

The New York Times | THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY Exclusively for Times Subscribers

The Twisting Case Against Dominique Strauss-Kahn

By Carolyn Ryan, Metropolitan Editor



Riding shotgun in Willy Rashbaum's creaky Volkswagen Jetta, I felt every dip and turn in the road.

Willy is a wonderful reporter, a genius at cultivating cops and courts sources. But he shouldn't be allowed to drive.

William K. Rashbaum, investigative reporter for The New York Times.

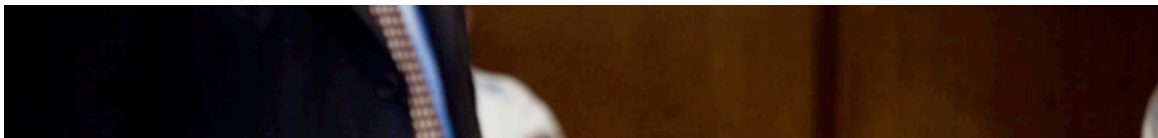
We were headed to a long-planned lunch with a federal law enforcement official in Brooklyn. But our minds were focused elsewhere -- obsessively strategizing, once again, about the sexual assault case against Dominique Strauss-Kahn.

Photo by Piotr Redlinski

It was Thursday, June 30, nine hours before we broke the story -- written by Willy, Jim Dwyer, and John Eligon -- that the case was in trouble.

Willy was periodically pulling over to the side of the road to work his legal sources over one of his many mobile phones.

Clearly something was happening, but it was unclear what.





Dominique Strauss-Kahn in a brief hearing at State Supreme Court in Manhattan.

The drama involving the hotel housekeeper who accused the French politician of sexual assault had occupied us for weeks.

There were many dimensions to it: the reverberations at the International Monetary Fund; the implications for the French presidential election, the debate over how powerful Frenchmen treat women.

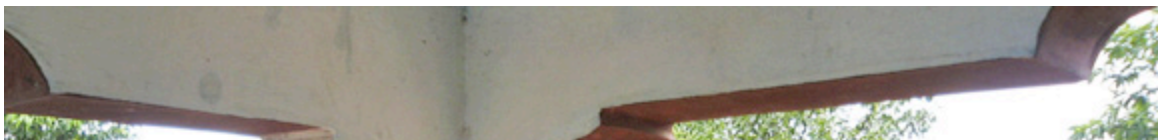
But inside the Times's Metro department, we were fixated on the two principal people involved.

Photo by Todd Heisler

2:45 p.m. Piecing Together the Story

Our reporters -- mainly Willy and the ever-relentless courts reporter John Eligon -- pieced together the movements of Mr. Strauss-Kahn in the hours after the alleged attack. (Willy spent way too many meals at McCormick & Schmick's Midtown seafood restaurant, where Mr. Strauss-Kahn met his daughter for lunch after the encounter.) Our transportation reporter, Michael Grynbaum, tracked cab drivers to their mosques in Queens, looking for the driver who took Mr. Strauss-Kahn from the restaurant to the airport, so we could better understand the Frenchman's demeanor during those critical hours.

We wanted to learn more about the housekeeper, an immigrant from a tiny village in Guinea, West Africa. It was a sensitive story for us, given the nature of the accusation, and the anonymity that we provide those who report they have been sexually assaulted. (That anonymity, of course, was no longer necessary once the accuser went public with her story in a Newsweek interview and two television appearances.)





A man who claims to be the brother of the victim, at home in the village of Thiakoulle, Guinea.

Photo by Adam Nossiter

We gathered as much as we could about her life story: Our West Africa bureau chief, Adam Nossiter, traveled from our foreign bureau in Senegal to her home, 10 hours over rutted roads from the capital city of Conakry, to talk to relatives and people who knew her growing up. Metro immigration reporter Kirk Semple and Metro enterprise reporter Anne Barnard gathered more details from her co-workers and neighbors here. But the woman's lawyer wouldn't let us speak to her. And much about her remained blurry.

In late June, Willy -- the same reporter whose sources were key to The Times breaking the story in 2008 that Eliot Spitzer had solicited prostitutes -- began picking up more stray tips, suggesting a shakiness in the case against Mr. Strauss-Kahn. The signals were coming from a surprising variety of directions but were difficult to confirm, as official channels seemed shut down.





Cyrus R. Vance Jr., the district attorney, spoke to the news media after Mr. Thompson's briefing.

Photo by Lucas Jackson/Reuters

4:00 p.m. Alerting the Senior Editors

He and John Eligon pushed for information from all sides: Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance Jr., Mr. Strauss-Kahn's defense team and the lawyer for the victim. It was difficult to pry anything loose. On Monday, June 27, John and Metro reporter Alan Feuer met for a long-planned profile interview with Mr. Vance, who seemed preoccupied with the case, but would reveal little about its status.

By the time we returned from that Brooklyn lunch on Thursday, however, after spending much of the week pressing sources, a few facts seemed clear: the prosecutors' body language had shifted dramatically from the opening days of the case, when they declared emphatically that Mr. Strauss-Kahn had sexually assaulted the housekeeper. They now seemed less confident about the victim making the accusation. Additionally, both sides were planning to be in court the next day. And there seemed to be a possibility that the case might never come to trial.

It was close to 4 p.m. Willy and John started to sketch out a story, under the steady guidance of their editor, Dean Chang.

I walked over to executive editor Bill Keller's desk, in the middle of the third-floor newsroom, and told him quietly that we might have a big exclusive that evening. The case against Mr. Strauss-Kahn -- which had spawned more than 50 separate stories and opinion columns in The Times in just six weeks -- could be falling apart.

To avoid tipping off our competitors, especially our ferocious tabloid rivals, I told Bill I was not including the story on our daily news budget, which is widely distributed around the building and to our news service clients. I also did not talk about the story at our 4 p.m. news meeting, when the senior editors gather to select stories for Page 1.

But Bill let us know that if we could nail down the story and the sourcing, it would go on the front page.

6:00 p.m. A Trusted Source Delivers

It was getting close to 6 p.m., and we were still drafting the piece, debating how strongly we could signal to readers that the case was in trouble.

That's when Jim Dwyer, our Pulitzer Prize-winning Metro columnist, a remarkably plugged-in New York newspaperman, came forward with crucial -- and potentially explosive -- details.

A trusted law enforcement source of Jim's, who had once believed the victim was a devout and truthful woman, now said there were major problems with her credibility. The housekeeper had lied on her taxes and on her immigration asylum application, where she falsely claimed she had been raped. And she had ties to people involved in criminal activities, including an incarcerated man she had a conversation with the day after the encounter with Mr. Strauss-Kahn.

Jim's breakthrough seemed to loosen John and Willy's sources, so they confirmed the account and gathered other details. And Jim kept turning up more.

At 7:52 p.m., I emailed the first six paragraphs of the story to managing editor John Geddes and Bill, who was traveling that evening. They decided it would become the lead story on the front page.

9:00 p.m. A "Thunderbolt" from the Times

We broke the news online shortly after 9 p.m. At 9:13 p.m., a news alert went out to our e-mail subscribers with a link to the story: "Strauss-Kahn Prosecution Said to Be Near Collapse."

Within minutes, Twitter lit up with people commenting on and re-tweeting the story. Requests for interviews with our reporters, from NPR to the BBC, flowed in. Insomniacs in France noticed the news and it spread quickly there, with French media calling the Times report a "thunderbolt." Our colleagues at the International Herald Tribune embarked on an early morning reaction story from the streets of Paris.



French
reaction
to revelations
in
the Dominique
Strauss-Kahn
case.
Translation for

the

Le Figaro

headline:

"DSK, The

Moment

Everything

Changed".

Translation for

the

Le Monde

headline:

"The DSK

case --

A Sudden Turn

of Events".

Photo by

Ed Alcock for

The

International

Herald Tribune

12:00 a.m. The Morning News Cycle Beckons

Around midnight, the restaurant's hostess approached the table and said a livery car was waiting out front.

The driver was from the Today Show, and he whisked Willy away to Rockefeller Center to tape an interview.

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