

LBRIS

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books

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BED OF NAILS

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Lambert was gnawing at his fingernails.

The half-light shrouded the three other policemen in a shadowy space and time, neither day nor night. The cramped office reeked of alcohol and stale tobacco. Their fatigue could be heard in their voices, still hoarse and unprepared for the day, although it was already late morning. Huddled round the T.V. screen, they were chain-smoking, but no-one in Paris Police H.Q. was about to quote the rules at them.

"What the fuck's he doing?"

"Taking his kit off."

"Is that it? Where's this come from anyway?"

"It's one of Guérin's files. Lambert's treating us to a film show."

Berlion, grinding a cigarette between his teeth, turned to the back of the room. "Hey Lambert, don't you want to watch it again?"

Lambert glanced at the door. The cigarette shifted to the corner of Berlion's mouth and the filter tip scrunched under his pre-molars.

"Don't worry, Guérin's not around!"

They guffawed with scornful laughter.

"Look, look!"

The three of them were now glued to the small screen, breathing out thick clouds of cigarette smoke.

"Bloody hell, he's running through the traffic!"

"Where is this?"

"Porte Maillot, under the bridge. C.C.T.V."

"Hey, it's like he's looking up at the camera!"

"Get away, he doesn't even know he's being filmed."

"Hung like a horse, eh?"

"Don't get too excited, Roman."

Roman elbowed Savane.

"Piss off."

Lambert was working out the damage. Not difficult. The worse ideas he had, the more he blamed himself. If Guérin turned up now, he was for it.

"Oh my God, that Peugeot nearly wiped him out."

"He won't make it."

"Jeez, look at the pile-up, ten cars, more!"

"And this nutcase galloping up the road."

On the black-and-white screen, a young man, naked and waving his arms in the air, was running up the inside lane of the *périphérique*, the inner ring road round Paris. Cars were swerving to avoid him, scooters were smashing into the crash barriers. Privates on parade, the man was running towards the oncoming traffic with a beatific smile on his face. Shouting something that couldn't be heard, and looking unmistakably joyous, he was exposing his bare flesh to the hurtling metal bodies. At the foot of the screen, a digital display recorded the date and time: 9.37 a.m. After the minutes, the seconds crept by, much more slowly than the man's running steps. He was thin and pale-skinned, with the elegant profile of a heron taking off across a pool of oil. The crashes, shocks and broken glass were all happening in total silence.

"He's shouting, what's he saying?"

"Lambert, what was the guy shouting?"

Lambert didn't reply. Why had he been such a fucking moron as to try to curry favour with these three brutes?

According to a witness, the runner had been shouting "I'm on my way!" That was all. Lambert thought it was quite enough. Not for these three though. By not replying, he was redeeming himself slightly in his own eyes.

"Ah, what's happened, where's he gone?"

"Wait, it'll be on the next camera."

The camera angle changed. Now they were viewing the man from behind, and could see the cars coming towards him. He emerged from under the bridge while the traffic, like a black stream, flowed around this white pebble, with its hairy backside.

"Doesn't give a damn, does he?"

"He's been going, oh, two hundred metres now, must be a world record!"

Savane nudged Roman, his darker alter ego.

"Easy to tell: got a stopwatch going!"

Another burst of throaty laughs. Lambert opened his mouth to protest, but the three of them intimidated him.

"Shut the fuck up, look at the screen!"

"Berlion doesn't like people talking when he's watching a film."

"Shut it."

Roman, Savane and Berlion. If you were in Homicide, you could do a good job and still be a complete cretin. As they amply demonstrated, three times over. They fell silent now, sensing the end approaching, their gallows instinct awakened. Ash from their forgotten cigarettes fell on the tiled floor, and the only sound was the whirring of the tape in the video recorder.

A large saloon car headed straight for the kamikaze, centre screen. The young man spread out his arms as if in crucifixion, thrusting out his chest, like an athlete breasting the tape. The car swerved at the last moment and missed him. But behind it, an H.G.V. was thundering along.

Soundlessly, the runner was drawn under the truck, his insane

race stopped short. Then absurdly, it began running in reverse. The radiator of the truck was now splattered with a circular blood-stain from the man's pulverised skull, and the rest of the body had entirely disappeared under the cabin, as the trailer, its wheels locked, started to slide across the road.

The video squeaked, the tape stopped, freezing on a final image of the truck skidding sideways and the driver's horrified face. At the bottom of the screen, the numbers of the digital clock had stopped.

Berlion stubbed out his cigarette, burned to the filter, on the tiled floor.

"Eeurgh, that's gross."

"I told you it was crazy as hell."

They went on staring at the screen, caught in mid-breath, sickened and disappointed.

Savane turned towards the dark corner where Lambert had taken refuge.

"Hey, Lambert, what's the verdict then, suicide or a serial killer?"

They all collapsed laughing, and Savane, gasping for breath, piled it on further.

"Think your boss has arrested the truck driver?"

They were practically pissing themselves at this when the door of the T.V. room opened. Lambert drew up his tall body, as if guiltily standing to attention.

Guérin switched on the light. His three colleagues, emerging from the smoke-filled twilight, were wiping their eyes. He glanced at the screen, then more slowly at Lambert. The anger almost immediately faded from his big brown eyes, dissolving into weariness.

The expressions of Berlion and his sidekicks moved from laughter to aggression, with the facility of men used to questioning suspects.

They filed slowly out of the room, passing in front of Guérin. Savane, probably the most vicious of the three, snarled quietly as he went past:

“Hey Colombo, your mac’s dragging on the floor.”

As he went off down the corridor, he added more loudly,

“Don’t drag it in the shit your little mutt leaves around!”

Lambert blushed crimson, and stared down at his shoes.

Guérin ejected the tape from the machine, put it in his pocket and walked out. Lambert, like a lamp post with no bulb, stood without moving. Guérin put his head back round the door.

“Coming? We’ve got a job to do.”

He almost said “I’m on my way”, in a jokey voice, but something stopped him. Dragging his feet, he followed the boss along the corridors. He tried to guess from the figure in front of him whether it expressed rage, but could only discern the eternal fatigue in which the raincoat draped it. A dog that needed no lead to follow its master. Unlike Savane, he didn’t find the idea degrading. Lambert considered it rather as a sign of trust.

The boss had carried on as if nothing had happened, without a word, but Lambert knew what to think. Being nice wasn’t a quality required in this building. Indeed, one had to admit in the end that it was of little use. Any niceness you had, you got rid of as fast as possible, feeling a bit ashamed, like losing your virginity to some raddled hooker. Lambert wondered if the boss – forty-two years old, thirteen of them in the job – was perhaps making this unnatural exception in his case only. Another reason, he told himself, not to act like a complete dickhead. One, it was a privilege, and two, Guérin was certainly capable of the opposite.

Trainee officer Lambert, who sometimes pursued his thought to its exact limits, wondered whether the boss wasn’t in fact using him as a sort of lifebelt, a refuge for his feelings. When he lost himself in these hypothetical ramblings, generally after a few beers, the

image of the dog and its master came back every time. In the end, it summed up their relationship pretty clearly. For the humble, humiliation is the first step towards recognition.

Lambert pushed open the door of their office, meditating on self-esteem. That delicate thing the boss was trying to get him to cultivate.

Guérin, silent and inscrutable, had sat down and plunged straight into the file on the man from the ring road. His ancient raincoat flopped round his shoulders like a sagging and discoloured scout tent.

What was the name of that character on the *périphérique*? Lambert had already forgotten. A complicated name, double-barrelled. Impossible to remember.

"So, young Lambert, what would you say about him? I agree with you, it wasn't a very user-friendly way to commit suicide." Guérin smiled to himself. "You saw it too, did you, how he was waving at the cameras?"

There was no sound or movement in the office. Looking up at his junior encouragingly, Guérin was waiting for some word, some approval. Lambert was busy picking his beaky nose. He looked fascinated by what he was extracting and sticking on the underside of the chair.

"Lambert?"

The big fair-haired junior jumped, slipping his hands under the desk.

"Yessir!"

"Could you go and fetch us some coffee, please."

Lambert trailed off down the corridor, hoping not to meet too many people. On the way, he once more wondered why in the quai des Orfèvres no-one ever used first names. They said things like "Roman's divorced again", "Lefranc's depressed", "That dope Savane is in trouble", "Guérin is completely nuts", and so on. No

first names. To his mind, it was odd to talk in such a detached way among supposed friends.

Guérin listened as the trailing footsteps of his colleague died away, and stared into the distance. Invariably, the sound of old trainers dragging along on the floor reminded him of holidays and the luxury hotel for middle-income tourists in Morocco where he had once booked himself into a room. A palace with unreliable plumbing, where the waiters, with drowsy zeal, walked around slowly, dragging their feet, as they brought trays of mint tea. A week spent sitting on the hotel terrace, looking at the sea, into which he had not once dipped a toe, just listening to the waiters' footsteps. Lambert's shoes, echoing in the corridor of H.Q. reminded him of the sound of the waves washing over the beach. There was a direct link between his junior and the Atlantic tide. A link, one of many, that nobody had ever made. As the sound of the sea grew fainter, he wondered why Lambert went on calling him "boss" or sometimes "sir", like the Moroccan waiters, whereas he had told him a hundred times just to call him Guérin.

He suddenly realised that there was another undeniable link between people being called "sir" and *holidays*. Hadn't it been his own boss, Barnier, who had advised him to take that break? "*Guérin, why don't you just get away from Paris and the squad for a bit? Things will have calmed down by the time you get back. Are you listening, Guérin, just take some leave, go away somewhere, anywhere.*" So the words "sir" or "boss" really had no business in the workplace. Guérin plunged into the file again, but was distracted by these exotic images and the direct connection he would always make from now on between disciplinary leave and Islam.

Lambert came back with two plastic cups of coffee: he put one on his boss's desk: black, no sugar. The other one, frothy and heaped with half a ton of demerara, he put on his own desk. Before

sitting down, he went over to the wall and smartly tore a little sheet off the calendar. In red figures and letters, it now said: 14 April 2008. He went back to his seat and started to drink his coffee, still looking at the date.

Two years earlier, when he got back from Morocco, Guérin had been directed to this poky office. Two desks, a strip-light, two chairs, a few electric sockets and two doors, as if the way in and the way out were not the same. In fact, there wasn't really a way out of this office. Behind one of the tables, a long thin strand of white coral with a human head sat facing a wall without a window, calmly contemplating the future. Since that day, it had seemed as if Lambert had never budged from his seat and that the future had definitely postponed its arrival until some later date.

The office was at the very end of the building, at the western point of the Ile de la Cité, in central Paris. To reach it you had to go through half of No. 36, or use a side entrance and an old service staircase. Barnier had handed Guérin the keys, giving him to understand that going through the other offices to get there would be a wasted effort. *"Your new assistant,"* Barnier had said, *"Your new office. Your new job. Suicides. Guérin. From now on, you're Suicides and Suicides is you."*

The second door opened into a much bigger room, of which their office was the antechamber. The archives of all the suicides in Paris. Or part of them anyway, the ones that ended up in the prefecture of police. Why they had been chosen, he and Lambert, as guard dogs for this endless vista of shelves and files, was a sign he had not yet interpreted. But he was a patient man.

The archives were no longer consulted these days; they were the anachronistic remains of files now kept on computer, the paper copies made for insurance companies and rarely requested. Almost every month the question arose of chucking them out onto a rubbish dump. Guérin was now the only person who added to

them or spent hours looking at them, apart from the odd sociology student who came from time to time to investigate social behaviour. It was these students who allowed the archive to survive. The University of Paris had declared the deposit a research resource, and getting rid of it would cause a row. The oldest files went back to the industrial revolution, a time when suicide, as a sort of counterbalance to progress, had embarked on its golden age. Guérin, during the two years since he had listened to the waves on the beach, had become something of a specialist on voluntary death. Ten or so cases a week, hundreds of hours in the archives. He had become a walking encyclopedia on Parisian suicides. Any aspect you could think of: methods, social categories, seasons, family situation, time of day, trends, legislation, influence of religion, age, district – you name it. After the first week spent riffling through these dusty box-files, he had almost forgotten why he had ended up in this dead-end job.

Suicides was a dreaded chore at the Criminal Investigation Department. Not really an established service, but an aspect of police work that had a natural tendency to be separated from the other kinds of case. Every presumed suicide was the subject of a report, confirming or contesting the facts. Where there was any doubt, an investigation was opened: in almost every case, it was simply a matter of ticking boxes. If there was an investigation, it was taken out of Guérin's hands and fetched up with characters like Berlion and Savane. The hierarchical powers that sent you to Suicides could only be overturned by even more powerful forces, of whose existence nobody was certain. The only exit paths out of Suicides were retirement, resignation on account of depression, committal to an institution – or even, and these cases were more frequent in this branch of the police force than any other – ending it all with a service revolver in the mouth. All these options, with varying orders of preference, had been wished on Guérin. The only

one no-one had anticipated was that he would take to it like a duck to water.

But that was what had happened.

As a result, Guérin had added a new layer to the pre-existing hate of his colleagues: the visceral repulsion inspired by perverts, who, when plunged into something everyone else thinks revolting, actually seem to be enjoying themselves.

Two years earlier, Guérin, aged forty and a top graduate from the Officer Training School, had already had both admirers and enemies. But everyone respected his competence, choosing to ignore certain odd aspects of his behaviour. Then there were the incidents, more and more frequent, outside the usual field of thinking and the classic methods of investigation. The incidents were put down to his Nobel-sized brain, which people hoped was working, even if it was not always easy to follow. But two years later, his career was over, he was personally disliked, and his assistant was universally considered a halfwit.

After the fall, Guérin had undergone psychological tests. They had tried to find something physically amiss as well, so that he could be fired. But no valid reason for early retirement had been discovered, either physically or mentally. If there was anything like madness in his makeup, it fitted quite easily into the tickboxes for normality. Dr Furet – an independent psychiatrist who had been consulted because of some administrative slip-up – had put a note in Guérin's file which had inspired some gossip: "The subject, in a perfectly reasoned way, seems to think, just as some people see God as a concept unifying everything else, that the world can only be comprehended and explained, in other words that the subject's police work can only be accomplished, if the idea is accepted (is that so absurd?) that *everything is connected*. No event can be understood or conceived in isolation without losing sight of its meaning, causality and effects. The subject is perfectly sane, and fit for police work."

Furet had also said to Barnier who was gently pressing him to reconsider his diagnosis: "He may make mistakes, like anyone else, but sack him from the force and if you're going to be logical, you should resign at the same time. And you could change the Minister of Justice while you're at it."

Guérin had stayed. In Suicides.

Poised on the edge of a landslide away from objectivity, the little lieutenant was still concentrating on the case of the kamikaze nudist, which seemed more and more suspicious. Looking for support from his junior, and anxiously rubbing his glossy bald head with one hand, he asked the question again.

"Really, what do you think?"

Looking up at the ceiling, Lambert spoke slowly.

"I didn't hear it rain in the night."

Guérin didn't catch his meaning at first, then looked up too. The pink stain had, indeed, got bigger.

Their office was on the top floor, under the attics. Or more precisely under the drying room. The roof leaked, and rain tended to seep inside onto the clothes hanging up there, then started dripping, now laden with blood. The rainwater collected in a pool on the wooden floor, and trickled between the planks into the plaster in the ceiling below, where it created a rose-pink stain of variable shape, expanding and shrinking above their heads, depending on the amount of rainfall. Every time the stain shrank, it left a series of concentric tawny rings, like a cross section of amethyst. It had rained that night and into the morning. Heavy rain, announcing that spring was on the way. The pink stain had got bigger, a living amethyst, the mineral pulse of dead victims, whose clothes, stiff with blood, were stored in the attics. Police evidence, which in summer gave off an unbearable stench.

Guérin looked at the stain in silence. The sound of the waves,