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SUICIDES IN FRANCE: A PUBLIC ACT

From subways to self-immolation, public suicides are becoming disturbingly frequent in the country of *joie de vivre*. That can leave a toll on witnesses and those unwittingly involved in ending a life

BY KRYSTLE WONG

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JÉRÔME VERONY

THE MORNING BEFORE VALENTINE'S DAY, a dark-haired man in a black coat stood at the far end of a subway platform, counting down until the next train arrived. It was around 9am at Odéon, a busy hour at a relatively busy métro station. He wouldn't have to wait long. As the figures "0:00" started blinking on the overhead clock and the tunnel filled with the roar of an approaching train, the man took a deliberate step towards the platform edge. He bent over, put his hands on the ground, and quickly lowered himself onto the train tracks. The horror of what was about to happen instantly dawned on everyone on the platform. Screams of "*Non!*" filled the station. The man disappeared as the train slammed into him. It was over in seconds.

Standing two paces away from the suicide, Fanny saw everything. "I saw him go down," she said. "I had the reflex to turn away. There was a loud thud. Everybody was screaming." The train screeched to an emergency halt in the middle of the station. On board, people lurched and

topped forward like a line of dominos from the inertia. "The passengers didn't know what had happened," said Fanny. "But they saw the looks on the faces of people on the platform and I think they understood." The 26-year-old marketing manager had been idly watching the man from behind just moments before he ended his life, and the horror hasn't left her since. In her mind, she still sees the man on the tracks. He had been standing sideways, frozen in a sort of stride. At the time she'd had the wild and absurd thought that he would never cross the tracks on time. "I remember thinking: what is he *doing?*" she said. "But there was no doubt about it, he wanted to die."

After the impact, people had quickly made for the stairs, emptying the platform. "There was someone continuously screaming and sobbing," said Fanny, who believes it might have been the train conductor, a middle-aged woman. "But she couldn't have done anything. Nobody could have. It happened so fast." The indelible memory of how the tunnel went cold like a crypt that morning still gives Fanny the

chills. “It was like a place of death,” she said. “It didn’t feel like a place you go to everyday.” Fanny declined to share her full name, saying her experience could not compare to the grief faced by the man and, by now, his family.

There are 11,000 suicides in France each year, a fraction of the 195,000 people hospitalised following a suicide attempt annually. According to OECD figures, France has one of the highest suicide rates in Western Europe – twice that of the United Kingdom and 40 percent higher than in Germany and the United States. It is the first cause of mortality for French people in their thirties. A further 2,200 people take their lives each year without making the official lists. Many family members jump on the slightest shadow of doubt and would sooner call a death an accident than a suicide – a possible remnant of French Catholicism, which considers voluntary death a sin. The fact that there is no option to list “suicide” as a cause of mortality in French death certificates and no systematic inquiry into the causes of non-natural deaths – unlike in most European countries – further helps to mask these numbers.

Many different reasons can drive a person to suicide, and it is often a challenge to decipher the motives behind such a final, fatal decision. But in France, suicides tend to be more public in nature than anywhere else, lending a particular authority to what voluntary death means. In the most recent context of the euro-crisis and growing disillusionment with the country’s future, the phenomenon of public suicide is being seen as a sort of protest against society’s failing conditions. Above all, it is sparking a painful and contentious debate over France’s oppressive workplace conditions and its consequences.

Last Tuesday, May 22, a 78-year-old man entered the Notre Dame cathedral amidst a throng of tourists, went up to the altar, stuck a shot-gun into his mouth, and pulled the trigger. Dominique Venner was a far-right award-winning historian who had been campaigning hard against the government’s decision to legalise gay marriage, signed into law last weekend by French president François Hollande. “New spectacular and symbolic actions are needed to wake up the sleep walkers and shake the anaesthetised consciousness,” Venner wrote on his blog, just hours before the act.

On May 16, a 50-year-old man with a history of mental health problems forced his way into a nursing school near the Eiffel Tower and shot himself in front of 12 school children aged six and seven. Later, one boy told a French news channel that he had thought the school had been invaded by terrorists.

On February 13, a jobless man burnt himself to death in front of a public job search agency in Nantes. Frustrated after a long period of futile job-hunting, 33-year-old Djamel Chaar wanted his self-immolation to be public statement about France’s socio-economic malaise. He hasn’t been the only one. At least a dozen men and women have set themselves on fire since 2011 for similar reasons.

IT IS A CRY TO THE COLLECTIVE... THERE IS A MESSAGE SOMEWHERE TO SOCIETY

The overall suicide rate, while stable, has actually decreased slightly over the last few years. Yet despite this decline, railway suicide is becoming an increasingly common form of these “spectacular and symbolic” deaths. French transport operators are relatively discreet, referring to railway deaths as *accidents graves* or serious accidents, but it is no secret that suicides on the rails are a disturbingly frequent phenomenon. France’s national railway SNCF sees up to 400 fatal accidents each year, of which a large majority are voluntary deaths – almost double the annual number of suicides on British railways. The phenomenon is on the rise: according to SNCF president Guillaume Pépy, there were 30 percent more railway suicides in 2012 than in the preceding four years. In the Paris métro, which carries the highest volume of traffic in Europe after Moscow, at least one person kills himself in the subway every three days. Paris transport authority RATP says there were 195 such suicides in 2008. By contrast, the New York subway averages about 26 suicides a year.

“There is a collective dimension to this particular type of suicide,” explained Rébecca Hartmann, a psychologist who has been working for France’s national railway for nine years. Although large French firms have in-house doctors, SNCF went a step further in 1997 to create a specialised department dedicated to providing psychological support for staff, as they kept running into suicide attempts. To die by throwing oneself before a train, according to Hartmann, is a cry to the collective. “It’s not at all like a suicide in one’s room,” she said. “It’s not a private affair. The idea is to shout out to the collective about one’s poor wellbeing. The person knows that this will affect hundreds of people who are stopped in their day, so there is a message somewhere to society.”

Indeed, France’s high suicide rate is widely seen as a sign of the country’s socio-economic malaise. When Hollande called the self-immolation of Djamel Chaar a “personal drama” in March, he was met with scorn. To the French, public suicides are widely understood not as acts of personal drama but as an outcry against an ailing society. It is not difficult to see where this angst is coming from: France is experiencing its highest unemployment rate in 17 years, leading to increased pressure in the workplace. The country’s waning influence in the European Union has led Jacob Funk Kirkegaard, of the Peterson Institute for



International Economics, to ask if France is “a peripheral country” – a burning point of shame for the French, who have been eyeing Germany’s stable economic growth and burgeoning political clout following the euro-crisis.

Various studies have sought to capture France’s moody disposition during this time. A 2012 European quality of life survey, commissioned by the European Union, found that the French are the least optimistic about the future after Greece, Portugal, Italy and Slovakia. A public opinion survey released by Pew Research Centre this month concluded that the French are becoming dispirited faster than anyone else in Europe. A recent study by sociologist Claudia Senik at the Paris School of Economics went even further: her study, titled “The French Unhappiness Puzzle”, suggests that it’s not the crisis, silly – gloominess just happens to be an integral part of French culture. The consensus is overwhelming: something is rotten in the state of France.

It is unsurprising then that in such a context, public suicides are being seen as cries of protest. Sociologists say these are emanating from “the most vulnerable” in society. Typically, suicide is considered an act of desperation for those who are unable to accept or deny their social circumstances. But in France, the public aspect of suicide gives the act a particularly vindictive tone. It is a ghastlier version of the child in tears throwing a fit, whose intuition is: “One day I’ll die and you’ll be sorry.” Each public suicide is – so

goes the reasoning – akin to holding a mirror to the face of society. The idea is that this will force society to examine itself for having created the hopeless conditions for such wasted lives. The message is being delivered in collective overtones, and increasingly, it is being heard. In an op-ed for leading newspaper *Le Monde*, French sociologist Alain Ehrenberg proclaimed that “today...individual suffering is a declaration that has value for acting on a common problem.” But what is the common problem?

For the past three years, Fabienne Leonhart has been working at *Suicide Écoute*, a 24-hour hotline that receives 22,000 calls a year. Over the telephone, Leonhart’s grandmotherly voice has a calming and non-judgmental tone – an important quality that has played a part in pulling hundreds away from the brink of death. According to the 43-year-old, it is too simplistic to single out a factor as the main cause of suicidal depression. The answers could be a conflation of anything ranging from mental health issues to workplace stress. “Which caused what? It’s impossible to say! It can all be related,” said Leonhart, who has fielded crisis after crisis from callers with obvious mental health problems such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. The conundrum, she says, is whether to read depression as a cause or as a symptom: is something caused by depression or the other way around?

Since the economic crisis, however, Leonhart admits

the hotline has been receiving an increasing number of calls from people who have unemployment or work-related issues. “We are in a difficult economic climate,” she said. “There’s no denying that there is an enormous amount of pressure in companies. It is a phenomenon of the crisis.” When asked how she went about convincing these people not to kill themselves, Leonhart swiftly corrected the question. “It’s not that they want to die,” she said, sounding a bit pained. “They want to stop suffering.”

Involuntary killers

Suicide always leaves behind the indelible aspect of trauma. And in the case of a public suicide, this trauma extends beyond the circle of family and friends to complete strangers. Few experience this as frequently and as intimately as train conductors, who are the first to see the silhouette of a person on the tracks, the last to see him or her alive, and the ones who are directly implicated in the destruction of a life. It is a peculiar and rather grotesque hostage situation. “Although railway suicide is a violent decision,” explained French national railway psychologist Hartmann, “it is also an act of passivity”, since it transfers the act of killing to someone else. In this case, a train conductor and his train unwittingly become the agents of destruction. “The train conductors are thus taken hostage,” writes Éric Fottorino, former editor of *Le Monde*, in his latest book *Suite à un accident grave de voyageur*. “Their machine becomes part of the machination. A person wants to die. Another especially does not want to kill. He kills, despite himself.”

“When it happens, there is practically nothing we can do,” said Cédric Gentil, a train conductor who blogs for French newspaper *Liberation* and author of *Mesdames et messieurs, votre attention s’il vous plaît*. “By the time you understand what is going on, it’s too late. The distance needed to bring the train to a stop is too long.” The 33-year-old still vividly recalls the woman who had leapt in front of his train a few years ago. Horrified, he had acted instantly. He pulled the emergency brakes, hit a switch that released sand onto the tracks, and cut off the electric current in the rails. These gestures would later be extremely important, not only for the woman, but for Gentil himself.

Then he waited helplessly until the train came to a halt. “When you’re in that situation, the wait is endless,” said the tall, brown-haired man. “I felt as though time was passing in slow-motion.” Once the train finally stopped, he could no longer see the woman from his window. Heart in his shoes, Gentil came out of his cabin and looked in front of his train. He had stopped just 40cm in front of the woman. She was dazed but completely unharmed.

Most of Gentil’s colleagues have not been so fortunate. According to Hartmann, every train conductor experiences on average one railway suicide attempt during his career. Many risk prolonged psychological trauma and some enter depression, often replaying the death in their minds. In 2012, SNCF’s team of psychologists made 50



emergency on-site visits to the scene of the suicide in order to quickly stem the overwhelming sense of shock and guilt. “Even though they know in theory that they couldn’t do anything to prevent it, they go through the ‘what ifs,’” said Hartmann. “It is a feeling of total helplessness, to have been active in the death of someone.”

One of Gentil’s female colleagues struggled from crippling guilt after running into two suicides. “She took a long time to get over the first one,” said Gentil. “She was really traumatised. Then it happened again. It’s like all the work that she’d had gone through to recover, it’s as though it’s for nothing.” For Gentil’s friend, the memory of the man’s face is particularly horrifying. The person killing himself had stood on the tracks and stared directly into her face, as though to “defy her”, until her train rammed into him.

“I’ve asked myself many times why people choose to die this way,” said Gentil. “We talk about it a lot amongst us. I don’t think it’s an innocent act.” Amongst train conductors, there is a flash of anger against railway suicides that appear premeditated. Gentil remembers being confused by the simultaneous relief and rage he felt when he was speaking to the woman who had tried to kill herself. “I was facing her alone, nobody else would have heard me if I had said how I felt to her,” said Gentil, suddenly looking very tired. “But out of respect for the woman, I could never have done it.”

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Instead, he said to her: “Don’t worry, you’re safe now. Help is coming.”

Gentil has no illusions about how lucky he had been this time. “I don’t ask *if* it’ll ever happen to me,” he said of the possibility of killing someone who jumps in front of his train. “I ask *when*. It’s like having the sword of Damocles hanging above my head. I know it’s going to fall on me someday, I just don’t know when or where.”

It is never a clean death. Gentil says it can take firemen at least three hours to recover the grisly remains of a body. “They have to look for pieces of the corpse under the train or in the tunnel where it’s very dark and difficult to see,” he explained. “Sometimes someone will have to move the train a bit backwards in order to remove the body.” Only half of the suicide attempts are successful and survivors are never quite whole again. “A train weighs hundreds of tons,” said Gentil, who drives the RER A, a suburban train with one of the highest volumes in the world at 1.2 million passengers a day. “If people do survive, they are mutilated for life.”

The ramifications of each railway suicide touch thousands. It takes seconds for a suicide to throw a line into complete bedlam, and hours before things go back to normal. Traffic is disrupted for at least three hours, a halt that snowballs into more cancelled trains and delayed schedules. This knock-on disruption is likely the point of such a public death. Yet for the most part, passengers who are not privy to this cinema of horror react either with indifference or simple irritation. “It’s sad but true,” said Gentil. “When most passengers realise there’s been another serious accident, they roll their eyes and go: ‘Pffffff!’” In his book, Fottorino points out the irony of this final failure: “Unknown till the end, they are the *et ceteras*,” he writes. Despite their public act of desperation, “nobody will try to remember them...the ones who try to shake up the very society that rejects its most vulnerable.”

But it’s not entirely true. First-hand witnesses like Fanny are often stirred by what they have seen. The trouble is finding the company they crave. In the virtual world, many witnesses eventually find their way to public transport forum blogencommun.fr. They anonymously share their experiences in comments threads so they can feel less alone in their shock and grief; there is a certain comfort in the familiarity of the reactions of other witnesses. For days after the métro suicide, Fanny hungrily scoured the internet for something, anything, to lace a human feeling around what she had seen. It was on this forum that she found some solace and my request for an interview. Fanny needed to talk about it. It helped her feel better.

A form of protest against the workplace?

The growing drama of suicides in France is putting the focus on large firms, many of which shed thousands of employees through ‘voluntary’ departures between 2006 and 2008. In 2008, the media spotlight fell on France Télécom for its wave of 30 suicides each year. Although this number

is in line with the French national average of suicides and thus not especially high, some of these acts were especially dramatic. One man allegedly stabbed himself – harakiri-style – in the middle of a meeting. A woman leapt from a fifth-floor office window. Another employee jumped off a highway bridge. Similar stories abound from La Poste and Renault. Perhaps because some work-related suicides have been particularly imaginative and perhaps because they are the simplest to identify and control for, they have become a frequent headline in French media. In March, *Le Monde* dedicated a spread to *la souffrance au travail*, where a series of articles analysed French suffering in the

72% OF FRENCH PEOPLE SAY THEY EXPERIENCE MOOD DISORDERS BECAUSE OF WORK

context of high workplace stress, unemployment, social tensions, and suicides.

Side-by-side, the numbers and commentary are compelling. According to the Economic, Social, and Environmental Council (Cese), at least 400 suicides each year are directly related to work dissatisfaction. In a 2008 survey of 1,210 employees, Etienne Wasmer, a labour economist at Sciences Po, found that many experienced work-related disorders (mood 72%, sleep 70%, psychological disorder 52%), anxiety (60%), and abnormal fatigue. According to the OECD, the French incidence of depression was about twice that of Germany’s in the mid-2000s. One governmental study found that French consumption of anti-depressants amounted to 543 billion euros in 2000. At France Télécom, some employees keep anti-depressants on their desks, out in the open.

“For too long, mental suffering at work has been considered as the exclusive result of the personality of the employee,” wrote Michel Debout, a prominent doctor and one of the founders of the National Union for Prevention of Suicide, in one of the articles published by *Le Monde*. “Managers try to make this a medical problem: they speak of ‘fragile people’ and rarely of ‘people made fragile.’”

Indeed, the French are increasingly outraged at the capitalist ills of large private firms. Last year, former France Télécom CEO Didier Lombard was probed for the firm’s many suicides in 2008, the result of harsh and surreal administration that placed unnecessary pressure on workers in order to get them to voluntarily resign. On May 7, a leaked internal document dated 2006 reveals how Lombard had spearheaded the aggressive shedding of 22,000 workers by

2008. In the document, Lombard declared: “We need to stop being the mother hen...In 2007, I will make these departures happen one way or another, by the window or by the door.”

To explain the particularly violent case of France Télécom and the country’s persistently high levels of workplace dissatisfaction overall, some economists have pointed fingers at France’s rigid labour regulation. According to a 2012 study by Wasmer, high levels of stress are typical in countries with a lot of job protection. Indeed, with its generous employment protection, France has one of the worst levels of workplace stress amongst OECD countries. It is an ironic proposition about the perverse effect of “too much” job security: when labour regulation makes it too difficult and costly to fire employees, managers resort to piling pressure onto workers or neglecting them until they resign. According to Wasmer, firing someone can be as personal and formalised as “filing for a divorce”. The result is varying levels of workplace harassment, known in France by the more profound term *harcèlement moral*. And with the current economic climate, more employees are willing to suffer workplace harassment than to look for a new job. The price of job security becomes their mental and emotional wellbeing. “Employees initially feel that they are doing this for their family, their children, so they are capable of accepting a lot,” said Jean-Louis Bally, a member of the Observatoire de stress, an independent organisation composed of academics and labour activists and whose main purpose is to monitor and lobby against large firms that create *risques psycho-sociaux* – occupational stress and suicide risks. “But when it becomes personal, when the management starts to disdain them, they become unhappy,” said the 69-year-old. “They take more sick leave, they fall into depression, and eventually you get suicides.”

The former France Télécom employee has strong views on whether enough prevention is being done in large firms. “It depends how you view prevention,” said the white-haired, bespectacled man contemptuously. “If you view it the way big companies do, then prevention is just about hiring psychologists to help depressed people. But that’s just treating the consequence, not the cause.” In truth, there may be no better way to do it. Most outreach programmes, including the French government’s national strategy for tackling suicides, are also based on identifying and providing psychological support to those at suicidal risk.

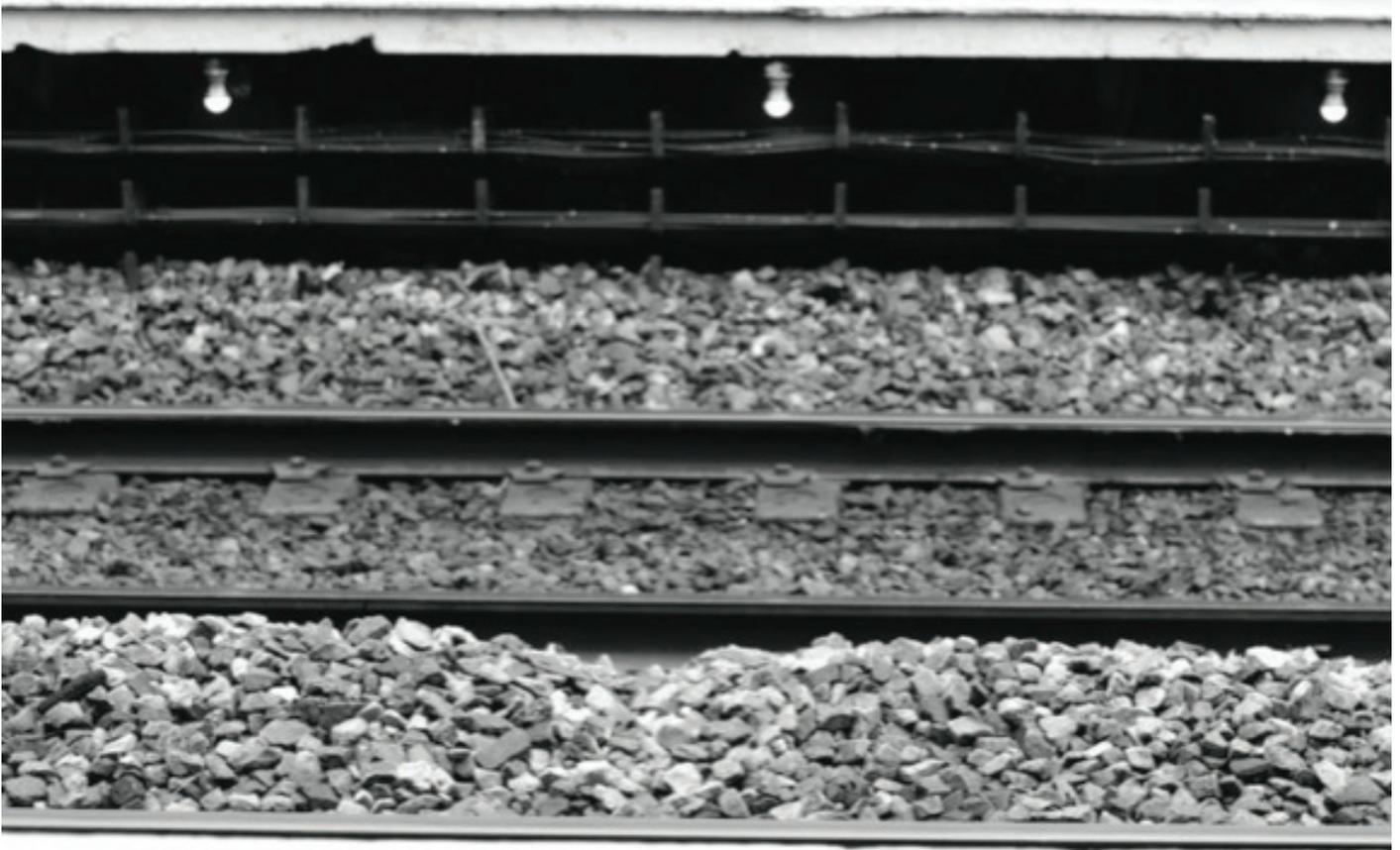
Venner, Char, and hundreds of other unknown suicide victims appear to grasp intuitively the social implications of self-destruction. Unhappy with their lives and with the societal conditions that made this unhappiness possible, they lashed out at the world by choosing violent and public

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deaths. It is their final act of vindication, the ultimate protest. In France, voluntary deaths like theirs are laden with social value, intended by the suicidal and interpreted as such by the living. The collective unity of this understanding is perhaps unsurprising, given the country’s particular cultural and intellectual authorities. Although he argued against the act himself, philosopher Albert Camus, whose works are taught in many French high schools, famously declared that suicide was the only serious philosophical question: it represented the rejection of an absurd life in a mute world. France also gave us Emile Durkheim, the father of sociology, who in 1897 presented the world’s first monograph on none other than the topic of suicides. In his seminal work, Durkheim stripped away the moral overtones of the church, presenting suicide for the first time as an explicable social phenomenon. Voluntary death is an act of choice, he reasoned, the terms of which are entirely those of this world: it is a rejection of life by those who are poorly integrated in society and morally confused.

But it may be the French Revolution that best explains the sentiment behind France’s public suicides. According to Patrice Higonnet, professor of French history at Harvard University, voluntary death was seen as a libertarian and individualised gesture. Suicide – *l’acte le plus libre* – was just one more facet of man’s right to be free. During the French Revolution, Jacobins and Montagnards alike saw communitarian value in public self-destruction. Voluntary death would “shame their enemies and serve as a pedagogical example” for their peers. These suicides were, Higonnet explained in a 1989 conference, assertions of martial dignity and political high-ground.

With a background like France’s, suicide turns – perversely – into an index of high civilisation. As in “tell me your suicide rate and I will tell you your cultural sophistication,” explains Al Alvarez in his book *The Savage God*. Richard Brody, a Francophone film critic at the New Yorker and one of several commentators who criticised Senik’s happiness study, believes so too. A “self-consciously intellectual” society like the French, he wrote in March, may



just be less willing to say they are happy. The unfortunate price of this sophistication, of course, may be the country's high suicide rate.

But for all the grandiose intellectual overtures and thoughtful academic studies surrounding suicide in France, too much scrutiny is still considered taboo. Most studies tiptoe around meaningful details such as linking demographics and causes to modes of suicide. For example, SNCF's department of psychological support may specialise in railway suicides, but they have yet to compile data on what sort of people throw themselves in front of trains. "It's a taboo subject," said Hartmann carefully. "We don't have any study on the profile – so to speak – of people who kill themselves. Why choose a train over overdose? It is delicate to interpret this. We should avoid hasty interpretations." The SNCF psychologist is not the only one to use such cautious language; although suicide is a trending point of discussion in France, talk of the phenomenon often takes on a tone of clinical reverence, inevitably creating distance from the subject itself.

It raises a troubling question: is it possible to understand the motives of suicide from a perspective so rationalised and formal that we use language the suicidal does not? Camus himself declared that not naming things properly adds to the misfortune of the world. Perhaps, suggests Fottorino in his book, it is impossible to understand something well without being tempted by it too, thus the

reluctance to tread the murky waters of a suicidal mind. The problem is contagion: talking about suicide "can give ideas, like dangling fire before a pyromaniac." It is amongst the reasons for which French transport operators prefer to call suicides "serious accidents", explained Gentil. First, "it's a legal thing." You can't call a suicide a suicide unless a formal police investigation concludes as such. Second, "the word suicide is too strong," he said. "It would make people uncomfortable."

These euphemisms no longer soften the blow for certain métro users like Fanny. More than ever, the term brings her back to that cold morning when she watched the man disappear under a train. Although she was badly shaken by the incident, she forced herself to go back the next day. "You have to resume your journey, your life, your day," she said. "I knew I had to face it sometime, so it was better to do it as soon as possible." Standing where she had last seen the man alive, she gingerly checked the railway tracks for any sign of his suicide from the day before. There wasn't a trace. Around her, people behaved as though nothing had ever happened. This time, the train docked normally, and people got on and off. Like so many others before this one, the loss of a life had made but a fleeting dent in the clockwork of Paris. But some things will never change for those involuntarily involved in a public suicide. A couple of paces away from Fanny, a woman stood a little too close to the edge of platform. The sight made her go cold. ■