



MERDE HAPPENS

STEPHEN CLARKE

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

The Englishman - Paul West is in deep financial merde and has taken on a decidedly dodgy job touring America in a Mini.

The Frenchwoman - Alexa, his très Parisienne girlfriend, claims to despise everything American, but ends up getting a little too friendly with the locals for Paul's liking.

The American - Jake is a poet whose main aim in life is to sleep with a woman from every country in the world. Preferably in the back of Paul's Mini.

As the little car battles from New York to Miami and then heads west, leg room turns out to be the least of Paul's troubles.

His work is being sabotaged; his love-life has become a Franco-American war zone; and as Paul knows better than anyone, when you mix love and war - **merde happens...**

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Epigraph

Acknowledgements

An Appetizer

PARIS AND LONDON

Do I Have a Dream?

NEW YORK

Merde in Manhattan

BOSTON

Digging for Victory

NEW YORK TO FLORIDA

Seriously South

MIAMI

Go Ahead, Merde My Day

MIAMI TWICE

Dirty Dancing

TO NEW ORLEANS

Hubble, Bubble, Toil and Double Trouble

LAS VEGAS

Money Makes the Wheels Go Round

LEAVING LAS VEGAS

Uzi Does It

LOS ANGELES

Mini Ha-ha

One for the Road

About the Author

Also by Stephen Clarke

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Merde Happens

Stephen Clarke



'If my melodies have found a place in people's hearts, then I know I have not lived in vain.'

Robert Stolz, Austrian
composer.

1968, what a great year that was ;)

'I'm told that America has more lunatics than anywhere in the world.'

*De la Démocratie en
Amérique,*
Alexis de Tocqueville,
1840.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the Americans I met during my frequent visits to the States over the past eighteen months for being so American.

I would also like to say an especially big thank-you to the car-hire company who let me drive their valuable vehicle away after I'd just said, 'I've never driven an automatic before. How does it work?'

I would, however, like to request that Americans turn the air-conditioning down a bit. New York sounds as if it's about to take off, and Las Vegas is basically a giant vibrator.

And finally, a big hello to all the pelicans out there. No, you don't need a face-lift - a triple chin is what makes you a pelican.

Stephen Clarke, Paris, May 2007.

An Appetizer

THE DRIVER WHO PICKED me up at JFK that February morning was a young Sikh, and as he bounced his taxi out of the airport, he started talking over his shoulder in Punjabi or some other Asian language.

I was just about to explain that I spoke only English and learner's French when I realized he wasn't addressing me at all. He was speaking into his phone, and kept this up for the whole journey. Maybe, I thought, he was moonlighting with a call centre, maximizing his time spent in traffic by doing computer after-sales service.

I wasn't offended, though. I didn't need conversation about the weather or why I'd come to America. I was happy to settle back in my seat and enjoy the thrill of arriving in New York.

Even the traffic jam was exotic - squadrons of yellow taxis jostling for position with black Lincoln limos and chrome-nosed trucks, all breathing out white clouds of exhaust into the freezing winter air. The spine-crunching bumps in the road did nothing to detract from the fun of it.

After an hour of this, the highway suddenly rose above street level and there it was, the world's most famous skyline, a silver silhouette against the hazy blue of the sky. Through the spider's web beams of a suspension bridge, I could make out the angular spire of the Empire State and the rocket-cone Chrysler building.

I gripped the edge of my seat.

When we'd crossed the bridge, the skyline loomed even bigger out of the left-hand side of the car, then started to recede.

Soon Manhattan was completely out of sight behind us.
Hang on, I thought, that can't be right, can it?

PARIS AND LONDON



Do I Have a Dream?

1

THE SEEDS OF DISASTER HAD been sown the previous autumn, when I opened an English tea room just off the Champs-Élysées in Paris. Almost immediately I was visited by a language inspector from the Ministry of Culture, who warned me that I could expect ‘the severest consequences’ if I didn’t translate my menu into French.

He had been well chosen for the job, a power-mad bureaucrat who refused to believe that even the most linguistically challenged Parisian could understand ‘sausage’ when the label was standing in front of a plate of long, meat-filled tubes.

He also alleged that my customers were being traumatized by the fear that their ‘cheese salad’ might contain a chair (*‘chaise’* in French). I mean, chair salad? What brand of poisonous Gallic tobacco had he been smoking?

I stayed calm and pointed out that plenty of English food names, like sandwich, cake, iced tea, toast and bacon had passed directly into the French language, to which his only reply was a dismissive ‘pff’.

Sensing that I had him on the defensive, I followed up with the clinching argument that the English labels were educational for my customers.

‘Hah! You think all French people must be forced to learn English?’ he trumpeted, and huffed out the door, leaving

me - I assumed - to get on with the serious business of running a café.

But no, his revenge arrived about three months later. It was a piece of sheer bureaucratic sadism - a letter saying that the tea room had been revisited incognito, found guilty of continuing to operate with an untranslated menu, and therefore sentenced to pay an obscene amount of euros in penalties.

'How much do we owe?' I asked.

I was at the tea room with Benoît, the son of a sneaky Parisian entrepreneur called Jean-Marie Martin, to whom I'd sold a fifty per cent stake in the business. Jean-Marie had bought this share in a desperate attempt to get Benoît off his student backside and into the real world. It was an astute move - I'd let Benoît take over as manager, and he'd quickly blossomed from a rich-kid slacker into a skilled raker-in of euros. He was making a real go of the tea room. Or so he thought, until the fine arrived.

Benoît read out the amount again, and I slumped forward to cool my aching forehead on the glass serving counter, right above the half-empty plate of what had to be the costliest sausages ever grilled.

'I can solve the immediate problem,' Benoît said in French. *'I'll translate the labels, re-do the blackboard, and I've ordered new takeaway menus. The inspector's coming back tomorrow.'*

'But I haven't got that kind of money,' I moaned. It was a huge sum - enough to take me around the globe in business class or buy me a mid-range sports car. Tragic to think that it was probably going to finance some ministerial brochure explaining how to persecute English-speakers.

Benoît tutted sympathetically. He was thoughtful enough to hide his relief that the fine had been incurred for something that happened before his father bought into the tea room. Legally, the money had to come out of my empty pocket. *'You could—'* he began, but I cut him off instantly.

‘Sell my share to Jean-Marie? No way.’ I knew that Benoît had plans to open another branch, and I had no intention of selling up just before the brand started to go global. If the Latin Quarter counted as global. ‘No, I’ll get the money,’ I told him.

‘You have to pay within six weeks, or it increases again.’

‘What?’ I straightened up and looked Benoît in the eye. If it had been his dad or his sister Elodie, some part of them would have been relishing my pain, but Benoît’s expression was one of genuine concern.

‘The French legal system shows no mercy,’ he said. ‘They’ve stopped guillotining people, but they cannot resist the temptation to slice off a businessman’s—’

‘Thanks, Benoît, I get the picture.’

I left him re-labelling ‘sausage’ as *‘saucisse’* and ‘salad’ as *‘salade’*, and went off to try and save my financial bacon. Or *‘bacon financier’* as I was probably obliged to call it.

2

I was in shock. Not only because of my money troubles, but also because I had just heard the scariest words in the English language.

No, not ‘This might hurt a little’, ‘There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you, darling’ or ‘Did you realize that your credit-card number is being used simultaneously in Moscow, Shanghai and Bogotá?’

This sentence was much, much scarier. It was ‘What do you want to do with your life?’

When someone asks this, I usually feign sudden deafness or an attack of the runs. But when it’s your girlfriend who says it, you can’t ignore her. You have to stop watching the cliffhanger ending of the murder mini-series you’ve been following for weeks, and answer her question.

'Pardon?' I said, forcing myself to look away from the TV and into Alexa's (admittedly gorgeous) face.

'What are your dreams, Paul?' She laid her head on my shoulder and put the TV on mute so that I wouldn't be distracted by the detective explaining exactly how the murderer had bamboozled Scotland Yard's finest for the past three episodes.

I could tell that I was in for a treat. Just like a lobster knows it's going to have fun when it feels that first gust of steam rising from the cooking pot.

It was eight hours since Benoît had told me about the fine. Alexa and I were cocooned together under a fluffy white duvet in her enormous apartment near the Bastille.

In one corner of this pine-floored palace was a mezzanine bedroom. We were huddled in here because the underfloor heating downstairs cost about a month's salary per day to turn on, and on top of all my other worries, I was temporarily between salaries. As was Alexa, whose only income came from the sale of her photos. She'd recently had shows at the Centre Pompidou in Paris and London's Saatchi Gallery, which had generated plenty of kudos but not much cash.

The apartment belonged to her dad, who had gone to live with his new *amour* in Copenhagen. I'd moved in with Alexa just after Christmas, and this was the first time we'd watched TV in bed. I didn't see it as a sign that we were less thrilled to be there and needed entertainment outside of each other's nakedness. I just wanted to watch the last episode of the mini-series.

But Alexa was an arty French girl, and French intellectuals regard TV mini-series the way crocodiles look at soya rissoles - not meaty enough to merit their attention. This was why she'd decided that it was perfectly OK to talk over the ending.

‘My dreams? That’s a tough one,’ I said. ‘I’d need to think about it.’

‘But you must have some ambitions. That’s why you started your tea room, isn’t it?’ Her English was so good that you could hardly hear a French accent at all.

‘Yes, exactly,’ I agreed, congratulating myself for getting out of trouble so effortlessly. My finger hovered over the mute button as the detective mouthed revelations that were making all the other characters gasp in amazement. Five seconds of silence from Alexa and I’d take it as tacit agreement that I could turn the volume on again.

‘But you sold half the business, so you must have other dreams, too.’

Damn. I was going to have to buy the DVD to find out whodunnit. I switched off the TV and snuggled up.

‘Oh, I have great dreams,’ I said. ‘Last night I dreamed you were lying naked in a hot tub and then I got in and—’

‘No, Paul, don’t joke, please. I’m being serious. What do you want to do with your life?’ Her all-seeing blue eyes drilled deep into my brain. ‘I dream of making a film about the French lifestyle,’ she went on, ‘of building a career in photography. What do *you* dream of, apart from watching the end of your murder series?’ Which was one dream she’d just murdered. ‘It’s great being in Paris with you, Paul, but right now I’m getting a bit . . .’ She trailed off.

‘A bit what?’

‘Bored.’

‘Bored?’ There’s something about being in bed with a woman who says you’re boring that makes certain parts of a guy go limp.

‘Yes. It’s no coincidence that this problem of the fine has hit you now. You have gone soft.’

‘Soft?’

‘Yes, *tu te laisses aller*, you have let yourself go. For a month now, you’ve done nothing. You almost never go to the tea room.’

'Benoît doesn't need me.'

'You spend most of your time watching DVDs, looking at stupid websites or sitting in cafés.'

'Or curled up in bed with you.' It sounded like the ideal lifestyle to me.

'But that is not enough. You are a guy with energy and imagination. You can't waste it like this. You must be more creative. I am scared you will sell your other half of the tea room to pay your debt, and then you will have even less than nothing.'

I got the message. It was caveman time. I had to go out and brain a mammoth to prove that I was a real male. Even the most feminist women get like that occasionally. They demand that a guy explores his feminine side, but now and again they need to feel the rasp of a five o'clock shadow on his chin.

And deep down, I knew she was right.

Sitting in a Paris café was still a thrill – people pretending to read books while checking out the other coffee-drinkers, couples in conversations so urgent they looked as if they would change the world, teenage schoolkids chain-smoking in an attempt to belong to this adult society. It was always entertaining.

But recently I had been feeling a slight unease as I sat over my fourth espresso of the day. I had caught myself drumming my fingers on the marble table-top, as if I was waiting for somebody or something. And I couldn't put all my fidgetiness down to caffeine poisoning. It was a kind of dissatisfaction, lodged deep in the soul where the coffee, the champagne and the love (and body) of a good woman couldn't reach. Part of me was looking for something else. A dream, perhaps.

'No, I'm not going to sell my share of the tea room,' I told Alexa in my best cave-dweller voice. 'I'm going to get the money. And I think I know how.'

'Yes?' She raised an eyebrow.

'Yes. I got an email a few days ago offering me a job. I dismissed the idea at the time because it sounded too wacky, but now . . .'

'What is it?'

'You've seen *Thelma and Louise*, right?'

'Yes?'

'And *Easy Rider*?'

'Yes?' Alexa's brow was knitted. She wasn't bored any more.

'And *Alfie*?'

'Original version or the remake?'

'Does it matter?'

'To me, yes.' Parisian girls think remakes of 1960s movies are as big a blasphemy as Californian champagne.

'OK. Original version?'

'Yes.'

'Well, this was a job offer that would combine them all.'

'So, you will have to drive across America, talking like a Cockney, and you will get chased by the police because you have two dangerous women in your car?'

'Just one French woman, I hope,' I said. 'How dangerous can that be?'

Alexa smiled and planted a kiss on my shoulder. If I hadn't yet brought home a mammoth, at least I'd hinted that I might know where hairy mammals hung out.

3

Two days later, I was in London with my best suit on my back and my whole life printed out on a sheet of A4.

The building where a taxi had just delivered me was at least ten storeys high, all blue-tinted glass except for the white marble staircase leading up to the entrance doors. At the top of the stairs, an ecosystem of exotic-looking shrubs

was growing in an immense granite sarcophagus. Perhaps they'd bought an Egyptian mummy and let it germinate, I thought. Though I wondered why they hadn't planted roses and apple trees, because the building was supposed to be selling Britishness. It was the brand-new headquarters of a brand-new organization called (and I quote) Visitor Resources: Britain. These were the people who, via a headhunting company, had sent me my job offer.

After a cursory interrogation by two bored security guys, I took the lift to the sixth floor and went to sit in a corridor with a carpet the colour of lightly-grilled toast. The walls were baked-bean orange. All that was missing to complete the English-breakfast theme was a set of light fittings in the shape of fried eggs.

There were no signs or sounds of life anywhere.

Until, that is, the lift doors opened again and a female voice flooded the corridor with the soundtrack to a nervous breakdown.

'No, I can't take your fucking dog for a haircut,' she was wailing. 'Well, not before six, anyway.'

She tripped out of the lift, a gangly, curly-headed thirty-something in clothes she must have bought from a charity shop specializing in mismatching outfits. Floppy rainbow jumper, tartan mini-skirt, vertical-striped tights and ancient suede moonboots. In one arm, she was clutching a heap of files that looked as if she'd dropped them ten times that day already.

'No, *you* fuck off, George, just like you always do. Oh.' She saw me and hung up.

'Hi,' she said, holding out her phone for me to shake. 'Sorry about that, you're early, come in, oh shit where are the sodding keys, hold this, bugger.'

She dumped the files in my arms and suffered a second bout of Tourette's syndrome while she rummaged through her suede shoulder-bag. All the while she was giving me the kind of frank, top-to-bottom examination that you might

give a girl in a pole-dancing club. Not that I've ever been to one. Well, not in Europe, anyway.

'They wouldn't let me park outside, the bastards. I mean, who's got a permit on their first day, here they are, shit how do you open this fucking . . . ah there we go, oh brilliant, it's been delivered, sit down, coffee, oh no I don't suppose there is any, fuck it let's just start OK?'

She ripped the tape off a large cardboard box that was sitting below a tinted window.

'Ah, we'll try this first, shall we?' She pulled out what looked like a legless Alsatian dog and threw it at me. When I caught it, I realized it was a busby, a Guardsman's bearskin hat. Was this a culture test, I wondered - Name That British Object? Next I'd be asked to identify a deep-fried Mars Bar and a Charles and Camilla tea cosy.

'Well?' she said. 'Stand up. Put it on.'

The hat flopped down over my eyes and tickled my ears. Through a fringe of fake fur I saw her take a photo and then head for her Pandora's box again.

'Ah, yes, what about these?'

This time I had to fit a scratchy lace collar round my neck and grin while she snapped me in Beefeater headgear.

'A bit young, but what the hell,' she said. 'Ooh, I know what we have to do with you - oh, sod it.'

She was on her hands and knees, her whole torso jammed into the box. A plastic crown flew over her shoulder, followed by what looked like a jester's codpiece with little bells on it. At least I was to be spared that indignity.

'Oh well, nothing for it.' She stood up and started to undress. 'Get your trews off,' she said.

Wow, job interviews have changed since I was last unemployed, I thought. Was I about to be asked to shag for England?

'You're not shy, are you? Come on, we see lots of bodies in our business. I bet it's not the first time you've seen a

girl in tights, either.'

It wasn't, and the experience was as unpleasant as ever. Sorry, ladies, but it's a law of nature that women's underwear, even a thong, cannot be squeezed inside coloured nylon and stay sexy.

'The kilt hasn't been delivered, but mine'll do for the test shots. Sorry it's only the tartan of the Marks and Spencer clan.' She gave a loud snort, a kind of clearing out of her nasal passages, which I guessed was her laugh.

At least there was to be no sex involved, just a photo of my tartan-framed knees. I pulled off my trousers and put on the skirt. Luckily - or unluckily - it had a buckle waist, so I had no problem adjusting it to fit, widthways at least.

It was only as I stood there allowing my knees to be immortalized in pixels, and listening to this basket case going on about how 'there'll be a real kilt for the actual brochure', that I realized this whole fancy-dress party was probably unnecessary. I hadn't come about a brochure at all. She had the wrong guy. And come to think of it, I definitely had the wrong woman. I was due to see a man called Tyler. I'd assumed this was his assistant. No, truth be told, I hadn't assumed anything, I'd just obeyed instructions and let her make a fool of me.

'Er . . .' I tried to interrupt, but she was jabbering on as she walked back to her cardboard box.

'Have you got your portfolio with you? You done any big campaigns recently? Oh, poo.'

Her phone was ringing. She checked out the caller's number and then picked it up, making a 'sorry, I have to take this' grimace at me.

'What? Pregnant? Again? Holy shit. Just a sec.' She put her hand to the mouthpiece. 'Sorry, dear, it's my sister. Can you just wait outside for a mo?' Gripping my elbow, she guided me to the door. 'Who's the father?' she said into the phone. 'Shit, so he was lying about the vasectomy? Bastard!'

I found myself standing in the corridor in a mini-skirt, hoping to hell that no one would come along and see me.

‘Ah, Mr West I presume?’

I was sorely tempted to say no.

4

A plump man in a grey suit was staring at me over gold reading glasses. He was at least fifty, but he had a full head of longish, floppy grey hair. He bared his teeth at me, not in a smile but so that he could lick them as if cleaning away remnants of his breakfast.

‘Jack Tyler,’ he said, holding out his hand. He had obviously decided that it wouldn’t be polite to draw attention to my naked legs. An old-school civil servant.

‘Paul West,’ I confessed. ‘Er, about the skir—’

‘Do go in.’ He gestured towards the office next door to the mad stripper.

Tyler’s office was exactly the same as the one next door, except that the shelves had been half filled with files and coffee-table-sized books. There was also a computer on the desk. This guy had been in residence a whole day longer than his neighbour, it seemed.

We sat down on opposite sides of his desk.

‘I should explain,’ I said.

‘Are you a Scot?’ he interrupted again. His voice was smooth and posh-sounding.

‘No.’

‘You’re not a transvestite, are you? Not that we have anything against them. The British government is an equal-opportunities employer.’ He said this as if reciting it straight from the manual.

‘No, no, it’s just that your colleague next door has got my trousers.’

'I see.' He looked at me indulgently, like a shrink whose patient has just explained that he's really a giant tomato.

'Not that she's wearing them, of course. We didn't exchange clothes.'

'No?'

'No. She asked me to take them off for some photos.'

'Really?' He stared at the wall as if he might be able to see all the kinky things that went on next door.

'What I mean is, she needed someone to pose for photos in a kilt - some kind of tourist brochure, she said - and the model hadn't turned up, and I was in the corridor, so she asked me to step in.'

'Ah.' He seemed to have got the picture at last. 'So it was out of the breeks and into the breach.'

'Pardon?'

'Breeks. Scots word for trousers.'

'Ah, yes, good one.' I managed a polite laugh. 'She's on the phone and asked me to wait outside. I'll get my trousers back when she's finished.'

'Yes, yes, it's all par for the course,' he said, licking his teeth. 'It's chaos around here. New name, new headquarters, bloody ridiculous if you ask me.'

'New name?' I asked.

'Yes, Visitor Resources: Britain was the good old Tourist Authority until some trendy twit in the government decreed that it sounded too *yesterday's generation* or whatever. Anyway.' He shuffled some papers to gather his thoughts. 'Enough about us. Tell me what you've been doing recently. In France as well as England, I see.'

I took him through my time in Paris, most of which I'd spent setting up the tea room, and gave him the bare bones of how I'd then gone to London to market a deranged French chef. Tyler asked a few questions, but none of them took me into the dangerous territory of why I'd ditched two jobs in a year.

‘OK. Good. So-o.’ His tongue shot over his teeth yet again, and it took all my mental resistance not to do the same. His tic was addictive. ‘Do you have any questions you’d like to ask me at this point?’

‘Well, yes, actually. Quite a basic one.’

‘As in?’

‘As in, what is the job exactly?’ I mean, the headhunters had given me enough info to get me interested, but they’d refused to be specific. Top secret, they’d said.

‘Ah!’ It was a laugh, but it sounded as if he’d just been shot. ‘Typical,’ he grunted. ‘Outsourcing. You pay someone else to do the job and you still have to do it yourself. Visitor bloody Resources. Visitor outsources, more like. We don’t even own the building, you know. Can you imagine how much of our budget goes in rent?’ He’d said most of this to the ceiling, but he now came back down to earth and slurped his gums at me. ‘What was your question again?’

‘The job?’

‘Ah yes. How much do you know?’

‘Well, all the recruitment people would tell me is that I’d be touring the USA promoting Britain as a tourist destination, and that there was a competition involved.’ With, they had assured me, a fat bonus for me if Britain won.

‘Yes, that’s it,’ he said. ‘In about a month’s time, the first ever World Tourism Capital will be selected. And the winner of the contest will host the World Tourism Fair next year.’ I looked suitably impressed. ‘Winning would attract not only millions of extra visitors,’ he went on, ‘but also a very healthy chunk of WTO money. You know the WTO?’

‘The World Trade Organization? Yes, though I think it just changed its name to Global Business Solutions.’

‘What? Really?’

‘No, I was—’

‘Ha. Good one. Exactly. Right on the ball. Or nail. Or something.’

'But you say the vote's in a month. So this job is pretty last-minute, isn't it?'

'Yes. There have been some, er, logistical problems.' He didn't seem keen to expand on this.

'And who else is competing?' I asked.

'Good question. Very good question. Who the hell is competing?' He scabbled around on his desk and finally started squinting at a small booklet. 'The other contestant nations for this first competition are . . .' He put a finger on the page, and read, 'China, France and the USA. I know you'd have been good for France, but we already have someone on the ground over there, which is why we thought you could cover America.' He waved at the window in what he probably thought was a westerly direction.

'But doing what exactly?'

'Ah yes. Well, some details are, I must admit, still being worked out. But basically - I do hate that word, don't you? There must be a better—'

'In a nutshell?' I prompted.

'Yes, in a nutshell - thank you - the successful candidate would be organizing a series of promotional events in the key cities.' He smiled and licked his teeth. This time I couldn't resist a quick flick of the tongue across my own top set as well.

'The key cities being?' I asked.

'Oh. Yes. I honestly have no idea. Here, you look.' He slid the booklet across to me. I opened it at a page headed 'Participating Cities, USA', but all it said was 'Cities subject to confirmation.'

'Have they been confirmed yet?' I asked.

'Yes,' he said. 'Probably. I'll find out. We got that booklet months ago.'

'And I was told I'd be driving across America?' In my mind, I was already there, out on the open highway, one foot on the accelerator (or gas pedal), the other hanging out of the window catching the Wyoming sun. Yes, I could

stick my leg out of the window as well as my arm because the car would be automatic.

'That's right, in a Mini.'

'Pardon?' It was a shock to find myself back in a sunless English office. 'A Mini? But I have legs. And I'll have luggage.' Not to mention my girlfriend. 'I was imagining something a bit bigger. A London taxi, maybe? There's nothing more British than a black cab.'

'No, no. We did a *survey*.' When he licked his teeth this time, it was as if to swab away the bad taste of the word he'd just used. 'And taxis were found to be too black.'

'Too black? Why not paint one?'

'And too old-fashioned. Don't ask me, I didn't even get to fill out the survey form. But if I remember rightly, Minis are colourful and fun, stylish but not snobbish. Something like that. You know. What did they use to call it? Cool Britannia.'

There seemed to be one little problem with this.

'Aren't Minis German these days?' I asked.

Tyler took off his glasses and let his fringe flop down over his eyes.

'Do I take it,' he asked, a touch of exhaustion in his voice, 'that you are not convinced that this, er, mission is accomplishable?'

'No, no, I'd love to give it a go.' Correction - I *had* to give it a go if I wanted to pay my fine. 'It sounds a little disorganized,' I said, 'but as you can see from my CV, I'm used to turning hopeless causes around.' He didn't need to know that my last job had ended when the French chef had tried to suffocate me with a grated courgette salad.

'OK, good. Well,' Tyler groped for his mouse and clicked tiredly on his computer, 'in that case, I have a few questions for you. A *survey*.' He put on his glasses and read from the screen. 'Now then, number one. "What is your opinion of American Homeland Security?"'

'Pardon?'

'It's meant to reveal your attitude towards your transatlantic hosts. My advice is, try not to sound too much like a terrorist.'

'OK. Well, how about, "I'm all in favour"?'

'What?'

' "I'm all in favour of a secure homeland." '

'It's a bit brief.'

'But what else is there to say?' I wasn't going to blunder into a speech about what a good idea it is to stop people taking toothpaste on to aeroplanes.

'If you insist.' He typed it out two-fingered, and began to read again. ' "What is your view of the current renaissance . . ." ' He seemed to run out of energy in the middle of the question, but took a deep breath and pressed on. ' "Of the current *renaissance* in American religiousness?" Religiousness? Is that even a word?'

Wow, from one trick question to the next. I shaped my reply as carefully as a French patissier moulding a chocolate truffle.

'Well, if I can quote George Michael, who I think is Greek Orthodox . . .'

'Yes?'

' "You gotta have faith." '

'Pardon?'

' "You gotta have faith." It's the words to a song.'

'You want me to write that down?'

'Yes, please. But maybe you should leave out the George Michael bit. And make it "got to" instead of "gotta".'

Tyler simply shook his head and typed.

'And, last one, I promise,' he said. ' "What is your view of American foreign policy?" '

He saw my look of horror and nodded. Oh yes, this was the nuke.

' "Like all Brits," ' I finally said, ' "I'm really grateful that the Americans came into World War Two and helped us

liberate Europe.” ‘ And my gran says thanks for the silk stockings, I thought.

Tyler shrugged and typed my answer into the hotline to the Pentagon or wherever this was going.

‘Well, that seems to be that,’ he said. ‘If you’re successful, I’ll be in touch. Or someone will be. That’s probably been outsourced, too. Ha!’

I laughed, shook his hand and leapt for the door before he could inflict any more of his manic-depressive humour on me. It was time to get my trousers back.

5

‘Inspire that atmosphere!’

My American friend Jake suffered from what was, as far as I could tell, a unique linguistic condition, namely that he couldn’t speak any languages at all.

No, that wasn’t quite true. In fact he spoke two languages simultaneously – French and English – so that you needed some kind of stereo listening system in your head to work out what he was talking about. What was worse, he often pronounced French words with an American accent and vice versa.

So what he actually said was, ‘Inspire that atmos-fair.’ Luckily, I spoke enough French to know that ‘*inspire*’ meant ‘inhale’.

Between the lank curtains of his chin-length blond hair Jake was beaming a smile of pure pleasure as he breathed in a deep lungful of the air around him. Well, I say air, but the atmosphere was mainly damp and smoke. There was precious little room for molecules of oxygen.

It was about ten at night. I’d called Jake as soon as I’d arrived back in Paris, and he’d told me to join him on his roof. We occasionally came up here to get away from the

world and talk nonsense, usually with the aid of a bottle. As long as it wasn't raining or icy, it was relatively safe to climb out of the skylight and on to the flattish area in the centre of the roof. Providing, that is, you didn't trip over one of the ridges where the zinc plates overlapped and plummet into the street six floors below.

I was sitting on the bone-chillingly cold metal roof with my spine pressed hard against a warm chimney stack. It was a popular place to hang out. The chimney was pockmarked with cigarette burns and chewing-gum fossils, and there was a grinning cat graffiti'd on the plaster, as if to make the spot more homely.

There was a good reason for this popularity. From my centrally heated outdoor vantage point, I had a spectacular view over the anarchic jigsaw of Paris rooftops. The apartment buildings that look so grey and uniform from the street show all their individuality at skyline level, with wildly different slopes, skylights, and illicit rooftop terraces. On one building, the top-floor residents had colonized the zinc with a square of AstroTurf and a fake palm tree. Two plastic loungers faced west to catch the sunset.

The sun was long gone, but now the distant Eiffel Tower began to sparkle as if a billion sexually aroused fireflies had just jumped off the summit. Every hour on the hour, from sundown to one in the morning, the tower's illuminations go disco for five minutes, and the throbbing golden lightshow that I was now watching would have made even the most blasé of electrical engineers go 'ooh!'

Jake, though, wasn't interested in this display of French lighting technology. He was hugging a shiny metal tube that curved up on to the roof from the central courtyard of the building. It was the outlet for the air-conditioning system in the café on the ground floor.

'Inspire that,' he repeated, standing on tiptoe to get his nose as close as possible to the mushroom-shaped nozzle.

'Pure Patee.' Yes, he was actually sniffing the waste air from a Parisian café, a mixture of gases only slightly less toxic than a fire at a tar refinery. And at the same time he was puffing on a Gauloise.

This had to be the only explanation for his success with women, I thought. When he wasn't wearing the black Paul Smith suit that he'd borrowed from me three months earlier and had never returned, he looked as if he'd dressed in the dark after a scarecrows' orgy. So there had to be something irresistible about his boyish grin and his ability to behave like a total dork.

He had recently discovered a rich new seam of dorkish behaviour - France had announced that smoking was to be banned in all public places. And even though it seemed unlikely that Parisian smokers would actually obey the law, Jake wanted to get his fill before the world came to an end.

'Virginie, she wants me to stop smoking already,' he said. 'She won't permit me to smoke in the apartment, man, like, not even with my head outside the fenêtre.'

Virginie was a film student with whom Jake had been living since around the time he'd borrowed my suit. It was his longest relationship ever, and pretty well the only one he'd had with a Frenchwoman during his ten-year stay in Paris. Since arriving here, he'd been living out his project to sleep with, and then write poetry about, every nationality of woman living in the city. With Virginie, though, for once he actually seemed to be after something more than a poke and a poem.

'Do you write poems about her?' I asked.

Jake eyed me suspiciously. He often accused me of 'not respecting his posy'. By this he meant not flowers, but his '*poésie*' - his poetry. He was wrong, though. I respected his poems a lot, in the same way that I respected pit bull terriers - meaning that I tried my best to avoid close contact with them. Once you've had to listen to fifty unrhyming couplets about exactly what Jake did with a