



# MERDE ACTUALLY

STEPHEN CLARKE

TRANSWORLD  
BOOKS

## About the Book

**A year after arriving in France, Englishman Paul West is still struggling with some fundamental questions:**

Why are there no health warnings on French nudist beaches? Is it really polite to sleep with your boss's mistress? And how do you cope with a plague of courgettes?

Paul opens his English tea room, mutates (temporarily) into a Parisian waiter; samples the pleasures of typically French hotel-room afternoons; and, on a return visit to the UK, sees the full horror of a British office party through Parisian eyes.

Meanwhile, he continues his search for the perfect French mademoiselle. But will Paul find *l'amour éternel*, or will it all end in merde?

**Author's apology:** "I'd just like to say sorry to all the suppository fans out there, because in this book there are no suppositories. There are, however, lots of courgettes, and I see this as progress. Suppositories to courgettes - I think it proves that I'm developing as a writer" **Stephen Clarke**



# **CONTENTS**

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Epigraphs

Acknowledgements

## 1. Sexe and the Country

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

## 2. Can You Be Arsed?

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

### 3. Don't Get Merde, Get Even

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

### 4. Liberté, Egalité, Salon de Thé

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

### 5. That Was No Lady, That Was Your Wife

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

### 6. Ex and the City

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

7. Maybe It's Because I'm Not a Londoner

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

8. In the Merde for Love

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Epilogue

About the Author

Also by Stephen Clarke

Copyright

# Merde Actually

Stephen Clarke

'Everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.'

Voltaire, *Candide*

'Hell is other people.'

Sartre, *No Exit*

'I'll have some of that Voltaire, please.'

Paul West, *Merde  
Actually*



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Author would like to thank everyone who contributed in any way - deliberately or accidentally - to the success of the whole *Merde* adventure, and especially those who threatened physical violence if they didn't get thanked.

Those people are, in no particular order of violence: E, L, S, SL, K, K, M, C, LF, SW, AB, CW, EC, B, NH, NB, PF, DL, MTL, VC, BG, IA, AS, ER, LR, CD, JL&V, JR&J, IM, BS, CW, LG, SR, G, M, P, C&P, Y, SM, CD, MB, JR, JS, AZ, S, V, V, F, C, BP, JR, SC, AB, BE, EB, SF, LB, NL, DC, MD, AP, A, EV, J-P, LM, GC, DT.

If I've left you out, I'm really sorry. Get in touch and I'll send you a book and a grovelling apology.

1

*Sexe and the Country*



# 1

FLORENCE AND I were sitting forty kilometres south of Limoges, in Corrèze, almost exactly in the centre of France. If you staked a man out Da Vinci-style on a map of the country, with his right hand in Brittany, his left in Strasbourg, and his feet in Biarritz and Monaco, then Corrèze would be the small patch where he'd wet himself.

Florence's mum had a country house in Corrèze. We'd planned to stop off there for a quick lunch and then drive on for a two-week amble around southwest France.

But things hadn't gone exactly to plan, and we were sitting in the sun beside a recently dented car. It was after ten minutes of waiting for the police or a tow-truck to arrive that Florence laid her head on my lap and uttered the fateful words.

'I suppose we'll have to spend a few days with Maman.'

Of course, she didn't know then that I was going to try and kill her mother. Neither did I. We'd only been together for about two months, and if anyone had asked my opinion, I'd have said that I didn't think attempting to murder your new girlfriend's mum was a good basis for a successful relationship.

It wasn't really my fault, anyway. I blame it on the French driver.

'Connasse!' he shouted.

French insults are so wonderfully grammatical, I thought. Even in the heat of a verbal battle you have to remember to change the rude word for a male idiot, 'connard', to the feminine form.

But he was being totally unfair. I was the one who'd been driving, not Florence. He was only shouting at her because she was nearer to him than I was. And he'd just made what felt like an asteroid-sized dent in the passenger-side rear door of Florence's dad's brand-new car, thereby coming within a microsecond of making a similar dent in Florence herself.

'Are you OK?' I asked her in English.

'Oui.' She always answered me in French. 'Et toi, Paul?'

'Yes, but I'd like to go and stuff that guy's designer sunglasses up his nose.'

'No, you cannot do that, you are English. You must show your phlegm.'

'My phlegm?' I hadn't heard this one before. Did the French think we Brits calmed down by spitting all over the place? They must have been watching too much of our football on satellite TV.

'Yes, you are phlegmatic. You have cold blood.'

Ah, the Englishman as reptile, now we were on more familiar ground.

'No,' I said, 'those sunglasses have got to go.'

I got out of her dad's royal-blue Renault Vel Satis and gave myself a quick frisk to see if any extremities had come loose. No, both cars had been travelling pretty slowly so I was suffering from nothing more serious than a stiff neck and a vague sensation of wanting to punch someone.

I walked round to the red Asian 4WD that had hit us. Its front headlights were not even cracked.

The driver was a bottle-blond, forty-something fashion victim with wraparound sunglasses so dark I was surprised he could see the sky, never mind cars ahead of him.

'You are blind, perhaps?' I asked, nodding at his glasses. I called him vous, of course, instead of the familiar tu or toi, because we hadn't yet been introduced.

'Et toi?' he shouted through the closed window. I forgave him his familiarity on the basis that he was a good twenty

years older than me. 'Don't you know la priorité à droite?'

He huffed towards his polo-shirted wife and their two skater-boy kids. They were all glowering at me venomously. I knew why - by falling victim to the guy's bad driving I had screwed up his family's holiday timetable. Breakfast in Burgundy was probably on their schedule, lunch in Limoges, but not crash in Corrèze.

'La priorité à droite?' I said. This is the stupidest, most dangerous law in the Western world. It is the French law which states that a car coming from the right has right of way. You might be tooling along on what looks and feels like a major road, and if a car leaps out of a tiny hidden sidetrack without looking to see whether anything is coming, and thereby wipes out your whole family, it's perfectly legal because it was coming from the right. 'There is no priorité à droite on a roundabout,' I said.

'Roundabout?' The driver pulled his sunglasses down his nose and looked around as if he'd only just noticed the large, grass-covered traffic island next to his car. He also took in the distinctly circular road running around it and the four or five exits leading off in different directions.

'What a merde, these roundabouts,' he moaned, expressing the view of a fair number of Frenchmen, who don't seem to know what roundabouts are for. To provide work for municipal gardeners, perhaps? 'They're an anglais thing, aren't they?'

'Yes. We invented them to stop accidents. France is a technological nation, so we did not think you will have a problem with our roundabouts. After all, you can even open oysters.' I took a chance including a joke with the horrifically difficult word 'huîtres', but I was on a roll and it hit home.

'Et vous, vous êtes anglais.' This was his butch wife, leaning over and bellowing across the steering wheel at me. At least she called me vous. 'You English don't know how to drive on the right.'

'And your husband, what is his excuse?' I asked.

The wife gripped her husband's arm and whispered urgently to him. He nodded.

I guessed what she'd said when he started up his engine and hit reverse. The two cars wrenched apart like post-coital lovers whose skin has temporarily stuck together. Then the 4WD did a neat one-point turn and drove off the way it had come.

As the driver sped away I memorized his number and, pointlessly, the faces of the two long-haired boys who were grinning at me through the back window. Papa had just become the outlaw hero of their very own road movie. The French love road movies. They call them 'les rod-moo-vee'.

'What did you say to him?' Florence asked.

'Nothing that insulting. He probably thinks I won't know how to report him because I'm English.'

'Yes, and just after lunchtime his blood is probably half wine,' she said.

I went to admire the dent on her side of the car. An ugly red-and-blue bruise that wouldn't have been too serious except for the fact that the impact had bent the rear wheel arch and ripped the tyre, which was whistling goodbye to its short but high-pressured life.

There was no way I could get at the wheel to change it. We had to call a tow-truck.

We pushed the car over to the side of the road and went to sit in the long grass looking out over a field of sunflowers that stretched back hundreds of yards. I'd never seen so many sunflowers in one place before. In my mind they grew alone, sentries watching over suburban gardens. But here, the massed ranks of five-foot-high flowers looked like an invasion of the Earth by an army of anorexic green aliens.

'Are you really OK?' I asked. 'You didn't hit your head or anything?'

'No. I might need you to massage my neck, though.' Florence flashed me a smile and ran a long finger down from her ear to the smooth, bare shoulder curving up out of

her T-shirt. The first time we ever went to bed together, I'd been struck by the incredible smoothness of her skin, as if she'd spent her teenage years cocooned in coconut milk. She was half-Indian - her father was a Tamil from the volcanic French island of La Réunion, near Madagascar - and she had a body that was a perfect blend of French poise and Indian litheness.

She pushed her black bra strap out of the way and pressed her fingertips into the muscle behind her collar bone. 'You're going to have to kiss me, just *there*.' She groaned, finding a tender spot and rolling her eyes.

All of which sounded very promising.

Until, that is, she announced that we were going to stay with her mum.

The garagiste arrived half an hour later. When he heard that a Parisian car (that is, one with a number ending in 75) had caused the crash, he was more than happy to write an oil-stained statement testifying that we'd been in the right and that the other driver had left the scene illegally.

He also put in a good word for us with the pair of local gendarmes who came to investigate the accident. They were looking stressed in their tight trousers and old-fashioned képis. This was the first Saturday in July, when a large percentage of the French population, plus a sizeable herd of foreign tourists, was migrating southwards through the region. Boozed up, overheated, impatient, lost, and distracted by vomiting kids, loose luggage and ringing phones, the millions of drivers charging along the autoroutes would cause more accidents over the next two days than there had been in the last six months.

So when the two young gendarmes saw that we were a simple case of dent and run, they made a quick show of taking notes and drove off again in their little blue van.

Our arrival chez Maman was a bit of an anticlimax, even though her daughter had probably never turned up in a battered orange tow-truck before.

Florence opened a small white-painted gate and we walked into an empty garden. Over to our right was an overgrown lawn and a handful of mature fruit trees. I could see birds pecking busily at enormous scarlet cherries. Straight ahead was a stone barn with a moustache of moss running along the edge of its gleaming slate roof. To our left was the house, a one-storey construction made out of stone the milky-beige colour of the skin on a ripe Saint Nectaire cheese. The window shutters were painted slate-grey to go with the roof, and they were all closed, as was the front door.

‘They’re having a sieste,’ Florence whispered. ‘We’ll wait until they wake up.’

You really felt that you were in the middle of a continent here. There was the occasional breath of wind, but most of the time the air just hung there, shimmering and seething in the sun. The thick foliage and low branches of the cherry tree weren’t enough to provide comfortable shade, so we went into the barn to get a parasol.

Being suddenly hidden from view gave me an idea.

Florence read my mind.

Well, perhaps I did give her a little hint by grasping her around the waist and pressing my face to her neck.

She shook herself free. ‘No, Paul, it is not a good idea. Look. There are just piles of logs and an earth floor. Ce n’est pas pratique.’ Some girls get a damn sight too pratique as soon as they’re within range of their mothers, don’t they? ‘You get the parasol,’ she said. ‘I’ve got a beach towel that we can lay on the grass.’ She turned back towards the sunlit doorway, then stopped and swore.

‘What is it?’ I asked.

‘We left the luggage in the car.’

‘Oh merde.’



## 2

BY THE TIME we had found the garage-owner's number, explained our problem above the noise of another accident scene, and been told that our car was safely padlocked away in his yard and that he for one wasn't going to go and unlock the yard just to get some bags, there were signs of life from the house.

A small, chestnut-haired boy in blue swimming trunks ran out into the garden and saw us lying under our parasol.

'Flo!' the boy squealed.

'My nephew,' Florence explained. 'My sister's boy, Semen.' Weird names they have out here in the country, I thought.

The boy flopped down on the grass to hug her. As he did so, he eyed me suspiciously. 'He's small,' he said.

'Semen!' Florence hissed at him as if he'd commented on some unmentionable affliction. At the time I didn't think any more about it. I'm six feet tall and have no hang-ups about my height. And I was wearing baggy shorts, so he couldn't possibly have been commenting on any other shortcoming in my physique.

'Bonjour. Je suis Paul.' I held out my hand for the little guy to shake. His suspicion instantly doubled.

'Doesn't he want to kiss me?' he asked Florence.

'He's English,' she told him.

This seemed to explain away everything strange about me, and the boy - whose actual name, I had now worked out, was Simon - walked around his aunt and kissed me on the cheeks.

'He is small, though, isn't he?' he whispered to Florence.

She tutted. 'Where's grand-mère?'

'Still snoring.'

'Is Michel here?' Florence asked. Michel was her elder brother, whom I'd heard about but never met.

'Oui. But he *never* wakes up.'

We went into the kitchen to get something to drink. Little Simon leapt around Florence like a puppy who hasn't been for a walk for two days. But all the time he kept half an eye on me as if I was about to steal his favourite toy. There was still something about me that bothered him.

The kitchen was a cool relief after the oppressive sunlight of the garden. The large square flagstones on the floor were cold to the touch. I twisted the top off a stubby bottle of Kanterbräu beer and guzzled it down in one blissful gulp. I could feel the sweat condensing deliriously in the small of my back.

So it was something of a shock when I sat down at the long dinner table and fractured both of my knees.

'Ah, yes, I should have told you,' Florence said. 'Be careful when you sit there.'

I stood up again (my knees weren't actually broken, I discovered, only as dented as the car) and examined the table.

It was about ten feet long, made of dark wood, and seemed to be of a normal height. But below the scratched table top there were deep drawers that lowered the leg room, so that only a crouching midget could have sat comfortably down to dinner.

'It is a traditional Corrèze table,' Florence explained. 'My great-grandfather made it when he built the house.'

'Didn't he have any legs?'

'Yes. It's just that we don't have his chairs any more. They were very low too.'

'Can't you cut the legs off these chairs?' I mimed amputation. 'Or add a few centimetres to the table legs?'

'Oh no, Maman would not like that.'

Little Simon was suddenly clinging to Florence again.

'He wants to cut our chairs?' he asked, aghast.

'No, no,' Florence assured him. 'It's OK, Paul, you will quickly learn to eat your dinner facing to one side.'

'Ma chérie!'

A woman swept into the kitchen. She was wearing a brown kaftan-style dress that made it impossible to tell whether she was as thin as a parasol or as bulky as her dinner table. She bounded up to Florence and gave her a loud smacking kiss on each cheek. As they pressed together I saw that Madame Flo senior was very shapely in that comfy, fifty-year-old kind of way.

'Maman, je te présente Paul.'

Maman turned to look at me. I stood up and smiled with all the gratitude that a boy should show to the woman whose loins had produced his lover.

She smiled back warmly and tugged on my shoulder until I was small enough for her to kiss. I tried not to let my brain register the fact that my mother-in-law's large breasts were bouncing against my ribs.

'Enchanté, Madame. Vous allez bien?'

'You can call me Brigitte,' she said, promoting me instantly to a tu. 'Qu'il est mignon!' she laughed, and kissed me again on the cheek. Mignon, I knew, meant cute. Though it can also be used to describe a cute guinea pig.

Brigitte was small and graceful, like her daughter, but not at all Indian. Her hair was dark red - the colour black-haired women dye their hair to cover up greyness. It was cut in a thick bob, and her skin was very fair. She had Florence's joyful smile and laughing eyes, and emanated a kind of universal love for humankind.

And I don't think it was *all* down to Prozac.

We exchanged potted CVs. She was a primary-school teacher, an institutrice, in a town near Tours. I was a soon-to-be English-tea-room owner.

‘Ah oui, Maman,’ Florence interrupted. ‘I’m leaving my job and going to work in the salon de thé.’

‘What?’

Suddenly I looked less mignon. I could tell that I’d mutated from the harmlessly exotic boyfriend to the corrupting influence that had persuaded Madame’s poor offspring to give up a job for life. The universal love had evaporated and been replaced by raw disapproval.

‘Oui, Maman, mon boulot me faisait chier.’ Florence’s work was ‘making her shit’, as if constipation in the office was some kind of ideal state.

She explained that her company was instigating a ‘plan social’, offering staff a full year’s salary or early retirement to leave. Even when the French economy slows down, people are rarely thrown on the rubbish heap. So she had taken the offer and was coming in with me to set up the tea room.

‘And in this salon de thé, what will you do? Be a waitress? Is that why you qualified as an accountant?’ Brigitte smiled wanly over at me as if to say that she wasn’t implying that her daughter was too good for the likes of me. Even though she was.

‘It’s a small business, Maman, we’ll do everything. You know, Paul was the head of marketing for a big company before giving it up for his salon de thé.’

Brigitte leaned back against the polished slate mantelpiece and examined me, this T-shirted, unshaven foreigner with the faded Union Jack flip-flops who didn’t look like the head of anything except maybe some international association of beach bums.

‘A French company?’

‘Yes, and before that an English company,’ Florence said.

‘Hmm.’ For some reason, Brigitte was slightly reassured by this. ‘In London?’

‘Yes, Maman, in London.’

‘They say it’s the most expensive city in the world.’

'It is, but luckily the salaries are in proportion,' I said, drawing myself up to my full height and cracking my skull on the low ceiling beams.

Maman went to the fridge in the corner of the kitchen and took out a large glass jug full of pink foam.

'You will have some strawberry juice?' she asked me.

'Strawberry juice?'

'Yes, we have so many, we don't know what to do with them. I mix them up, add some water and a little sugar and lemon juice, and voilà.'

'Mmm, it must be délicieux,' I said, thinking the liquid looked like mashed sheep's brain.

We sat at the table, our knees twisted to one side, and drank tumblers of pink frothy goo that got stuck between your teeth. Little Simon was the only one who could sit comfortably. The rest of us were like three Snow Whites squatting chez the dwarves.

'So where is it, this salon de thé?' Brigitte asked, with only mild aggression.

'Near the Champs-Élysées,' I said.

'The rent must be very expensive.'

'I negotiated a good price.'

'When do you open?'

'A la rentrée, the first of September,' I said.

'Yes, Maman, Nicolas is doing the plans. You remember Nicolas?'

'Oh, oui, he was so mignon, Nicolas!' Brigitte sighed fondly.

I wondered how she was so familiar with the architect who was overseeing the refit at the tea room. Florence had told me he was a young architect who'd give us a good price - a 'prix d'ami' - because he was 'a boy I went to school with'. Parisian women are surrounded by 'boys I went to school with' because so few of them leave Paris to study or find a job. The question is, of course, what did they get up to when they were at school together?

This Nicolas was quite a handsome guy if you liked the tall, pale, artistic type with impeccably casual designer clothes and an overdose of self-confidence.

It was comforting to know that a friend of Florence's was dealing with all the stuff I was linguistically incapable of: getting building permission and quotes, buying materials, scheduling in the various workmen. But I couldn't get the question about his place on Florence's sexual CV out of my mind. Wasn't there a difference between hiring an architect you knew and giving work to an ex-boyfriend?

I made a mental note to call him over the weekend to make damn sure that everything was ready to roll on Monday morning, when the guys with sledgehammers were due to go in and remove all evidence that the premises had recently been a shoe shop.

'Was he very big, Nicolas?' little Simon asked.

'Shut up, Simon,' Brigitte snapped, giving me a 'don't worry about him, he's just being stupid' smile.

'Wel-kum, wel-kum!'

A grinning man of about my age and size was stooping through the doorway from the lounge. This was Florence's big brother, Michel.

Like Florence, he was a perfect cocktail of French and Indian blood, a dark-eyed, long-limbed latte of a man. Unlike her, he had a lot of bodily hair, and a corresponding tendency to baldness that he attempted to hide by pulling his hair back in a short ponytail. He was shirtless, with a slight pot belly, and his shorts were even more rumpled than mine. I guessed he'd slept in them.

He kissed Florence and gripped my hand, examining with a mixture of curiosity and pity this guy who was shagging his sister.

Waving away the offer of sheep juice, he went to the fridge, where he found a bottle of fizzy Badoit water and guzzled down half of it, puffing breathlessly as the bubbles fizzed up into his nose.

‘Michel, that bottle is for everyone,’ Brigitte told him, and he laughed, the kid who’s never had to listen to what his parents told him.

Florence and I told the story of our accident, and then Brigitte announced that as we’d be staying for a few days, we could help out with the chores. A holiday at her country house wasn’t a holiday, it seemed. Everything was permanently on the verge of falling down, going rotten or getting eaten by pests. I knew the feeling.

I was given several choices of how to occupy my first afternoon in Corrèze. Unfortunately, curling up with Florence wasn’t one of them. There was picking lettuce, radishes, courgettes or strawberries, demossing the barn roof, or digging.

‘You are making a swimming pool?’ I asked. I had noticed a large, fresh hole down the slope a little from the barn.

‘No, it is for the fosse septique,’ Brigitte explained.

‘The what?’

‘You know, the reservoir for the, you know . . .’

‘For the caca and pipi,’ Simon giggled.

‘You don’t have one?’ I asked, envisaging dawn trips to fertilize the hedges.

‘Yes, yes, but it is out of date.’

‘Out of date?’ There was a problem with having last season’s septic tank?

Florence explained, while Brigitte listened tensely. This was obviously a subject that was painfully close to her heart.

Apparently all the houses in the village had septic tanks, but none of them were ‘aux normes’ – they didn’t conform to modern building laws. It seemed that it was OK to pollute the outskirts of every town in France with hideous billboards and industrial estates, but it was illegal to have an undersized septic tank.

The ones in Brigitte’s village were all basically brick chambers in the garden where waste products had been

flowing and fermenting efficiently for centuries. However, with modern washing machines and dishwashers, too many houses were pumping warm water out into the roadside ditches, turning the lanes into subtropical gardens that the council had trouble keeping in check. Now the mayor had got a regional grant to fit large modern septic tanks that would hold all the waste water.

‘They do not make the hole for you?’ I asked.

‘Yes, yes, but . . .’ Brigitte shuddered.

‘Maman is afraid they’ll break the water pipes or cut through the roots of the walnut tree,’ Florence explained.

‘Huh,’ Michel grunted. ‘She just doesn’t want strange men digging around in her—’

‘Michel!’ Brigitte blushed as pink as her strawberry juice.

‘Anyway,’ Florence went on, ‘Maman wants us to dig the hole ourselves.’

‘I think I prefer to pick courgettes,’ I volunteered.

‘OK, you can do some digging tomorrow,’ Brigitte said. ‘You’ll just have to be careful, because we’re quite close to breaking through to the old tank.’

In short, my French vacances were in danger of getting off to a very shitty start.



### 3

I HAD SEEN the three or four rows of courgettes round the back of the house, and figured it would take me no more than five minutes to strip them bare, after which Florence would be able to give me a guided tour of the house, with the finale in a secluded bedroom.

The two of us were still at that early stage in our relationship where you need to touch each other all the time. Where as soon as your fingers so much as brush against each other's skin, the other parts of your body start saying they'd like to join in with this skin-brushing business. It's probably not the best time to go and stay with your mother-in-law.

And now the combination of glorious sun, thrusting vegetation and Florence's exposed limbs (she'd found a bikini in the wardrobe) was making my whole lower body ache.

So I was gutted to learn that the courgettes I was supposed to pick weren't in the little veg patch behind the house. They were a ten-minute walk away across the lane and through the woods. Worse, Florence wasn't allowed to come with me because she had to help turn the morning's crop of cherries into a clafoutis, a sort of mammoth fruit flan.

I was given an old straw hat that a donkey would have refused for being too battered and a pair of gigantic wellies, and told not to come back till I'd filled a laundry basket with courgettes.

Just to be sure I knew what I was supposed to be doing, Brigitte came out of the kitchen and gave me a specimen.

‘Voilà, this is what I want,’ she said.

‘Yes, courgettes,’ I agreed, pointing intelligently at the courgette-shaped, courgette-coloured courgette.

‘Some city people mistake them for cucumbers.’

‘Not me, I am working five years in the food industry already.’

‘Ah, but I don’t think you make tea out of courgettes,’ she said and, having put me firmly in my place, pirouetted back to her kitchen.

At this point, I must admit that a little matricide did spring to mind.

In fact it was fun playing the peasant for a couple of hours.

No matter where you are in the south of England, the city can always catch up with you in the shape of an off-road vehicle or a gang of mountain-biking yuppies. Not here. The vegetable garden was a hundred-yard-long, ten-yard-wide strip of cultivation in the middle of a medieval wilderness. On a gently sloping hillside, it was a sunlit clearing amidst huge, swaying chestnut trees. Even the rusting shell of an abandoned van looked hundreds of years old. It was one of those vintage French vans made out of corrugated iron, and now it was quietly biodegrading back into iron ore, with a sapling growing out of its back window and rotting wooden vegetable trays in place of its windscreen.

When I took a swig of water from the bottle I’d brought, my glugging was the only human sound in the world around me. The insects were humming, the birds were screeching, the treetops were swishing, and absolutely no one was driving cars at me. It wasn’t as enjoyable as diving into the Med or on top of Florence, but spending an afternoon alone in the middle of France wasn’t so bad after all.

Even though I was out here on my own, filling my basket with courgettes made me feel part of the family. Everyone had their task to do, and I was providing the vegetables. I hadn’t felt this much at home in France in the whole ten

months I'd been here, not even when I'd moved into Florence's apartment near the Père Lachaise cemetery, or when I'd first learned how to barge in front of someone to nab a Parisian café table. Now I was just like countless thousands of Parisians, enjoying a mild summer dose of peasant life at the family maison de campagne. It felt deeply satisfying.

This was the most productive kitchen garden I'd ever seen in my life - the courgette plants were hidden away amongst potatoes, tomatoes, green beans, aubergines, radishes, beetroot (I think), carrots, cucumbers, three sorts of lettuce, strawberries, raspberries, blackcurrants, a pear tree, and what looked like almonds. At the end of the vegetable patch there was also a small fig tree, with curled, springy branches, small unripe fruit and the phallic leaves we've all seen in paintings. The guy who first chose the fig leaf to camouflage his genitals got it exactly right - the long, central lobe of the leaf looks exactly like a hanging willy. Though he was a bit boastful about the size of his balls.

What I hadn't known about a fig tree is that when the sun is on its leaves, it smells delicious. The whole tree was giving off a glorious sweet fig smell that made you want to sit there and wait for a month until the fruit was ripe enough to eat.

The courgettes were surprisingly prickly, and annoyingly close to the ground. But whenever I got backache I just went and raided the fruit plants.

This far south there were only a few kilos left on the raspberry bushes in early July, so I polished those off and then wandered down to the next row where there were several million strawberries. One thing was for sure - if I dropped dead from heat exhaustion, within a day my body would be sprouting fruit blossom.

When I staggered back into the garden with my full basket of courgettes, Florence was setting out glasses on a long

teak table by the side of the house.

‘The neighbours are coming for the apéritif,’ she explained.

‘Think I’ll have a quick shower,’ I said. ‘Can you, you know, show me where it is?’ I accompanied the ‘you know’ with an inquiring lift of the eyebrows, meaning, well, you know.

‘I’ll show you how it works,’ Brigitte said, arriving with an armful of alcohol bottles. ‘There is a knack.’

I looked imploringly at Florence, but like a UN soldier without a mandate to intervene in a humanitarian crisis, she just shrugged and left me to my fate.

‘Allez, Paul!’ Brigitte had already got as far as the kitchen door. ‘They’ll be here in ten minutes.’

It was my first day at the kindergarten. Lesson one: this is a courgette. Lesson two: going to the bathroom.

Is it just me or does every shower unit in the world have a fiendish knack to it? Is this why we Brits preferred baths for so many centuries before we decided we didn’t want to wash our hair in the sink any more?

With a bath, all you do is fill the damn thing. If the water’s too hot, you add some cold. With someone else’s shower, you need to be a kind of water DJ to get the mix right. And why is it always doubly difficult in a girlfriend’s mum’s bathroom?

‘Turn on the water and let it run for two minutes,’ Brigitte explained, bending over the deep shower basin and pointing to the mixer tap. ‘It’s a Butagaz water heater so you have to wait until the warm water arrives from the kitchen. D’accord?’

‘D’accord.’ This is French for OK.

‘Don’t change the temperature, because otherwise after two minutes you’ll freeze or get burned. D’accord?’

‘D’accord.’

'And don't turn it full on or it'll push the shower curtain out of the basin and wet the floor.'

'D'accord.' Very soon my ten-minute shower allocation was going to be used up and I'd have to meet the neighbours wearing a coat of sweaty dust.

'Put the shower curtain right inside the basin before turning on the water.'

'D'accord.'

'And don't put the plug in or you'll stain the tub.'

I now found that my tongue refused to say 'd'accord' any more. I nodded.

'And make sure you turn the water right off when you've finished.'

I tried to nod but my head would only move a millimetre. My whole body was going on strike.

'But don't turn the tap too far or it'll get stuck.'

All I could do was move my eyes up and down in agreement.

'And stay on the bathmat to dry yourself off, otherwise you'll leave wet footprints on the floor.'

That was it. One more instruction and my head would fall off.

'D'accord?' she asked.

'Towel?' I managed to squeak.

'Use the big blue one. And hang it out on the washing line after you've finished otherwise it will rot. D'accord?'

I smiled, not only to show that I'd understood but also at the idea of hanging myself with the washing line and escaping from this maternal French version of boot camp.

## 4

THE SHOWER DID its relaxing trick, and I was feeling at peace with the world when I emerged into the garden quarter of an hour later.

'Ah!' I was greeted with a loud collective sigh of pleasure, as if I was the guest who was bringing the only bottle.

'This is Pol,' Brigitte announced, doing the usual French thing of making me sound as if I was related to a Khmer Rouge dictator.

'Bonsoir,' I said.

Sitting around the table were Florence's mum, brother and nephew, Florence herself, and two suntanned old people who were smiling broadly and toasting me with enormous tumblers of Pernod.

They were introduced as Henri and Ginette, lifelong owners of the next farm down the road. I assumed they were husband and wife, but they looked so similar that they might have been brother and sister as well. It didn't seem polite to ask. They had the carefree faces of aged children, and gnarled hands that bore the scars of doing every menial job a small farm can throw at you. I wondered if they fancied taking over from me at tomorrow's cesspit-digging session.

'What are you drinking?' Michel asked.

Henri and Ginette gave an expectant 'Eh oui?' The foreigner's drinking habits were suddenly the most exciting thing happening this side of the English Channel.

It was a difficult choice because I didn't recognize half the bottles. What were Suze and Banyuls, for example? I thought I'd risk it and go native.

'I'll try a Suze.'