

Extract of *Fakirs* by Antonin Varenne

(opening scene)

On the black and white screen, a naked young man was running along the *périphérique*, the Paris ring-road, towards the cars, his arms stretched up towards the sky. Cars were swerving to avoid him, scooters were crashing into the safety barriers. With all his wares hanging out he was running, towards the cars, smiling like a prophet. He was shouting, though no one could hear, and looking so happy, while offering his bare flanks to the metal bodywork. At the bottom of the screen, one set of numbers indicated the date, the other the time : 9. 37 a.m. Next to the minutes the seconds ticked by slowly, even more slowly than the man was plying his legs. He was thin, white skinned and had the elegance of a heron skimming across a pool of oil. Everything was silent - the bumps, the crunching of metal, his cries and the broken glass.

-What the hell is he yelling about?

- Lambert, what's he shouting?

Lambert said nothing. Why on earth, for God's sake, should he want to be acknowledged by these three brutes?

According to a witness, the runner was shouting, 'I'm coming'. Nothing else. Lambert thought that was enough. Clearly it wasn't for the other three. He didn't reply and by not saying anything he felt a bit better.

- Hey, we can't see anything! Where's he gone?

- Wait, we'll get it on another camera.

The angle changed and they could now see the young man running from behind, facing the cars as they poured towards him. He came out from under the bridge, the flood of dark vehicles swerving to avoid this white lump with its hairy bum.

- Well, the idiot certainly isn't scared!

- He's run a good two hundred metres. Must be a record.

Savane, once again nudged Roman, his alter ego from hell.

- That's easy to see, there's even a stop watch!

There was a burst of throaty laughter.

Lambert opened his mouth to protest but the three of them scared him.

- Shut up for fuck's sake, and watch.

- Berlion doesn't like it when people talk during films!

- Shut it.

Roman, Savane and Berlion. To do good work in the Homicide Department didn't exclude the possibility of being completely stupid. They proved that three times over. Sensing that the end was coming, their vulture-like instincts made them quiet. The ash from their forgotten cigarettes was falling onto the tiled floor and the only sound was the hissing of the tape in the recorder.

A luxury car was bearing down on the kamikaze, straight down the line of the camera. The young man stretched out his arms and thrust out his chest, like the final effort of a runner crossing the finishing line. The car swerved at the very last moment and avoided him. Behind it there was a lorry going at full speed.

Without a sound the runner hit the lorry, his crazy running stopped dead and in a ridiculous way he at once set off again in the opposite direction at the same speed as the truck. The blood from the young man's smashed skull, driven into the ventilation grilles, had spurted all over the radiator, like a kind of halo or crown of thorns around his head. He suddenly disappeared, sucked under the driver's cab, while the lorry's trailer started to slide across the road, its wheels locked.

The tape recorder whined and the tape stuck on the last clip of the lorry skidding. In the cab, the driver's face was petrified in an expression of horror. At the bottom of the screen the digital numbers of the clock had stopped.

Ramon stubbed out his cigarette on the tiles.

- God, it's a right mess.

- I told you, it's completely nuts.

They continued to stare at the screen, sickened and disappointed, uncertain what to do next.

Savane turned to Lambert.

- Heh, Lambert, what do you think? Is it suicide or is he a serial killer?

They fell about laughing. Savane, gasping, had another go.

- Shit! Do you think Guérin arrested the lorry driver?

They were pissing themselves. The door opened and Lambert, feeling vaguely guilty, drew himself up and stood more or less to attention.

Guérin put on the light. The three policemen emerged from the smoke-ridden shadows, wiping their eyes. He glanced at the still on the screen and then, slowly, at

Lambert. The anger that had been in his big brown eyes disappeared almost immediately, overcome by weariness.

The expression on the crumpled faces of Berlion and his associates went from one of mirth to aggressiveness, with the ease of coppers well used to interrogations.

They slowly left the room, in front of Guérin.

Savane, probably the hardest of them, spat out between his teeth:

- Watch out, Colombo, your coat's dragging along the ground. (And then, when he was further down the corridor, added more loudly: 'Be careful not to let it drag in your dog's shit!')

Lambert went red and looked down at his shoes.

Guérin ejected the cassette from the tape recorder, slipped it into his coat pocket and left the room.

Lambert, looking like a standard lamp without a bulb, stayed there. After a few seconds, Guérin appeared in the doorway again.

- You coming? We've got work to do.

He almost said 'I'm coming' merrily, but something stopped him. Dragging his feet he went off after the boss along the corridors. He looked hard at Guérin's figure fearing that he would see anger, but could only sense the ever present tiredness that he carried beneath his coat. A dog and a master who didn't need a lead anymore. Unlike Savane he didn't find the idea so degrading and saw it rather as a sign of confidence.

The boss had let sleeping dogs lie but Lambert knew what was what. Being nice wasn't necessary in this building. In the end, you had to admit that it was useless. In this place, being nice was something you stopped as quickly as possible; it was a bit shameful, like losing your virginity between the legs of an old tart. Lambert wondered whether the boss – eleven years of service – didn't make this unnatural effort especially for him. Yet one more reason, he said to himself, not to mess around: for one thing it was a privilege and two Guérin was quite capable of doing the opposite.

Pushing this line of thinking as far as he could, trainee officer Lambert sometimes wondered whether his boss didn't use him as a kind of buoy, a shelter for what he was feeling. When, after a few beers, he got lost in such hypothetical limbo, the image of a dog and its master would come back to him. In the end, it summed up their relationship quite clearly and he was happy with it.

Lambert pushed open the door of their office, a little sad at having lowered his own self-esteem, the delicate approach his boss was teaching him to develop.

Distant and silent Guérin had immersed himself in the file on the ring-road as soon as he had sat down. His old raincoat hung on him like an old camping jacket, ill-fitting and discoloured.

What was the name of that guy on the ring-road? Lambert couldn't remember. A complicated name with hyphens in it. Impossible to recall.

- Look here Lambert, what do you have to say about this? Like you, I don't think it's a very kosher way of committing suicide. (Guérin smiled to himself.) You noticed as well the signs he was making to the camera didn't you?

Guérin supplied both the questions and answers, a habit from the way his assistant reacted.

Nothing moved in the office, there was no noise. Looking up at his junior with an encouraging smile on his lips, Guérin waited for a word, if only of approval. Lambert was picking his hooked nose, fascinated by what he was extracting and sticking under his chair.

- Lambert?

The tall, fair-haired assistant jumped and slipped his hands under his desk.

-Yes, boss?

- Go and get us some coffee, please.

Lambert set off through the corridors hoping not to meet too many people. On the way he wondered once again why no-one on the Quai des Orfèvres was called by his Christian name. People always said 'Roman has got divorced again', 'Lefranc is depressed', 'that shit Savane is in trouble', 'Guérin is completely crazy' and so on. Never a Christian name. He found this way of distancing your friends strange.

[...]

Lambert came back with two plastic cups, one black with no sugar which he placed on the boss's desk, and the other with milk and sprinkled with over an acre of cane-sugar, which he placed on his own. Before sitting down he went over to the wall and dramatically tore off a small page from the calendar. 14 April 2008 appeared in red

letters and numbers. He sat back down and started to drink his coffee, staring at the day's date.

Two years previously, on coming back from leave, Guérin had been shown to this office. Two tables, a strip-light, two chairs, power points and two doors, as if the entrance and exit weren't the same. In fact, strictly speaking, the office had no exit. Behind one of the desks, a piece of white coral in the shape of a human face sat turned towards a windowless wall, calmly staring into the future. It seemed to him that since that day Lambert had not budged from his chair and that the future had put off its arrival for good.

The office was right at the end of the building, at the western point of the Ile de la Cité. To get there you had to cross half of number 36 or take a side door and some back stairs. Barnier had given him the keys, making him understand that to go through all the offices simply to get here was a waste of energy.

'Your new assistant', Barnier had said. 'Your new office. Your new job. You're Mister Suicides, Guérin. Guérin the Suicides man, that's you, now.'

The second door opened into another, much bigger room, which was entered via their office. The Paris suicide records. Or part of them, those belonging to the police authorities. The fact that he and young Lambert had been chosen as door-keepers to these endless shelves and files was something that he had still not yet fathomed. But he was patient.

These files were no longer consulted. They were only the anachronistic remains of papers that had now been digitalised, copies kept for insurance companies and rarely asked for. Almost every month, there was talk of cleaning them out and taking them to a rubbish tip. There was only Guérin left to add to them and to spend hours sometimes with a sociology student in search of some data. These students ensured that the archives survived; universities had made them into research material and their disappearance would have caused a scandal. The oldest files went back to the industrial revolution when, as a kind of counterweight to progress, suicide had enjoyed its golden age. For two and a bit years, Guérin had become a specialist in self-destruction. A dozen or so cases per week, hundreds of hours in the archives; he had become a living encyclopaedia of Parisian suicides. Methods, social class, season, civil status, timetables, developments, legislation, religious influences, age, district.... After a week he had forgotten the very reason why he had arrived in this dead-end.

Suicides was a chore feared by those on the force. It wasn't really a department, but part of a job that naturally tended to be separate from others. Every suspected suicide was the subject of a report that confirmed or invalidated the facts. In the case of doubt, an inquest was opened; but in almost every case it was a matter of ticking a box. If there was an investigation it was no longer in Guérin's hands and fell into those of men such as Berlion and Savane. The hierarchical powers that led to Suicides could only be overturned by other, stronger ones, whose very existence was in doubt. You only left Suicides on retirement, resignation, depression, for a rest-home or else— and examples were more frequent in this branch than in the rest of the police force — by finishing yourself off with your service revolver in your mouth. With various degrees of preference, people had wished any one of these possibilities on Guérin. But what no-one had foreseen was that he would be as happy as a sand boy there.