Bye.

**Voicemail recording:** Hi, this is, this is her mom. If you know where she is, can you please call us? We just want to know she's okay. Thank you. Please call us.

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**Phone conversation:**

**HAKIM:** *Allo?* [Hello?]

**LESLIE:** *Vous êtes Hakim?* [You're Hakim?]

**HAKIM:** *Ouais . . .* [Yeah . . .]

**LESLIE:** *Alors . . . vous parlez anglais?* [Okay . . . do you speak English?]

**HAKIM:** Euh . . . yes . . . I speak *anglais*.

**LESLIE:** Great. I've been trying to get back in contact with your colleague from the BnF, Nemo? She's been editing together some audio for a podcast, had released some of it. I worked with her and Phil Donan for awhile.

**HAKIM:** *Ouais . . .* [Yeah . . .]

**LESLIE:** She was trying to pull it all together and then we lost touch.

[Hakim gasps.]

**LESLIE:** . . . Are you still there? I said, I'm trying to get in touch with Nemo.

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**Phone conversation:**

**LESLIE:** Okay, so you're telling me um . . . um . . . this is it? These are her recordings and I'm supposed to . . . We don't even know if . . . well, I'll release what we've got but I don't know if it's going to make any—

*Attendez, s'il-vous plait, pardon!*

Okay. Um. Lesser of 2 Weevils will pull it all together.

[Distortion.]

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**NEMO:** So, yeah, I don't know at this point whether I'm just doing this for myself, or if I'm going to make a podcast out of this—I mean, everyone has podcasts these days, and who wants to listen . . .

So, yeah, I—let me try this again. Let me take it from the top. (Pause) Maybe—maybe if I pick a theme tune. That would make it, like a real podcast, wouldn't it? I'm not going to be a perfectionist about this. I could be, but I'm not. Patrick always said that . . .

I decided against a theme tune as such. But I think a brief introduction is fitting. I am . . . Well, hi there, to whoever is listening or might be listening someday . . . or maybe just, hi, to myself. Hi, self. I speak in French enough in my job, so I thought here, I could express myself in English, because . . . I still think in English? For the most part. My job is to, essentially, clean up old audio recordings. That sounds somewhat simplistic, I guess, but I should make clear that these are *very* old recordings. I time travel every day. I start out at Colonel Fabien Métro station, change at Nation and then again at Bercy, unless I'm feeling adventurous and then I walk across the river, and then I'm up several flights of stairs to Rez-de-jardin to my little box of an office—

[Actuality in an echo-y office.]

--where I think back to a time before the Internet, before television, before sound film, before radio, to a period that roughly coincides with the invention of the phonograph, which was the late 1880s<sup>1</sup>, and widespread Gramophone-slash-phonograph use, the sort of early 1900s. Let me, let me play you something.

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<sup>1</sup> Nemo makes an error here. She means late 1870s.

**LESLIE:** Nemo gets up at this point and starts playing a recording of opera diva Adelina Patti, an EMI acetate disc she bought off eBay. The recording is a little difficult to hear, so we're going to skip ahead to where Nemo tells us about the . . .

**NEMO:** Gramophone discs, and what I was specifically brought in to do. It's France, and so there's bureaucracy, and it's complicated, but—essentially—the work is a joint project within the larger BnF and the Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra National de Paris—the work is to do with the Paris Opera, the Palais Garnier site. In 1907, some Gramophone discs—of opera stars, like Patti, and, uh, Nellie Melba, and Caruso, and some other singers—were buried for a hundred years in the cellars of the opera.

Anyway, once they were dug up, someone needed to come in and clean up the recordings and digitize them. So that was done. And then in 1912, they thought it would be a good idea to bury some more recordings, and, like, in case we forgot how to use this technology in a hundred years' time—they buried instructions and a Gramophone and were even thoughtful enough to provide replacement needles! 'Cause, you know, needles on Gramophones wear down. So far, so good.

[Door slams downstairs.]

**NEMO:** Sorry about that. Anyway, back to what I was saying. The 1907 recordings and the 1912 recordings were buried beneath the Opéra. But someone, at some point, dug up two of the 1912 urns and stole their contents. So who knows where those ended up. We don't know. But after that, all the recordings were kept safe, in the archives, now the *bibliothèque-musée*. But when the time came to digitize everything, they found in addition to what was supposed to be on the catalogue—32 Gramophone recordings minus the two urns that got tampered with-- So uncatalogued, provenance unknown, there's this, this cylinder—This is the mystery. We have all this documentation about the *voix vivantes*, these opera recordings buried for over a hundred years, but where . . . did these other cylinders come from? Who recorded them? And maybe more importantly, what's on them? Because it's not music. At least the first one I've been working with. I've had a first attempt to clean it up, and it's not looking good. It's—it's probably easiest if you listen to it yourself.

[Sound of uncleaned wax cylinder.]

**NEMO:** It's going to take some work. And I'll be helping out with the digitization of those 32 Gramophone recordings from 1912. But this cylinder is . . . kinda intriguing, you know? If I didn't know any better . . . well, anyway, I'll be updating you with my progress. Perhaps we can . . . unmask these voices and who they belong to?

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[Frenetic theme music.]

**LESLIE:** This was Nemo's first experiment with theme music.

**NEMO:** If you click through the search page on the BnF collections catalogue and search for *enregistrements sonores*, you get . . . 937,004 recordings. 100,000 tape cassettes. Then there are 30 Berliner Gramophone discs, and, until recently, three phonographs of unknown origin. The vast majority of these collections aren't digitized. So whenever there's a desire and some money, they can bring in someone like me, with expert knowledge, to do what is frankly usually pretty grueling work. Not that I don't enjoy it. I wouldn't do it if I didn't enjoy it. Technical, yes. Boring, no.

[Nemo slurps wine.]

Expert knowledge . . . expert in old recordings, but not in much else. The pull of confession is . . .

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**NEMO:** So I had a breakthrough with that cylinder. I'm going to call it the Volta cylinder, which is catchier than saying that it's kinda like the experimental recordings Alexander Graham Bell was doing at the Volta Laboratories in 1881. I think I've finally got it to the point where it's intelligible. Here, have a quick listen to what it sounded like before.

[Sound of uncleaned wax cylinder.]

I've worked hard to try to clean it up. I've tried to transcribe it, too. I'll put the transcription up when I upload this episode. So listen to the cleaned up file and read the transcription, and see what you think.

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**Wax cylinders 1 & 2** (translated into English)

**DUDE B:** . . . you are wasting my time.

**DUDE A:** You are a guest in my home, and so I entertain you. You will have to stand much closer to the apparatus. Like this. (the next lines finally become audible) You must speak very loudly into it. Come, come!

**DUDE B:** What is the point of this contraption?

**DUDE A:** You didn't react this way to the telegraph. I thought you had a belief in the workings of progress.

**DUDE B:** The telegraph came a long time ago. We were younger men.

**DUDE A:** You really must *speak loudly into the horn!*

**DUDE B:** And you invented all this, did you?

**DUDE A:** Naturally.

**DUDE B:** I read the newspapers. Had not Thomas Edison . . . ?

**DUDE A:** A trifle. This is a design, an improvement, to my own specifications. You'll believe me when I play it back.

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**NEMO:** If I, if I had to speculate on an age for these recordings . . . So, it's on a cylinder rather than disc, that's the first obvious thing. Based on what the one guy says—and what a kind of strange voice he has—I mean, they both sound a bit . . . foreign—it's hard to tell. Anyway, Dude A, we'll call him, he seems very full of himself, he's telling the other guy that he "improved" on Edison's original phonographic design. That, in itself, while unusual, isn't unheard of—once Edison had prototyped the phonograph, other inventors all across Europe and North America wanted to improve upon it, because the quality was actually pretty sh—it wasn't very good. So I'm guessing this is early 1880s? That's more than 20 years older than the transcription discs of the opera singers, so does that actually make sense? Was it planted in with the 1912 urn contents and somehow missed on the catalogue? And, um, why was it included? It seems to be this random conversation between—not actually friends—acquaintances? But Dude A must be kind of rich to be able to afford to tinker with cutting edge technology.

[Liquid being poured and being slurped.]

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**NEMO:** I'm wondering if this is a dead end. Plenty of people—when I was doing my Masters, everyone, everyone except this one professor who wasn't even in my subject specialism . . . They do a lot of research on postgrad degrees now and the levels of anxiety and panic attacks and the effect on mental health . . . let me tell you, it wasn't such a big deal in my day, it could make you feel . . . very isolated.

[A phone tone signals an incoming text.]

**NEMO:** Oh. Oh. Well, that's great, Joel. Here I am trying to unearth something big and important

[Crash.]

**NEMO:** . . . we may never know who these guys are. They'll be less than a footnote on history. And, it's not like I was hoping this . . . you know what, I'll go back to the library. There might be something . . . Some positive thinking for a change.

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**NEMO:** So . . . I've not opted for any theme music this time, as I'm feeling a bit disillusioned about the whole thing. I mean, the BnF and the *bibliothèque-musée* are happy with my work, but they've basically decided that the Volta-esque cylinder recordings—and it's not the only oddity, not the only unidentified recording in the urns buried underneath the opera house—is not really worth anyone's time?

It doesn't seem relevant to them, as regards the opera singers' recordings. And, I guess, I can't really blame them. What they'd like to do is put it in storage until they've got the time and the funding . . . I'm, I'm on a short-term contract, you know? And then I'm onto something closer to home, which is . . . cool . . .

Its—just a bit frustrating when you think you've found something—like, why wouldn't they want to know about . . . Dude A, the guy who said he had bettered Edison's design? I think Alexander Graham Bell was working at the same time Dude A was, and it stands to reason that he might be this unsung hero of sound recording . . . do guys like that just disappear?

My friend who works on the other side of the building, in the Allée Julien Cain—actually, she's the one who got me this job in the first place—found a book published in 1908, which she thought might fit the time period, might shed some light on this. It's called *Memoirs of a Manager*, and it's by Armand Moncharmin, who was one of the Paris Opera's managers during the 1880s. Now, I'm as much a fan of free full-text, and Project Gutenberg as anyone—but yeah, I was *really* surprised to find out that there was an audiobook reading of this book. I found it online. Apparently, this Armand Moncharmin had powerful friends, so that's how he got the job as manager at the Paris Opéra. He was a good writer, though, and had done a little newspaper reporting on the variety theatre scene. Okay, here goes. Have a listen to *Memoirs of a Manager*.

**AUDIOBOOK READER:** *Memoirs of a Manager*, by Armand Moncharmin. Chapter 1 . . . During the farewell ceremony for Messieurs Debiegne and Poligny, these exalted gentlemen were passing on to Richard and myself the two little master keys that we would need. Monsieur Poligny advised us to have new locks made, but it was not clear until much later what was meant by this. The transfer of managerial powers had, quite naturally taken place the day before. It had been amicable, to such an extent that, from scarcely knowing each

other, we had become friendly, bestowing quite sincerely upon each other resounding compliments. All the informal hints and tips had likewise been exchanged, such as how to deal with singers, concierges, and even the leading ballerinas like La Sorelli, who had danced so memorably in *Polyeucte* on the night of the gala. These redoubtable fellows had remarked, and quite rightly, we soon came to see, that the troupes of performers in the Opéra were similar to the groups of family contained in the home, or members of the same family, where a climate of inequalities was bound to pervade, with its petty jealousies and rivalries. I was put in mind of such a theme when recently, workmen were digging in the basement of the Opéra to bury phonographic recordings of singers' voices . . .

**NEMO:** That's the Gramophone recordings. Moncharmin didn't say anything about random inventors attached to the Opéra who were making experimental recordings. However, he does make mention of

**AUDIOBOOK READER:** . . . A man known as the Persian in fashionable circles, well-known to opera subscribers.

**NEMO:** I did think, what was this so-called Persian doing hanging around the opera house? Could he have been involved in the recordings? Or was he simply a music lover? And you may be wondering, why am I jumping to all these conclusions? For one thing, the Volta cylinders, Dude A says to Dude B, and we have no reason to disbelieve him, that it is being recorded in a home, not the opera house. So maybe it has nothing to do with the opera house and is in with the urns due to some mistake or coincidence. But Moncharmin makes reference to some kind of mysterious music that was rumored to exist, was played once and never repeated,

**AUDIOBOOK READER:** Occasional mysteries and mishaps occurred, one of which involved the accidental death of a scene-shifter. When the stagehands found the unfortunate man's body, hanging on some stage scenery from *La Roi de Lahore*, they said that they heard singing all around them, like the singing of the dead. Then, as theatrical folk often do, being so superstitious, they changed their story. It sounded like music that "burned." When I asked the chief *répétiteur* to be more specific, he mumbled something about Don Juan and changed the subject.

**NEMO:** "*La musique qui brûle.*" "Music that burns." That's quite strange. That whole passage starts so mysteriously and then fades out. I don't know, I haven't found any other reference to music that "burns"—

[Cell phone ring. Bach's *Toccatà and Fugue in D minor.*]

**NEMO:** W-what?

**End credits**

The *Shattered Podcast* is hosted by Nemo and is a Lesser of 2 Weevils Production 2022.