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THE SUICIDE SHOP

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GALLIC BOOKS
London

A Gallic Book

First published in France as *Le Magasin des Suicides*
by Éditions Julliard, Paris

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First published in Great Britain in 2008 by Gallic Books, 134 Lots Road,
London SW10 0RJ

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A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-906040-09-3

Typeset in Fournier by SX Composing DTP, Rayleigh, Essex

Printed and bound by Creative Print and Design, Wales

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 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, Lucrèce?'

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 . . .'