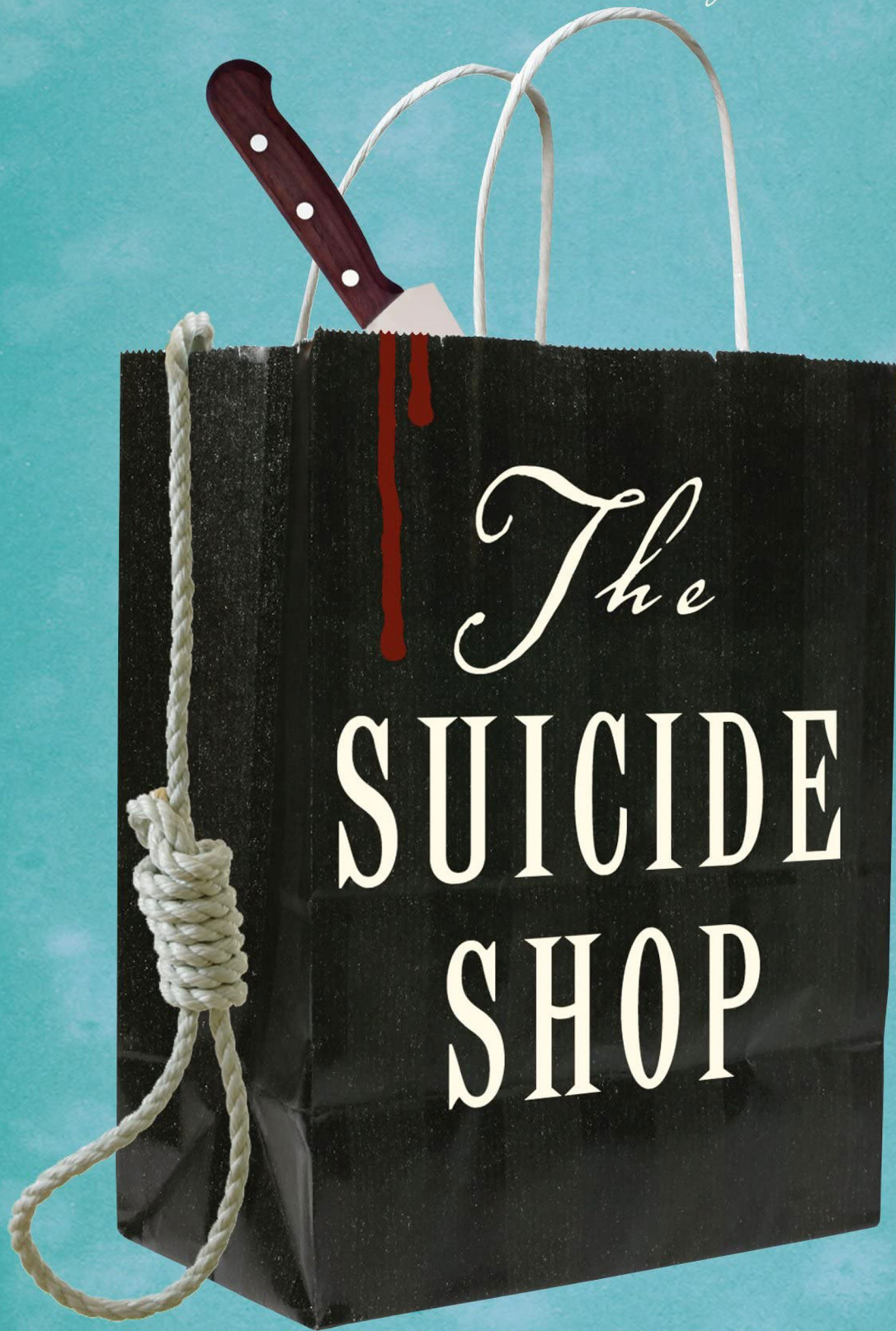


J E A N T E U L É

*Translated by* SUE DYSON



'A gently comic fable' *Financial Times*

# THE SUICIDE SHOP

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Translated by Sue Dyson



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THE SUICIDE SHOP

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# 1

No sunshine ever penetrates this small shop. The only window, to the left of the front door, is obscured by paper cones and piles of cardboard boxes, and a writing slate hangs from the window catch.

Light from the neon strips on the ceiling falls on an old lady who goes up to a baby in a grey perambulator.

‘Aah, he’s smiling!’

The shopkeeper, a younger woman sitting by the window facing the cash register, where she’s doing her accounts, objects. ‘My son smiling? No, he’s not. He’s just making faces. Why on earth would he smile?’

Then she goes back to her adding up while the elderly customer walks round the hooded pram. Her walking stick and fumbling steps give her an awkward appearance. Although her deathly eyes, dark and doleful, are veiled with cataracts she is sure of what she is seeing:

‘But he does look as if he’s smiling.’

‘Well, I’d be amazed if he were; nobody in the Tuvache family has ever smiled!’ counters the mother of the newborn baby, leaning over the counter to check.

She raises her head and, craning her bird-like neck, calls out: ‘Mishima! Come and look at this!’

A trapdoor in the floor opens like a mouth and, tongue-like, a bald pate pops out.

‘What? What’s going on?’

Mishima Tuvache emerges from the cellar carrying a sack of cement, which he sets down on the tiled floor while his wife says: ‘This customer claims Alan is smiling.’

‘What are you talking about, Lucreèce?’

Dusting a little cement powder from his sleeves, he too goes up to the baby, and gives him a long, doubtful look before offering his diagnosis:

‘He must have wind. It makes them pull faces like that,’ he explains, waving his hands about in front of his face. ‘Sometimes people confuse it with smiling, but it’s not. It’s just pulling faces.’

Then he slips his fingers under the pram’s hood and demonstrates to the old woman: ‘Look. If I push the corners of his mouth towards his chin, he’s not smiling. He looks just as miserable as his brother and sister have looked from the moment they were born.’

The customer says: ‘Let go.’

The shopkeeper lets go of his son’s mouth. The customer exclaims: ‘There! You see, he *is* smiling!’

Mishima Tuvache stands up, sticks out his chest and demands irritably: ‘So what was it you wanted, anyway?’

‘A rope to hang myself with.’

‘Right. Do you have high ceilings at home? You don’t know? Here,’ he continues, taking down a length of hemp from a shelf, ‘take this. Two metres should be enough. It comes with a ready-tied slip-knot. All you have to do is slide your head into the noose ...’

As she is paying, the woman turns towards the pram. ‘It does a heart good to see a child smile.’

‘Whatever you say!’ Mishima is annoyed. ‘Go on, go home. You’ve got things to be getting on with there now.’

The desperate old lady goes off with the rope coiled round one shoulder, under a lowering sky. The shopkeeper goes back into the shop.

‘Phew. Good riddance! She’s a pain in the neck, that woman. He’s not smiling.’

Madame Tuvache is still standing near the cash register; she can’t take her eyes off the child’s pram, which is shaking all by itself. The squeaking of the springs mingles with the gurgles and peals of laughter coming from inside the baby carriage. Stock-still, the parents look at each other in horror.

‘Shit ...’

## 2

‘Alan! How many more times do I have to tell you? We do not say “see you soon” to customers when they leave our shop. We say “goodbye”, because they won’t be coming back, ever. When will you get that into your thick head?’

A furious Lucrèce Tuvache stands in the shop, a sheet of paper concealed behind her back in her clenched hand. It quivers to the rhythm of her anger. Her youngest child is standing in front of her in shorts, gazing up at her in his cheerful, friendly way. Stooping, she reprimands him sternly, taking him to task. ‘And, what’s more, you can stop chirping’ – she imitates him – “Goo-ood morn-ing!” when people come in. You must say to them in a funereal voice: “Terrible day, Madame,” or: “May you find a better world, Monsieur.” And please PLEASE stop smiling! Do you want to drive away all our customers? Why do you have this mania for greeting people by rolling your eyes round and wiggling your fingers on either side of your ears? Do you think customers come here to see your smile? It’s getting on my nerves. We’ll have to get you fitted with a muzzle, or have you operated on!’

Madame Tuvache, five foot four, and in her late forties, is hopping mad. She wears her brown hair fairly short and tucked behind her ears, but the lock on her brow gives her hairstyle a touch of life. As for Alan’s blond curls, when his mother shouts at him they seem to take off, as though blown by a fan.

Madame Tuvache brings out the sheet of paper she’s been hiding behind her back. ‘And what’s this drawing you’ve brought home from nursery school?’

With one hand she holds the drawing out in front of her, tapping it

furiously with the index finger of her other hand.

‘A path leading to a house with a door and open windows, under a blue sky where a big sun shines! Now come on, why aren’t there any clouds or pollution in your landscape? Where are the migratory birds that shit Asian viruses on our heads? Where is the radiation? And the terrorist explosions? It’s totally unrealistic. You should come and see what Vincent and Marilyn were drawing at your age!’

Lucrèce bustles past the end of a display unit, where a large number of gleaming golden phials are on display. She passes in front of her elder son, a skinny fifteen-year-old, who is biting his nails and chewing his lips, his head swathed in bandages. Next to him, Marilyn, who’s twelve and overweight, is slumped in a listless heap on a stool – with one yawn she could swallow the world – while Mishima pulls down the metal shutter and begins switching off some of the neon lights. Madame Tuvache opens a drawer beneath the cash register and takes out an order book. Inside it are two sheets of paper, which she unfolds.

‘Look how gloomy this drawing of Marilyn’s is, and this one of Vincent’s: bars in front of a brick wall! Now that I like. *There’s* a boy who’s grasped something about life! He may be a poor anorexic who suffers so many migraines that he thinks his skull’s going to explode without the bandages ... but he’s the artist of the family, our Van Gogh!’

She continues, still lauding Vincent as a worthy example: ‘He’s got suicide in his blood. A real Tuvache, whereas you, Alan ...’

Vincent comes over, with his thumb in his mouth, and snuggles up to his mother. ‘I wish I could go back inside your tummy ...’

‘I know ...’ she replies, caressing his crêpe bandages and continuing to examine little Alan’s drawing: ‘Who’s this long-legged girl you’ve drawn, bustling about next to the house?’

‘That’th Marilyn,’ replies the six-year-old child.

At this, the Tuvache girl with the drooping shoulders limply raises her head, her face and red nose almost entirely hidden by her hair, while her mother exclaims in surprise: ‘Why have you drawn her so busy and pretty, when you know very well she always says she’s useless and ugly?’

‘I think she’th beautiful.’

Marilyn claps her hands to her ears, leaps off the stool and runs to the



back of the shop screaming as she climbs the stairs leading to the apartment.

‘There, now he’s made his sister cry!’ yells Marilyn’s mother, while her father switches off the last of the shop’s neon lights.

### 3

‘When she had mourned Antony’s death in this way, the queen of Egypt crowned herself with flowers and then commanded her servants to prepare a bath for her ...’

Madame Tuvache is sitting on her daughter’s bed, telling Marilyn the story of Cleopatra’s suicide to help her get to sleep.

‘After her bath, Cleopatra sat down to eat a sumptuous meal. Then a man arrived from the countryside, carrying a basket for her. When the guards asked him what it contained, he opened it, parted the leaves and showed them that it was full of figs. The guards marvelled at the size and beauty of the fruit, so the man smiled and invited them to take some. Thus reassured, they allowed him to enter with his basket.’

Red-eyed, Marilyn lies on her back and gazes at the ceiling as she listens to her mother’s beautiful voice, which continues: ‘After her lunch, Cleopatra wrote on a tablet, sealed it and had it sent to Octavius; then she dismissed everyone except one serving-maid, and closed the door.’

Marilyn’s eyes begin to close and her breathing becomes more even ...

‘When Octavius broke the seal on the tablet and read Cleopatra’s pleas to be buried alongside Antony, he immediately realised what she had done. First he considered going to save her himself, then hurriedly sent some men to find out what had happened ... Events must have moved quickly, because when they rushed in they caught the guards unawares: they hadn’t noticed anything. When they opened the door they found Cleopatra lying dead on a golden bed, dressed in her royal robes. Her servant, Charmian, was arranging the diadem on the queen’s head. One of the men said to her angrily: “Beautifully done, Charmian!”

“It is well done,” she replied, “and fitting for a princess descended of

so many royal kings.” As Cleopatra had ordered, the asp that had arrived with the figs had been hidden underneath the fruit, so that the snake could attack her without her knowing. But when she removed the figs she saw it and said: “So there it is,” and bared her arm, offering it up to be bitten.’

Marilyn opened her eyes, as though hypnotised. Her mother stroked her hair while she finished her story.

‘Two small, almost invisible pinpricks were found on Cleopatra’s arm. Although Octavius was grief-stricken at her death, he admired her noble spirit and had her buried next to Antony with royal pomp and splendour.’

‘If I’d been there, I’d have made the thnake into pretty thlippers tho Marilyn could go and danth at the Kurt Cobain dithco!’ said Alan. The door to his sister’s bedroom was half open, and he was standing in the doorway.

Lucrece swung round brusquely and glowered at her youngest child. ‘You – back to bed! Nobody asked your opinion.’

Then, as she stood up, she promised her daughter: ‘Tomorrow night I’ll tell you how Sappho threw herself off a cliff into the sea and all for a young shepherd’s beautiful eyes ...’

‘Mother,’ sniffed Marilyn, ‘when I’m grown up, can I go and dance with boys at the disco?’

‘No, of course not. Don’t listen to your little brother. He’s talking nonsense. You always say you’re a lump – do you really think men would want to dance with you? Come on, settle down for some nightmares. That’s more sensible.’

Lucrece Tuvache, her beautiful face grave, is just joining her husband in their bedroom when the emergency bell rings down below.

‘Well, we are on duty at night ...’ sighs Mishima. ‘I’ll go.’

He goes downstairs in the dark, grumbling: ‘Damn, I can’t see a thing. One false step and I could break my neck!’

From the top of the stairs, Alan’s voice suggests: ‘Daddy, inthtead of moaning about the dark, why not turn on the light?’

‘Yes, thank you, Mr Know-it-all. When I want your advice ...’

Nevertheless the father does as his son suggests and, by the glow of the crackling electric bulb on the staircase, he goes into the shop, where he

switches on a row of neon lights.

When he comes back upstairs, his wife is propped up with a pillow, a magazine in her hands. 'Who was it?' she asks.

'Dunno. Some desperate bloke with an empty revolver. I found what he needed in the ammunition boxes by the window so that he could blow his brains out. What are you reading?'

'Last year's statistics: one suicide every forty minutes, a hundred and fifty thousand attempts, only twelve thousand deaths. That's incredible.'

'Yes, it is incredible. The number of people who try to top themselves and bungle it ... Fortunately *we're* here. Turn off the light, darling.'

From the other side of the wall, Alan's voice rings out: 'Thweet dreamth, Mummy. Thweet dreamth, Daddy.'

His parents sigh.

## 4

‘The Suicide Shop. Hello?’

Clad in a blood-red blouse, Madame Tuvache picks up the telephone and asks the caller to hold the line: ‘One moment, sir,’ and gives change to a woman whose features are distorted by anguish. She leaves, carrying a biodegradable carrier bag that reads THE SUICIDE SHOP on one side, and on the other: HAS YOUR LIFE BEEN A FAILURE? LET’S MAKE YOUR DEATH A SUCCESS! Lucrèce calls after the customer: ‘Farewell, Madame,’ then picks up the receiver again.

‘Hello? Oh, it’s you, Monsieur Chang! Of course I remember you: the rope, this morning, wasn’t it? You ...? You want us ...? I can’t hear’ – the customer must be calling from a mobile – ‘to invite us to your funeral? Oh, that *is* kind! But when are you going to do it? Oh, you already have the rope round your neck? Well, today’s Tuesday, tomorrow’s Wednesday ... so the funeral will be on Thursday. Hang on, I’ll ask my husband ...’

She calls to the back of the shop, by the fresh produce display: ‘Mishima! I’ve got Monsieur Chang on the line. You know, the concierge from the City of Forgotten Religions housing estate ... Yes, you do, the one with the Mahomet Tower. He’d like to invite us to his funeral on Thursday. That’s not the day when the new sales rep from Don’t Give a Damn About Death is supposed to be coming, is it? Ah, that’s the following Thursday, so that’s all right, then.’

She speaks into the receiver again: ‘Hello? Monsieur Chang ...? Hello ...?’ She hangs up as she realises what’s happened. ‘Ropes may be basic, but they’re effective. We ought to think about recommending them more often. With the celebrations coming up ... Ah, Marilyn, come and see.’

Marilyn Tuvache is now seventeen years old. Indolent and flabby, with

long, pendulous breasts, she is ashamed of her cumbersome body. She's squeezed into an over-tight T-shirt, illustrated with a black-edged white rectangle bearing the slogan: LIFE KILLS.

Wielding a feather duster without conviction, she is moving the dust around at the edge of a shelf displaying razorblades for cutting one's veins. Some of them are rusty. A label beside them explains: EVEN IF YOU DON'T MAKE A DEEP ENOUGH CUT, YOU'LL GET TETANUS.

The mother says to her daughter: 'Go to the Tristan and Isolde flower shop and buy a funeral wreath, a small one, mind! Get them to write on the card: *To our customer, Monsieur Chang, from the Suicide Shop.* He will probably have invited quite a few tenants from the Mahomet Tower, and they'll say: "Our concierge managed not to bungle it." It'll be good publicity for us. Go on! You're always asking what you can do. Then you can take the wreath to the new warden at the cemetery.'

'Aw ... I always get the skivvy's jobs; I'm useless around here! Why don't the boys go?'

'Vincent's inventing in his room and Alan's outside, getting intoxicated on the autumn sunshine. He plays with the wind, chats with the clouds. At the age of eleven ... I don't think he's quite right, that one. Now, off you go.'

Marilyn Tuvache eyes up the man her father is talking to at the back of the shop. 'Why don't the good-looking customers look at me? I wish I was attractive ...'

'You really are plain daft, aren't you! Do you think they come here to flirt? Go on, get going.'

'Why can't we kill ourselves, Mum?'

'I've told you a hundred times: because it's impossible. Who'd look after the shop? We, the Tuvaches, have a mission here! Well, when I say "we", obviously I'm excluding Alan. Now be off with you.'

'Well ... OK ... All riiight ...'

'Poor big ...' Madame Tuvache comes out from behind the counter, her heart touched by the sight of her shapeless daughter leaving the shop. 'At her age I was the same: lethargic, always moaning. I felt stupid until the day I met Mishima.'

She runs her finger along a shelf, collecting a little dust. 'And when I

did the housework, the corners were always left out ...’

She picks up the feather duster and resumes her daughter’s work, moving the razorblades carefully.

At the bottom of the staircase leading to the apartment, next to the fresh produce section, a waistcoated Mishima is giving his sales pitch to a taller, muscular man:

‘If you’re asking me for something original and virile, I’d say: seppuku, commonly known as hara-kiri – but that’s slang. Now, I don’t recommend it to everyone, because it’s quite an athletic task. But you’re a sturdy fellow; you’re surely athletic, aren’t you? What is your – Forgive me, if you’ve reached this stage I should have asked – What was your profession?’

‘Gymnastics teacher at Montherlant High School.’

‘There you go, just as I thought!’

‘I can’t stand my colleagues or my pupils any more.’

‘Dealing with kids can be difficult sometimes,’ acknowledges Mishima. ‘For example, our last child ...’

‘I thought about petrol or napalm.’

‘Ah, a nice immolation in the indoor play area, that’s not bad either,’ agrees the shopkeeper. ‘We have everything you need for that, but, frankly, seppuku ... Anyway, I’m not pushing you to spend money; it’s your decision.’

The PE teacher weighs up the two options: ‘Immolation, hara-kiri ...’

‘Seppuku,’ Monsieur Tuvache corrects him.

‘Does it require a lot of equipment?’

‘A samurai kimono in your size. I must have an XXL left, and of course the tanto. People make a lot of fuss about it but, look, basically it’s a rather short sabre.’ Monsieur Tuvache speaks dismissively, removing from the wall a white – and actually rather long – weapon, which he places in the customer’s hands. ‘I sharpen them myself. Touch the blade. It goes through you like butter.’

The gym teacher contemplates the glinting blade and frowns while Mishima reaches into a cardboard box for a kimono jacket, which he spreads out in front of him.

‘My eldest son had the idea of sewing this red silk cross onto it, to indicate where to aim the sabre, because there have been times when people aim too high, at the sternum, and it won’t go in, or too low, so it goes into the belly. And, apart from severing your appendix, that doesn’t do anything for you.’

‘Is it expensive?’ enquires the teacher.

‘Three hundred euro-yens, the lot.’

‘Oh! Really? Can I pay by –’

‘Credit card?’ asks the shopkeeper. ‘Here? You must be joking – you might as well suggest a loyalty card while you’re at it!’

‘The thing is it’s an investment.’

‘Ah, of course, it’s more costly than a can of napalm, but, after all, it’ll be your last expense ... Not to mention the fact that seppuku is the aristocracy of suicide. And I’m not saying that just because my parents called me Mishima.’

The customer hesitates.

‘I’m afraid I won’t be brave enough,’ confesses the depressive teacher, feeling the weight of the tanto. ‘You don’t do a home service, do you?’

‘Oh no!’ replies Monsieur Tuvache indignantly. ‘We’re not murderers, you know. You have to understand that’s prohibited. We supply what is needed but people do the deed themselves. It’s their affair. We are just here to offer a service by selling quality products,’ continues the shopkeeper, leading the customer towards the checkout.

And, carefully folding the kimono, which he slips into a carrier bag with the sabre, he justifies himself. ‘Too many people do an amateurish job. You know, out of a hundred and fifty thousand people who make the attempt, one hundred and thirty-eight thousand fail. These people often find themselves disabled in wheelchairs, disfigured for life, but with us ... Our suicides are guaranteed. Death or your money back! Come now, you won’t regret this purchase, an athlete like you! Just take a deep breath and go for it! And anyway, as I always say, you only die once, so it ought to be an unforgettable moment.’

Mishima puts the PE teacher’s money into the cash register then, as he hands him his change, he adds: ‘Wait a minute. I’m going to tell you a trick of the trade ...’



He takes a good look around him to check that nobody is listening, and explains: ‘When you do it in your dining room, kneel on the ground and that way, even if the blade doesn’t go in very deep ... because it’s going to sting a little ... if you’re on your knees, you can just fall onto your stomach and that’ll push the sabre in up to its hilt. And when you’re discovered, your friends will be really impressed! You don’t have any friends? Well, then, it’ll impress the medical examiner who’ll say: “This fellow didn’t pull his punches!”’

‘Thank you,’ says the customer, overwhelmed at the thought of what he has to do.

‘Don’t mention it – it’s our job. Glad to be of service.’

## 5

‘Lucrèce! Can you come here!’

Madame Tuvache appears, opening a door under the stairs at the back of the shop. She is wearing a gas mask, which covers her face and neck. The circular goggles over her eyes and the bulky filtration cartridge in front of her mouth make her look like an angry fly.

Dressed in a white overall, she takes off her latex surgical gloves and joins her husband, who has called her over to explain the needs of one of their customers.

‘The lady would like something feminine.’

‘Won-won-won, won-won-won!’ buzzes Madame Tuvache’s fly face. Then she realises she is still wearing her protective gear, unfastens the head straps and continues, gas mask in hand: ‘Ah, something feminine, well, that has to be poison! It’s the most feminine thing there is. In fact, I was just preparing some in the scullery.’

She unbuttons her overall too, and places her paraphernalia on the counter, next to the cash register.

‘Poison ... Now, what do I have to offer you? Would you prefer a contact poison – one touch and you’re dead – one you inhale or one you ingest?’

‘Er ...’ says the lady, who wasn’t expecting this question. ‘Which is the best?’

‘Contact poison, it’s very fast!’ explains Lucrèce. ‘We have blue eel acid, poison from the golden frog, night star, elven curse, deadly gel, grey horror, fainting oil, catfish poison ... Not everything is here, though. Certain items are in the fresh produce section,’ she says, pointing to a unit exhibiting a large quantity of phials.

‘What about the poison you inhale? What’s that like?’

‘It’s quite simple. You unscrew the top and breathe in the contents of the bottle. It could be spider venom, hanged man’s breath, yellow cloud, evil-eye toxin, desert breath ...’

‘Oh, I don’t know what to choose. You’re having to go to a lot of trouble.’

‘Not at all,’ replies Madame Tuvache understandingly. ‘It’s perfectly normal to be undecided. If that’s not for you, if you prefer something to swallow, we have vertigo honey, which reddens the skin, of course, because you start to sweat blood.’

The customer frowns.

‘Briefly, why do you want to end it all?’ Lucrece asks her.

‘I’ve been inconsolable ever since the death of someone I was close to. I think about him all the time. And that’s why I’ve come here to buy something; I can’t think of any other way to forget him.’

‘I see. Well, I would recommend strychnine. It’s extract of nux vomica. As soon as you swallow it, it makes you lose your memory. That way, you’ll have no more suffering or regret. Then paralysis develops and you suffocate to death without remembering a thing. That one’s spot on for you.’

‘Nux vomica ...’ repeats the bereaved lady, rubbing her tired eyes with her palms.

‘But, if you prefer to grieve one last time,’ ventures Lucrece, ‘you can also make your own poison. Many women like the idea of mulling over their pain as they prepare for death. For example, digitalis: you crush up some foxglove petals in a mortar, which we have in the fresh produce section. You know, they’re those clusters of flowers shaped like drooping fingers, the ones that resemble the limp hands of people overcome by grief. When you’ve obtained a fine powder, mix it with water and boil it. Then let it cool – that will give you time to blow your nose and write a letter explaining what you’ve done – then filter the solution. Put it on to boil again until the liquid has evaporated. This will produce a white, crystalline salt, which you swallow. The advantage is that it’s not expensive: two fifty a bunch! We’ve also got *Strychnos* branches for extracting curare, black holly berries for theobromine ...’

Intoxicated by this succession of possibilities, the customer no longer knows what to think. ‘What would *you* take?’

‘Me? I’ve no idea,’ replies Lucrèce regretfully. And the look in her beautiful, solemn eyes becomes fixed, as if she were gazing far ahead of her. It’s as if she’s no longer in the shop. ‘We’re depressed too, and we’d have plenty of reasons to end it all, but we can’t sample our own products or the last one of us to try them would have to pull down the steel shutters pretty fast. And then what would our customers do?’

Madame Tuvache seems to come back to earth. ‘What I do know is that cyanide dries out the tongue and creates an unpleasant sensation. So, when I prepare it, I add mint leaves to refresh the mouth ... Those are the extras our business offers. Alternatively, we also have the cocktail of the day! What did I make this morning?’

She goes back to the slate hanging on the window catch. On it is written, in chalk: SANDMAN.

‘Oh yes, Sandman! Why didn’t I think of it before? I’m so scatterbrained at the moment. Madame, you couldn’t decide between poisons for contact, inhalation or ingestion. Well, this is a mixture of all three: belladonna, deadly gel and desert breath. So, whichever option you should choose at the last moment, whether you swallow the cocktail, touch it or breathe it in, the game will be up!’

‘Right, well, I’ll take that one,’ the customer decides.

‘You won’t regret it. Oh! I’m so stupid, I was about to say: “You can tell me how you get on with it.” It’s that child who’s driving me mad!’ grumbles Lucrèce, pointing her chin at Alan, who’s standing in front of the rope display with his feet together and his hands on his head. ‘Do you have children, Madame?’

‘I did have one, actually ... One day he came here to buy a bullet for a .22 long rifle.’

‘Oh.’

‘He saw everything in black. I could never make him happy.’

‘Well, we certainly can’t say the same about our youngest ...’ laments Madame Tuvache. ‘He sees everything in shades of pink – can you imagine? As if there was any reason for such a thing! I don’t know how he does it. And yet I can assure you that we brought him up exactly the same