



VINTAGE

**THIS NIGHT'S
FOUL WORK**

FRED VARGAS

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Fred Vargas

Title Page

Chapter I

Chapter II

Chapter III

Chapter IV

Chapter V

Chapter VI

Chapter VII

Chapter VIII

Chapter IX

Chapter X

Chapter XI

Chapter XII

Chapter XIII

Chapter XIV

Chapter XV

Chapter XVI

Chapter XVII

Chapter XVIII

Chapter XIX

Chapter XX

Chapter XXI
Chapter XXII
Chapter XXIII
Chapter XXIV
Chapter XXV
Chapter XXVI
Chapter XXVII
Chapter XXVIII
Chapter XXIX
Chapter XXX
Chapter XXXI
Chapter XXXII
Chapter XXXIII
Chapter XXXIV
Chapter XXXV
Chapter XXXVI
Chapter XXXVII
Chapter XXXVIII
Chapter XXXIX
Chapter XL
Chapter XLI
Chapter XLII
Chapter XLIII
Chapter XLIV
Chapter XLV
Chapter XLVI
Chapter XLVII
Chapter XLVIII
Chapter XLIX
Chapter L
Chapter LI

Chapter LII
Chapter LIII
Chapter LIV
Chapter LV
Chapter LVI
Chapter LVII
Chapter LVIII
Chapter LIX
Chapter LX
Chapter LXI
Chapter LXII
Chapter LXIII
Chapter LXIV
Chapter LXV
Chapter LXVI
Chapter LXVII

Copyright

About the Book

On the outskirts of Paris, two men are discovered with their throats cut. In Normandy, two stags have been killed and their hearts cut out. Meanwhile, a seventy-five-year old nurse who had murdered several of her patients has escaped from prison. Is there a connection between the three cases?

In his latest mystery, Commissaire Adamsberg is pitted against nemeses past and present: Ariana Lagarde, France's foremost pathologist and Adamsberg's enemy since they argued over a case twenty-three years earlier, and Louis Veyrenc, a new recruit with a grudge, who has been assigned the job of protecting the Commissaire's ex-girlfriend. As the different strands of Vargas's compelling story begin to intertwine, events move towards a gripping climax ...

About the Author

Fred Vargas was born in Paris in 1957. A historian and archaeologist by profession, she is now a bestselling novelist. Her books have been translated into thirty-two languages.

Siân Reynolds is a historian, translator and former professor at the University of Stirling.

ALSO BY FRED VARGAS

Have Mercy on Us All
Seeking Whom He May Devour
The Chalk Circle Man
The Three Evangelists
Wash This Blood Clean From My Hand

FRED VARGAS

This Night's Foul Work

TRANSLATED BY
Sian Reynolds

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

I

BY FIXING HIS curtain to one side with a clothes-peg, Lucio could better observe the new neighbour at his leisure. The newcomer, who was small and dark, had stripped to the waist despite the chilly March breeze and was building a wall of breeze-blocks without using a plumb line. After an hour's watching, Lucio shook his head abruptly, like a lizard emerging from its motionless siesta. He removed his unlit cigarette from his mouth.

'That one,' he said, pronouncing his final diagnosis, 'has no more ballast in his head than in his hands. He's going his own sweet way without the rule book. Pleasing himself.'

'Let him get on with it, then,' said his daughter, without conviction.

'I know what I have to do, Maria.'

'You just enjoy upsetting other people, don't you, with your old wives' tales?'

Her father clicked his tongue disapprovingly.

'You wouldn't talk like that if you had trouble sleeping. The other night I saw her, clear as I see you.'

'Yes, you told me.'

'She went past the windows on the first floor, slowly like the ghost.'

'Yes,' Maria said again, with indifference.

The old man had risen to his feet and was leaning on his stick.

'It's as if she was waiting for the new owner to arrive, as if she was getting ready to stalk her prey. That man over there, I mean,' he added, jerking his chin at the window.

'The neighbour?' said Maria. 'It'll just go in one ear and out the other, you know.'

'What he does after that's up to him. Pass me a cigarette - I'm going over there.'

Maria placed the cigarette in her father's mouth and lit it.

'Maria, for the love of God, take off the filter.'

Doing as she was asked, Maria helped her father on with his coat. Then she slipped into his pocket a little radio, from which a hiss of background noise and muffled voices emerged. The old man wouldn't be parted from it.

'Don't go scaring the neighbour now, will you,' she said, knotting his scarf.

'Oh, the neighbour's had worse than this to cope with, believe me.'

Jean-Baptiste Adamsberg had been working on his wall, unperturbed by the watchful gaze of the old man across the way but wondering when he would be coming over to test him out in person. He watched as a tall figure with striking, deeply scored features and a shock of white hair walked across the little garden at a dignified pace. He was about to hold out his hand to shake when he saw that the man's right arm stopped short at the elbow. Adamsberg raised his trowel as a sign of welcome, and looked at him with a calm and neutral expression.

'I could lend you my plumb line,' the old man said civilly.

'I'll manage,' said Adamsberg, fitting another breeze-block into place. 'Where I come from, we always put up walls by guesswork, and they haven't fallen down yet. They might lean sometimes, but they don't fall down.'

'Are you a bricklayer?'

'No. I'm a cop. *Commissaire de police.*'

The old man leaned his stick against the new wall and buttoned his inner jacket up to his chin, giving himself time to absorb the information.

'You go after drug dealers? Stuff like that?'

'No, corpses. I work in the Serious Crime Squad.'

'I see,' said the old man, after registering a slight shock. 'My speciality was the bench.'

He winked.

'Not the Judge's Bench, wooden benches. I used to sell them.'

A joker in days gone by, thought Adamsberg, smiling at his new neighbour with understanding. The old man seemed well able to amuse himself without any help from anyone else. A joker, yes, a man with a sense of humour, but those dark eyes saw right through you.

'Parquet floors too. Oak, beech, pine. If you need anything, let me know. Your house has nothing but tiles on the floor.'

'That's right.'

'Not as warm as wood. Velasco's the name. Lucio Velasco Paz. The shop's called Velasco Paz and Daughter.'

Lucio Velasco smiled broadly, but his gaze did not leave Adamsberg's face, inspecting it thoroughly. The old man was working up to an announcement. He had something to tell him.

'Maria runs the business now. She's got a good head on her shoulders, so don't go running to her with stories, she doesn't like it.'

'What sort of stories would those be?'

'Ghost stories, for instance,' said the old man, screwing up his dark eyes.

'No chance. I don't know any ghost stories.'

'People say that, and then one day they do know one.'

'Maybe. For all I know. Your radio isn't tuned properly, *monsieur*. Would you like me to fix it?'

'What for?'

'To listen to the programmes.'

'No, *hombre*. I don't want to listen to their rubbish. At my age, you've earned the right not to put up with it.'

'Yes, of course,' said Adamsberg.

If the neighbour wanted to carry around in his pocket a radio that wasn't tuned to any programme, and call him 'hombre', that was up to him.

The old man staged another pause as he watched Adamsberg line up his breeze-blocks.

'Like the house, do you?'

'Yes, very much.'

Lucio made a joke under his breath and burst out laughing. Adamsberg smiled politely. There was something youthful about Lucio's laughter, whereas the rest of his demeanour suggested that he was more or less responsible for the destiny of mankind.

'A hundred and fifty square metres.' The old man was speaking again. 'With a garden, an open fireplace, a cellar, and a woodshed. You can't find anything like this in Paris nowadays. Did you ever ask yourself why it was going so cheap?'

'Because it's old and run-down, I suppose.'

'And did you never wonder why it hadn't been demolished either?'

'Well, it's at the end of a cul-de-sac - it's not in anyone's way.'

'All the same, *hombre*. No buyer in the six years it's been on the market. Didn't that bother you?'

'Monsieur Velasco, it takes a lot to bother me.'

Adamsberg scraped off the surplus cement with his trowel.

'Well, just suppose for a moment that it *did* bother you,' insisted the old man. 'Suppose you asked yourself why nobody had bought this house.'

'Let me see. It's got an outside privy. People don't like that these days.'

'They could have built an extension to reach it, as you're doing now.'

'I'm not doing it for myself. It's for my wife and son.'

'God's sakes, you're not going to bring a woman to live here, are you?'

'No, I don't think so. They'll just come now and then.'

'But this woman, your wife. She's not proposing to *sleep* here, is she?'

Adamsberg frowned as the old man gripped his arm to gain his attention.

'Don't go thinking you're stronger than anyone else,' said the old man, more calmly. 'Sell up. These are things that pass our understanding. They're beyond our knowing.'

'What things?'

Lucio shifted his now extinguished cigarette in his mouth.

'See this?' he said raising his right arm, which ended in a stump.

'Yes,' said Adamsberg, with respect.

'I lost that when I was nine years old, during the Civil War.'

'Yes.'

'And sometimes it still itches. It itches on the part of my arm that isn't there, sixty-nine years later. In the same place, always the same place,' said the old man, pointing to a space in the air. 'My mother knew why. It was the spider's bite. When I lost my arm, I hadn't finished scratching. So it goes on itching.'

'Yes, I see,' said Adamsberg, mixing his cement quietly.

'Because the spider's bite hadn't finished its life - do you understand what I'm saying? It wants its dues, it's taking its revenge. Does that remind you of anything?'

'The stars,' Adamsberg suggested. 'They go on shining long after they're dead.'

'All right, yes,' admitted the old man, surprised. 'Or feelings. If a fellow goes on loving a girl, or the other way

round, when it's all over, see what I mean?'

'Yes.'

'But why does he go on loving the girl, or the other way round? What explains it?'

'I don't know,' said Adamsberg patiently.

Between gusts of wind, the hesitant March sunshine was warming his back, and he was quite happy to be there, building his wall in this overgrown garden. Lucio Velasco Paz could go on talking all he wanted, it wouldn't bother Adamsberg.

'It's quite simple. It's because the feeling hasn't run its course. It's beyond our control, that kind of thing. You have to wait for it to finish, go on scratching till the end. And if you die before you've run your life's course, same thing. People who've been murdered, they go on hanging about, their presence makes you itch non-stop.'

'Like spider bites,' said Adamsberg, bringing the conversation back full circle.

'Like ghosts,' said the old man, seriously. 'Now do you understand why nobody wanted your house? Because it's haunted, *hombre*.'

Adamsberg finished cleaning his cement board and wiped his hands.

'Well, why not?' he said. 'Doesn't bother me. I'm used to things that pass my understanding.'

Lucio tilted his chin and looked at Adamsberg sadly. 'It's you, *hombre*, who won't get past her, if you try to be clever. What is it with you? You reckon you're stronger than her?'

'Her? You're talking about a woman, then?'

'Yes, a ghostly woman from the century before the one before, the time before the Revolution. Ancient wickedness, a shade from the past.'

The *commissaire* ran his hand slowly over the rough surface of the breeze-blocks.

'Indeed,' he said, suddenly pensive. 'A shade, you said?'

II

ADAMSBERG WAS MAKING coffee in the large kitchen-living room of his new house, still feeling unaccustomed to the space. The light glanced in through the small window-panes, and shone on the ancient red floor-tiles dating from the century before the one before. The room smelled of damp, of woodsmoke, of the new oilcloth on the table, an atmosphere that reminded him of his childhood home in the mountains, when he thought about it. He put two cups without saucers on the table, in a rectangular patch of sunlight. His neighbour was sitting bolt upright, clasping his knee with his good hand. That hand was large enough to strangle an ox between its thumb and index finger, having apparently doubled in size to compensate for the absence of the other.

'You wouldn't have anything to pep up the coffee, by any chance? If that's not too much trouble.'

Lucio looked suspiciously at the garden, while Adamsberg searched for something alcoholic in the cases he had not yet unpacked.

'Your daughter wouldn't like a drink, would she?' asked the *commissaire*.

'She doesn't encourage me.'

'Now what's this one?' asked Adamsberg, pulling out a bottle from a tea chest.

'A Sauternes, I'd say,' was the opinion of the old man, screwing up his eyes like an ornithologist identifying a bird

from a distance. 'It's a bit early in the day for a Sauternes.'

'Doesn't seem to be anything else here.'

'We'll settle for that, then,' decreed the old man.

Adamsberg poured him a glass and sat down alongside, letting his back feel the patch of sunlight.

'How much do you know about the house?' Lucio asked.

'That the last owner hanged herself in the upstairs room,' said Adamsberg, pointing at the ceiling. 'And that's why nobody wanted the house. But that doesn't worry me.'

'Because you've seen plenty of hanged people?'

'I've seen a few. But it's not the dead who've ever troubled me. It's their killers.'

'We're not talking about the real dead here, *hombre*, we're talking about the others, the ones who won't go away. And she's never gone away.'

'The one who hanged herself?'

'No, the one who hanged herself *did* go away,' explained Lucio, swallowing a gulp of wine, as if to recognise the event. 'Do you know why she hanged herself?'

'No.'

'It was the house that made her go mad. All the women who've lived here have been troubled by the ghost. And then they die.'

'What ghost?'

'The convent ghost. A silent one. That's why the street is called the rue des Mouettes.'

'I don't follow,' said Adamsberg, pouring out coffee.

'There used to be a convent here, in the century before the one before. Nuns who were forbidden to speak.'

'A silent order.'

'Right. It used to be called the rue des Muettes, the Street of Silent Women, but as people forgot the real name, and said it wrong, they started to call it the rue des Mouettes, which just means the Street of Seagulls.'

'Nothing to do with birds, then,' said Adamsberg, disappointed.

'No, they were nuns, but the old name was harder to pronounce. Anyway, one of these silent sisters dishonoured the house. With the devil, they say. Well, I have to admit, there isn't any evidence for that bit.'

'So what *do* you have evidence of, Monsieur Velasco?' asked Adamsberg, smiling.

'You can call me Lucio. Oh yes, there's evidence all right. There was a trial at the time, in 1771. The convent was closed and the house had to be purified. The wicked Silent Sister had managed to get herself called Saint Clarisse. She promised any women prepared to come up with a sum of money and go through a ceremony that they would have a place in paradise. What these poor women didn't know was that they were going straight there. When they turned up with their purses full of cash, she cut their throats. Seven of them she killed. Seven, *hombre*. But one night, she got her come-uppance.'

Lucio laughed like a boy, then gathered himself once more.

'We shouldn't laugh at anyone so wicked,' he said. 'The spider bite's itching again, that's my punishment.'

Adamsberg watched as Lucio scratched in the air with his left hand, waiting placidly for the rest of the story.

'Does it help when you scratch it?'

'Just for a moment, then it starts up again. Well, on the night of 3 January 1771, one more old woman turned up to see Saint Clarisse, hoping to buy her way into paradise. But this time the woman's son, who was suspicious, and mean, came along with her. He was a tanner. And he killed the so-called saint. Like that,' said Lucio, crashing his fist down in the table. 'He beat her to pulp with his huge hands. Are you with me so far?'

'Yes.'

'Because if not, I can start again.'

'No, no, Lucio, carry on.'

‘Only the thing was, this wicked Sister Clarisse never really went away. Because she was only twenty-six, do you see? And since then, every woman who’s ever lived here after her has left the house feet first, after meeting a violent death. Before Madeleine, that’s the one who hanged herself, there was a Madame Jeunet in the 1960s. She fell out of a top-floor window. No reason. Before Madame Jeunet, there was a Marie-Louise who put her head in the oven during the war. My father knew them both. Nothing but tragedy.’

The two men nodded simultaneously. Lucio Velasco with gravity, Adamsberg with a certain pleasure. The *commissaire* didn’t want to offend the old man. And to tell the truth, this satisfying ghost story suited both of them, so they savoured it, making it last as long as the sugar took to dissolve in their coffee. The horrors of Saint Clarisse made Lucio’s life more exciting, and the tale diverted Adamsberg momentarily from the mundane murders he was investigating at the time. This female phantom was more poetic than the two petty criminals who had been slashed to death the previous week at Porte de la Chapelle. He almost decided to tell Lucio about the case, since the old Spaniard seemed to have a definite view about everything. He warmed to this one-armed humorist, though he could have done without the radio buzzing away uninterruptedly in his trouser pocket. At a sign from Lucio, he filled his glass again.

‘If everyone who’s ever been murdered was still trailing around in the ether,’ Adamsberg said, ‘how many ghosts would I have on my hands in this building? Saint Clarisse, plus her seven victims. Plus the two your father knew, plus Madeleine. That makes eleven. Any more?’

‘No, no, it’s just Clarisse,’ Lucio pronounced. ‘Her victims were all too old, they didn’t come back. Unless they went to their own houses – that’s possible.’

‘OK.’

'And the other three women, they're different. They weren't murdered, they were possessed. But Saint Clarisse hadn't finished her life when the tanner beat her to death. Now do you see why the house was never demolished? Because if it had been, Clarisse would have moved somewhere else. To my house, for instance. And round here, we'd rather know exactly where she is.'

'Right here.'

Lucio agreed with a wink. 'And here, so long as nobody comes to disturb her, there's no harm done.'

'She likes the spot, you're saying.'

'She doesn't even go into the garden. She just waits for her victims up there in your attic. But now she's got company again.'

'Me.'

'You,' Lucio agreed. 'But you're a man, so she won't trouble you much. It's the women she drives crazy. Don't bring your wife here. Take my advice. Or else just sell up.'

'No, Lucio, I like this house.'

'Pig-headed, aren't you. Where are you from?'

'The Pyrenees.'

'High mountains,' said Lucio, with respect. 'So it's no good my trying to convince you.'

'You know the Pyrenees?'

'I was born the other side of them, *hombre*. In Jaca.'

'And the bodies of the seven old women? Did they look for them when they held the trial?'

'No, in the century before the one before, the police didn't search the way they do now. I dare say the bodies are still under there,' said Lucio, pointing to the garden with his stick. 'That's why people haven't dug it too deeply. You wouldn't want to disturb the devil.'

'No, no point.'

'You're like Maria,' said the old man, with a smile. 'You think it's funny. But I've seen her often, *hombre*. Mist, vapour, then her breath, cold as winter on the high peaks.'

And last week I was out taking a leak under the hazel tree in my garden one night, and I really saw her.'

Lucio drained his glass of Sauternes and scratched the spider's bite.

'She's got a lot older,' he said, almost with disgust.

'It *is* a long time, after all,' said Adamsberg.

'Yes. Well, Sister Clarisse's face is as wrinkled as a walnut.'

'And where was she?'

'On the first floor. She was walking up and down in the upstairs room.'

'That's going to be my study.'

'And where will you sleep?'

'The room next to it.'

'You're not easily scared, are you?' said Lucio, getting to his feet. 'I hope you don't think I was too blunt? Maria thinks I'm wrong to come in and tell you all this straight off.'

'No, not at all,' said Adamsberg, who had unexpectedly acquired seven corpses in the garden and a ghost with a face like a walnut.

'Good. Well, perhaps you'll manage to calm her down. Though they say that only a very old man can get the better of her now. But that's just fancy. You don't want to believe everything you hear.'

Left to himself, Adamsberg drank the dregs of his lukewarm coffee. Then he looked up at the ceiling, and listened.

III

AFTER A PEACEFUL night spent in the silent company of Saint Clarisse, *Commissaire* Adamsberg pushed open the door of the Medico-Legal Institute, which housed the pathology lab. Nine days earlier, at Porte de la Chapelle, in northern Paris, two men had been found a few hundred metres apart, each with his throat cut. According to the local police inspector, they were both small-time crooks, who'd been dealing drugs in the Flea Market. Adamsberg was keen to see them again, since *Commissaire* Mortier from the Drug Squad wanted to take over the investigation.

'Two lowlifes who got their throats cut at La Chapelle? They're on my patch, Adamsberg,' Mortier had declared. 'And one of them's black, what's more. Just hand them over. What the devil are you waiting for?'

'I'm waiting to find out why they've got earth under their fingernails.'

'Because they didn't take a bath too often.'

'Because they'd been digging somewhere. And if there's digging going on, it's a matter for the Crime Squad.'

'Have you never seen these characters hide drugs in window boxes? You're wasting your time, Adamsberg.'

'That's OK by me. I like wasting time.'

The two bodies were stretched out, unclothed, alongside each other: one very big white man, one very big black man, one with a hairy torso, the other smooth, both harshly illuminated by the strip lighting in the morgue. With their

feet neatly together and their hands at their sides, they seemed in death to have turned abruptly into docile schoolboys. In fact, Adamsberg thought, as he considered their sober appearance, the two men had led lives of classic regularity, since there's not a great deal of originality in human existence. Their days had followed an unchanging pattern: mornings asleep, then afternoons devoted to dealing, evenings to women, and Sundays to their mothers. On the margins of society, as elsewhere, routine imposes its rules. Their brutal murder had cut abnormally short the thread of their uneventful lives.

The pathologist was watching Adamsberg as he walked round the two bodies.

'What do you want me to do with them?' she asked, her hand resting negligently on the black corpse's thigh, idly patting it as if in ultimate consolation. 'Two dealers from the wrong side of town, slashed with a knife - looks like the Drug Squad had better take care of it.'

'Yes, they're shouting for them.'

'So what's the problem?'

'Me. I'm the problem. I don't want to hand them over. And I'm hoping you'll help me hang on to them. Find some excuse.'

'Why?' asked the pathologist. Her hand was still resting on the black corpse's thigh, signifying that for the moment the man was still under her jurisdiction, in a free zone, and she alone would make any decision about sending him either to the Drug Squad or the Crime Squad.

'They had newly dug earth under their fingernails.'

'I expect the drugs people have their reasons too. Do they have files on these two?'

'No, not at all. So these two are mine, full stop.'

'They told me about you,' said the pathologist calmly.

'What did they tell you?'

'That you're sometimes on a different wavelength from everyone else. It causes trouble.'

'It wouldn't be the first time, would it, Ariane?'

With her foot the doctor pulled over a stool. She sat down on it and crossed her legs. Twenty-three years earlier, Adamsberg had thought her a beautiful woman and, at sixty, she still was as she posed elegantly on her perch in the mortuary.

'Gracious me!' she said. 'You know my name.'

'Yes.'

'But I don't know *you*.'

The doctor lit a cigarette and thought for a few seconds.

'No,' she said at last. 'I can't say I remember you. I'm sorry.'

'It was twenty-three years ago, and we were only in contact for a few months. I remember your surname and your first name, and indeed that we were on first-name terms.'

'Were we now?' she said, without enthusiasm. 'And what were we doing to be on such familiar terms?'

'We had an almighty quarrel.'

'A lovers' tiff? I'd be devastated if I'd forgotten something like that.'

'No, it was professional.'

'Gracious me,' said the doctor again, frowning.

Adamsberg inclined his head, distracted by the memories that her high-pitched voice and cutting tone brought up for him. He recognised the ambiguity which had both attracted and disconcerted the young man he had been then: her severe way of dressing combined with a mane of tousled hair, her haughty manner but familiar way of speaking, her elaborate pose but spontaneous gestures. He had never been quite sure whether he was dealing with a superior but absent-minded specialist, or a workaholic who cared nothing for appearances. He even recalled the way she said 'Gracious me!' at the start of a sentence, without being able to work out whether this was an expression of scorn or simply a provincial mannerism. He

was not the only policeman to be wary of her. Dr Ariane Lagarde was the most eminent pathologist in France, an unrivalled forensic expert.

'So we were on first-name terms, were we?' she went on, letting the ash from her cigarette fall to the floor. 'Twenty-three years ago I would have been in mid-career, but you would have been just a junior policeman.'

'As you say, a very junior policeman.'

'Well, you surprise me. As a rule, I'm not on familiar terms with my junior colleagues.'

'We got on pretty well. Until a big bust-up that caused a stir in a café in Le Havre. The door slammed and we never met again. I never got to finish my beer.'

Ariane stubbed out her cigarette underfoot, then sat back on the metal stool as a smile hesitantly returned to her face.

'The beer,' she said. 'I wouldn't by any chance have thrown it on the floor, would I?'

'You did indeed.'

'Jean-Baptiste,' she said, detaching each syllable. 'That young idiot Jean-Baptiste Adamsberg, who thought he knew better than everyone else.'

'Yes. That's what you said when you smashed my glass.'

'Jean-Baptiste,' Ariane repeated more slowly.

The doctor slipped off her stool and put her hand on Adamsberg's shoulder. She seemed on the point of kissing him, then put her hand back in the pocket of her overall.

'I did like you, Jean-Baptiste. You upset the apple-cart without even noticing. And according to what people say about *Commissaire* Adamsberg, you haven't changed. Now I see: that was you, you're him.'

'Sort of.'

Ariane leaned her elbows on the dissecting table where the white corpse lay, pushing the body aside to make more room. Like most pathologists, Ariane showed little respect for the dead. On the other hand, she investigated the

enigma of their bodies with unrivalled talent, thus paying homage in her own way to the immense and singular complexity of each one. Dr Lagarde's analyses had made the corpses of some quite ordinary mortals famous. If you passed through her hands, you had a good chance of going down in history. After your death, unfortunately.

'It was an exceptional corpse,' she remembered. 'We found him in his bedroom, with a sophisticated farewell letter. A local councillor, compromised and ruined, and he had killed himself with a sword, hara-kiri style.'

'Having drunk a lot of gin first, to give himself courage.'

'I remember it clearly,' said Ariane, in the mild tone of someone recalling a pleasant story. 'A straightforward case of suicide, on the part of a subject with a history of depression and compulsion. The local council was glad the matter went no further, do you remember, Jean-Baptiste? I had put in my report, which was impeccable. You were just the junior who used to make photocopies, run errands, sort out my paperwork, though you didn't always stick to instructions. We used to go and have a drink sometimes by the harbour. I was about to be promoted, and you were daydreaming and going nowhere. In those days, I used to put pomegranate juice in beer to make it fizz.'

'Do you still mix crazy drinks?'

'Yes, lots,' said Ariane, sounding disappointed, 'but I haven't found the perfect mixture yet. Remember the *violine*? An egg whipped up in crème de menthe and Malaga.'

'Awful drink, I never went for that one.'

'I stopped making the *violine*. OK for the nerves but a bit too strong. We experimented with a lot of things in Le Havre.'

'Except one.'

'Gracious me.'

'A bedroom experiment. We never tried that.'

'No, I was married in those days, and a very devoted wife. On the other hand, we worked well together on the police reports.'

'Until the day.'

'Until the day a little idiot of a Jean-Baptiste got it into his head that the local councillor in Le Havre had been murdered. Why? Because you found ten dead rats in a warehouse in the port.'

'Twelve, Ariane. Twelve rats, all slashed across the belly with a blade.'

'All right, twelve, if you say so. And you concluded that a murderer had been testing his courage before the attack. And there was something else. You thought the wound was too horizontal. You said the councillor would have had to hold the sword at more of an angle. While he was blind drunk.'

'And you threw my glass of beer on the floor.'

'I had a name for that beer-grenadine mixture, for heaven's sake.'

'*La grenaille*. You had me transferred away from Le Havre, and put in your report without me: suicide.'

'What did you know about forensics? Nothing.'

'Nothing at all,' Adamsberg admitted.

'Come and have a coffee. And tell me what's bothering you about these two corpses.'

IV

LIEUTENANT VEYRENC HAD been assigned this mission for the past three weeks, stuck in a broom cupboard one metre square, providing protection for a young woman whom he saw go past on the landing a dozen times a day.¹ He found the young woman rather touching, and this feeling disturbed him. He shifted on his chair, trying to find another position.

He shouldn't have been troubled by this - it was just a little grain of sand in the machinery, a splinter in the foot, a bird in the engine. The myth according to which a small bird, however exotic, could make an aeroplane engine explode was complete nonsense, one of the many ways people find to scare each other. As if there weren't enough problems in the world already. Veyrenc expelled the bird with a twitch of his brain, took the top off his fountain pen and set about cleaning the nib. Nothing else to bloody do anyway. The building was completely silent.

He screwed the top back on, replaced it in his inside pocket and closed his eyes. It was fifteen years to the day since he had defied the old wives' tales and gone to sleep in the forbidden shade of the walnut tree. Fifteen years of determined effort that nobody could take away from him. When he had woken up, he had used the sap of the tree to cure his allergy, and over time, he had tamed his furies, worked his way backwards through the torments he had endured, and exorcised his demons. It had taken fifteen

years of persistence to transform a skinny youth, who took care to keep his hair hidden, into a sturdy body attached to a solid psyche. Fifteen years of applied energy to learn not to be tossed like a cork on the seas of love, something that had left him disillusioned with sensations and sickened with complications. When Veyrenc had straightened up under the walnut tree, he had taken the decision to go on strike, like an exhausted worker taking early retirement. From now on, he would keep away from dangerous ridges, taking care to temper his feelings with prudence and to control the intensity of his desires. He had done well, he thought, at keeping his distance from trouble and chaos, and approaching the serenity he yearned for. His relationships with people ever since that day had been non-committal and temporary, as he swam calmly towards his goal, on a course of work, study and versification – a near-perfect state of affairs.

His goal, which he had now achieved, was to be posted to the Paris Crime Squad under *Commissaire* Adamsberg. Veyrenc was satisfied with this, but it had surprised him. An unusual microclimate reigned in the squad. Under the almost imperceptible leadership of their chief, the officers allowed their potential to develop unchecked, indulging in humours and whims unrelated to precise objectives. The squad had achieved undeniable results, but Veyrenc remained highly sceptical. Was this efficiency the result of Adamsberg's strategy, or was it simply the benevolent hand of providence? Providence seemed to have turned a blind eye, for example, to the fact that Mercadet had put down cushions on the first floor and went to sleep there for several hours a day; to the abnormal office cat, which defecated on reams of paper; to *Commandant* Danglard's practice of concealing his bottles of wine in a cupboard in the basement; to the papers, quite unrelated to any investigations, that lay about on tables: estate agents' prospectuses, race cards, articles on ichthyology, private

notes, international newspapers, colour spectra - to name only those he had noticed in one month. This state of affairs did not seem to trouble anyone, except perhaps *Lieutenant* Noël, a cussed character who found fault with everyone. And who, the second day he was there, had made an offensive remark about Veyrenc's hair. Twenty years earlier, it would have provoked tears, but nowadays he couldn't care less - well, not much less. Veyrenc folded his arms and leaned back against the wall. Unshakeable strength allied to a solid physique.

As for the *commissaire* himself, Veyrenc had taken some time to identify him. Seen from a distance, Adamsberg looked nondescript. Several times in the corridor, Veyrenc had passed this small man, a slow-moving bundle of tension, whose face was curiously angular and whose clothes and demeanour were dishevelled, without realising that he was one of the most famous figures, for good or ill, in the Serious Crime Squad. Even his eyes did not seem to be much use. Veyrenc had been waiting for his official interview since his first day on the job. But Adamsberg had never even noticed him, going round as he did in a daze of either profound or vacant thought. Perhaps it was possible that a whole year would go past before the *commissaire* noticed that his team had acquired a new member.

The other officers, however, had not missed the considerable opportunity offered by the arrival of a New Recruit. Which was why Veyrenc found himself stuck here in the broom cupboard on the seventh floor of a building, carrying out an excruciatingly boring surveillance duty. Normally, he should have been relieved regularly, and at first that had happened. Then the relief had become more erratic, with the excuse that X was depressive, Y might fall asleep, Z suffered from claustrophobia, or irritation or backache. As a result, he was now the only officer still mounting guard from morning to night, sitting on a wooden chair.

Veyrenc stretched out his legs as best he could. Newcomers usually get treated this way, and he was not particularly downcast. With a pile of books at his feet, a pocket ashtray in his jacket, a view of the clouds through the skylight and his pen in working order, he could almost have been happy here. His mind was at rest, his solitude was overcome, his objective reached.

¹ The events in Canada which prompted this protection, and are referred to occasionally hereafter, are described in *Wash This Blood Clean from My Hand* (Harvill Secker, 2007).