

Stephen Clarke

THE

MERDE



FACTOR



A new novel from the bestselling author of *A Year in the Merde*
and *1000 Years of Annoying the French*

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About the Book

Englishman Paul West is living the Parisian dream, and doing his best not to annoy the French.

But recently things have been going très wrong.

His apartment is so small that he has to cut his baguette in two to fit it into the kitchen.

His research into authentic French cuisine is about to cause a national strike.

His Parisian business partner is determined to close their English tea-room.

And Paul's gorgeous ex-girlfriend seems to be stalking him.

Threatened with eviction, unemployment and bankruptcy, Paul realizes that his personal merde factor is about to hit the fan ...

Warning: repeating the French swear words used in this book could cause irreparable damage to Anglo-French relations. But if you're English, you might like to try ...

About the Author

Stephen Clarke lives in France, where he divides his time between writing and not writing. His first novel, *A Year in the Merde*, originally became a word of mouth hit in Paris in 2004, and is now published all over the world. Since then he has published three more bestselling Merde novels, as well as *Talk to the Snail*, an indispensable guide to understanding the French, and *1000 Years of Annoying the French*, in which he investigates what has really been going on since 1066. A *Sunday Times* bestseller in hardcover, *1000 Years of Annoying the French* went on to become one of the top ten bestselling history books in paperback in 2011.

Also by Stephen Clarke

A Year in the Merde
Merde Actually
Merde Happens
Dial M for Merde
The Merde Factor

Talk to the Snail: Ten Commandments for Understanding
the French

1,000 Years of Annoying the French

Paris Revealed: The Secret Life of a City

Stephen Clarke

THE

MERDE

FACTOR



Century · London

This novel is dedicated to everyone who has written to me over the past three years saying, 'When's the next Paul West novel coming out?'

Merci for asking.

'The English have corrupted the mind of my kingdom. We must not expose a new generation to the risk of being perverted by their language.'

Louis XV, King of France 1715-74

'Die Erde hat mich wieder.' ('The Earth has reclaimed me.')

From *Faust* by J. W. Goethe

'Die Merde hat mich wieder.' ('The *merde* has reclaimed me.')

From *Watt* by Samuel Beckett

Un

'Le printemps à Paris - il me donne suffisamment d'énergie pour conquérir le monde. Ou au moins l'Angleterre.'

Springtime in Paris - it gives me enough energy to conquer the world. Or, at the very least, England.

Paul-Ovide-Robin Desclous, general in Napoleon's army and alleged lover of Josephine, killed at Waterloo by a stray French cannonball

I

THE SUN CAME out, and springtime hit Paris like a tsunami of hormones. Suddenly every life form in the city, from the preening pigeons to the usually sullen street cops, seemed to grow a grin on its face.

The morning pavements were as crowded as ever, but now the Parisians looked as though they were enjoying their walk to the Métro station instead of doing their usual head-down rush. The rental bikes at the Vélib' stations disappeared early as occasional cyclists opted to take the scenic route to work. Almost overnight, girls decided that the season for tights was over, and the men in the streets mutated into owls, their necks suddenly capable of 360° rotation in search of bare legs.

The first tourists were just appearing, tiptoeing in like guests who arrive early at a party and feel embarrassed until they notice that the plates on the buffet are all deliciously full. And their timing was perfect – the café awnings had been winched away to expose the terraces to the sun, transforming the city into one big open-air theatre.

The tall plane trees that lined the streets, their spindly new branches waving like over-excited children, were sending out a blizzard of pollen that swarmed through the air, the particles as big as insects and as spiky as a Parisian waiter's morning conversation. There were even tufts of plant life poking up through the round metal grilles at the bases of the tree trunks. These absurdly optimistic little sprigs would soon be pecked out by birds or peed on by dogs, but for the moment they were raising their heads through the drift of pollen and cigarette ends, and enjoying springtime in Paris.

Why couldn't I do the same?

Well, the immediate reason was that I was sitting in a café in the posh 6th *arrondissement* suffering from palpitations. I'd come indoors to avoid paying extra for a drink on the terrace, but it hadn't done me much good. The waiter had just deposited a coffee on my table, accompanied by a toothpick-sized complimentary chocolate and a bill that suggested I was being asked to help refund the eurozone debt. Surely he'd mixed me up with the table across the aisle, where a family of tourists were grazing on a mound of croissants?

'Excusez-moi,' I called out, but the waiter was on his way to inflict some pain at another table. I heard an American woman ask for a cappuccino. No, I thought, don't do it.

'Un cappuccino? Ce n'est pas San Francisco ici, madame,' the waiter guffawed.

But the woman wasn't backing down. She looked around the place, taking in the leather banquettes, the flitting

waiters in their long aprons, the clink of spoon on china cup.

'C'est un café ici, non?' she enquired in an extreme American accent.

'Off course,' the waiter mispronounced. 'You want un café crème?'

'Non, un cappuccino.'

It would have been fun to watch them battle it out - the waiter trying to tame the intruder, the woman naively expecting to get exactly what she wanted in a French café - but just at that moment, in walked my reason for being here, a loping figure who stood out in the chic environment like a cigarette butt on a dish of oysters. Even the waiter flinched.

My American friend Jake looked, as usual, as if he was auditioning for the role of a corpse washed up on a beach: his clothes had apparently been gnawed at by a shoal of sardines and his long blond hair styled by the rising tide. Only the huge grin on his erratically shaven face showed any sign of symmetry.

'Hey, Paul, beau weather, huh? Merci for having come, man,' he said in his unique brand of Franglais. He was one of those people who learn a new language by ejecting bits of the old one from their memory. In the ten or so years he'd been living in Paris, he'd managed to stew his French and English into a lumpy linguistic *soupe à l'oignon*. You never knew what you were going to get: broth, crouton, or a soggy mix of the two.

'So how did it go?' I asked as he joined me at the table.

'Oh, formidable, man, she adored them.'

I nodded, but found this very hard to believe. The 'she' in question was a literary agent, the 'them', Jake's poems, and 'adoring' was not usually something you did with Jake's poems. Surviving them was more like it, or taking them on the chin. There was something about his combination of excruciating rhymes and explicit pornography that made

you want to go and put your finger in an electric pencil sharpener to ease the pain of listening to them.

'You say she *invited* you to come and see her? I mean, *after* you'd sent her a sample?' I tried my best to banish the incredulity from my voice.

'Oh, oui, man,' Jake said, getting out a packet of rolling tobacco and some papers. He had never quite managed to get his head around the no-smoking rule in French cafés. 'I heard of her from this guy I know. He's a writer. Well, he says he's a writer but he hasn't yet finished anything - he's Français - but he telled, tolen, uh ...'

'Told?' I prompted. Once Jake got caught up trying to extract English grammar from his French-soaked mind, conversation could grind to a halt for several hours.

'Yes, voilà - he told to me that this agent makes the Français writers famous in all the world. You know, she is the one who selled, uh, sailed this French writer to Hollywood. You know that movie about the guy who meets the girl but really it's her spirit because she's in a coma?'

'Yes.' He was talking about France's biggest-selling author, whose first novel had been signed up by Spielberg before it was even published, thanks to this Paris-based literary agent. 'And you think Spielberg will be putting in a bid for your poems?' I asked Jake. Unless Hollywood was about to start a fashion for hard-core porn with verse dialogue - rhyming couplings - I couldn't see it happening. But Jake ignored practicalities and stampeded on with his story. I hadn't seen him this excited since he'd bumped into a group of female delegates from a conference on saving the world's endangered languages. Given that his aim in life was to sleep with a woman of every nationality in the world, to him it had been like stumbling on a stockpile of free cigarette papers.

'I written a poem spécialement for her, you know, inspired by the coma story. You want to hear it?'

'Well ...' How did you say 'please God no' politely? But I wasn't given the choice.

'Girl, you may be in a coma, but I love your hospital aroma ...'

'Yes, Jake, I get the picture.' And I wanted to erase it.

'Who cares if you're comatose, cause you got sexy underclose.'

'So you sent her *that*, and she agreed to see you?' I asked.

In reply, Jake just grinned and nodded. By now his cigarette was in his mouth and he was looking round for someone to give him a light, frowning at the inexplicable absence of smokers.

'She even assembled all her colleagues in her bureau to listen,' he went on, 'and they understood all my ironies. They were non-stop laughing.'

I bet they were, I thought.

'She *adored* them, man. She has said me to, uh ...' Jake gazed into mid-air as if to capture the magic of the moment when someone told him they liked - or could even endure without painkillers - his poems. '... to go away,' he concluded.

'She told you to go away?' A glimmer of sanity had suddenly entered the room.

'Yeah, and come back when I have traduced them.'

'Traduced?'

'Yes, you know, into other langues. To come back when I have traduced them into ten other langues. Then she can sell them to the world.' Now I understood. Translate his poems into ten languages? It was like telling a seven-foot-tall aspiring jockey to come back when he was five foot five. As in, never.

'I can ask some of my ex-girlfriends to aid me,' Jake ploughed on. 'Li, the North Korean, and Yamani, the Saudi, and, oh, monsieur?'

I was afraid that Jake might be about to enquire whether the waiter fancied translating some risqué verse, but he only asked if he could have some *feu* for his cigarette.

'Non, monsieur,' was the candid reply. Jake still didn't get the message, though, and kept the ragged tube between his lips in the hope that someone with a lighter would turn up.

'She only ended our interview because she said she was obliged to go to a party,' he told me proudly. 'It is her birthday, or we would still be there listening to my oeuvre.' He paused, a new idea making the cigarette twitch in his mouth. 'Merde!' he exclaimed, attracting the attention of everyone in the café. 'I must write her a birthday poem, an improvisation. Oui!'

I couldn't stop myself wincing.

'I must do it,' he declared, rummaging in his shapeless jacket for a pen. 'I will go to her now!' He was gathering momentum, like a landslide about to bury an unsuspecting village.

'Send her an email,' I pleaded.

'No, much better if I perform it en direct. I will return at her office - they have an intercom. I will rap it to her from the street.'

'You sure that's a good idea?'

'Oh oui. What rhymes with birthday? Surfday, Smurfdays ...'

He stood up, the glow of a mission burning in his eyes. As he walked away, his soggy cigarette was bouncing up and down in his mouth to the rhythm of an emerging poem.

Poor lady, I thought. Until today, being a literary agent must have been fun. Putting the squeeze on publishers, the endless lunches and cocktail parties. Now she was going to see the dark side. And on her birthday, too. I shook my head to try and clear it of the suffering Jake was about to unleash. But no, it wouldn't go away. What, I wondered, was the equivalent of putting my finger in an electrical

pencil sharpener? Oh yes, a fight with the waiter in a snooty French café.

‘Monsieur?’ I hailed him as he walked by. He ignored me and sauntered towards the lady who’d tried to order a ‘San Franciscan’ coffee. He stopped beside her table, swivelled and ceremoniously delivered a textbook, white-capped cappuccino in a tall glass mug. It was a work of art in shades of cream and beige. I had to laugh. He’d complained, but given her exactly what she wanted, even if he had made her wait several punitive minutes.

‘Ah, merci,’ the woman cooed, delighted.

The waiter now came and looked down his nose at me. So he’d heard me after all.

‘Monsieur?’ he asked.

I’d prepared my fighting talk. ‘I ordered an espresso,’ I had planned to tell him in my best French, ‘but you gave me the bill for the menu du jour, non?’

But somehow, I couldn’t bring myself to do it. It was the way he’d given the tourist her cappuccino, the way he’d appeared to ignore me and then come straight to my table. He wasn’t such a snooty bastard, after all. He was just doing things his way.

‘Je voudrais payer, s’il vous plaît,’ I simpered.

Springtime was turning me soft.

II

My personal *printemps* got even cloudier a few minutes later when my phone buzzed.

‘Pool?’

Only one person called me that, the halfway house between the French pronunciation of my first name – ‘Pol’ – and the correct one.

'Bonjour, Jean-Marie,' I answered. 'We're not due to meet till next week, are we?'

'No, but I am free now. Can you come to meet me? I'm in the Sixième.'

'Oh, so am I.'

'Excellent, come to ...' And he dictated an address.

'Right, OK. Be there in about ten minutes, then.'

If I sounded unenthusiastic, it was because I'd been trying to squirm out of meeting Jean-Marie, in the same way I always put off going to the doctor to get a flu jab. Both of them, I suspected, would give me a pain in the same place.

Jean-Marie was the man who'd hired me for my first job in Paris. He'd then unfairly fired me and muscled in on the tea room I started, taking advantage of a temporary cash-flow problem to grab 50 per cent of the business. A meeting with him was never pleasant. He was a French cross between Silvio Berlusconi and a used-car salesman, but slightly less honest than either. And with a Napoleon complex thrown in. He was the kind of guy who, as a Parisian friend of mine once put it, should never be allowed to borrow your goat. (Parisians have long left behind their rural roots, but they still have subconscious memories of the horrors that can be inflicted on livestock entrusted to the wrong type of person.)

The problem was that a meeting with the least trustworthy man in Paris was a necessity if, like me, you were jobless and subletting a top-floor garret so small that you had to ask the woman at the *boulangerie* to cut your baguettes in half so you could fit them into the kitchen. One thing Jean-Marie had was contacts, and contacts are what you need in Paris to get yourself out of a cheap garret and into some money.

He'd summoned me to an address just off the boulevard Saint-Germain. His office was nowhere near the Quartier Latin, but he loved to hang out there to give himself an

intellectual sheen. There was nothing very intellectual about his meat-wholesaling business.

It was even more typical of Jean-Marie to give me an address instead of the name of a café or office. Why the secrecy?

The mystery deepened when I found the place. It was a New York-style diner called American's Dream. That had to be wrong, surely. Not just the pointless apostrophe S but the whole address. Jean-Marie, French owner of a multi-million-euro company and wearer of suits so sharp they could slice cheese, in a fake American diner?

I walked in and was hit by a warm fug of food smells and conversation. The place was almost full, mainly of teenage and twenty-something Parisians. Strange, I thought. These were posh people from one of the snootiest neighbourhoods in the city. What were they doing sitting at these canteen-like plastic tables? It felt like stumbling across a crowded champagne lounge in a riot-torn housing estate. Totally incongruous.

And there, in one corner of a booth for four, was Jean-Marie, his fist clamped around a big white mug of coffee. He was grinning at me, and obviously exchanging some wisecrack with the gorgeous dark-haired girl sitting next to him. She laughed politely, giving him an excuse to squeeze her shoulder. Oh God, I thought as I walked towards their table, she's even younger than his daughter. The girl was twenty-five at the most, a classy *Parisienne* with her hair tied back in a tight ponytail: efficient but sexy. She was wearing bright red lipstick and a white blouse that was buttoned up almost to the neck as if she was determined not to let anyone get a glimpse of her cleavage, which, ironically, only made her even more alluring.

'Ah, Pool, you have found me!' He grabbed my outstretched hand and almost dragged me across the table.

'Yes, well, you gave me the address,' I admitted modestly.

‘This young Englishman knows me very well,’ he told the girl in the kind of soft French accent that makes English ladies go gooey at the knees. ‘Too well.’ He laughed loudly and clapped me on the shoulder. ‘This is Amandine,’ Jean-Marie announced, and before I had time to wonder whether I should shake hands or kiss her on the cheek, she held out a slim, perfectly manicured hand and gave me the briefest of squeezes. ‘Amandine is my, how do you say, stagiaire?’ Jean-Marie said.

‘Intern. Hi, Paul,’ she said in a slightly transatlantic accent. I guessed Mummy and Daddy had probably sent her to an American business school.

‘Yes, intern. There is no need to trouble yourself with your terrible French, Pool,’ Jean-Marie said. ‘Amandine speaks perfect English. She is only an intern now, but she is already the new star in my company.’

Starlet more like, I thought. Poor girl. I tried to smile sympathetically at Amandine but she had her eyes cast down, and seemed to be fiddling with something under the table.

Jean-Marie was smugger than ever, if that was humanly possible. Even at normal times he wore an expression that suggested he’d just shagged a Hollywood actress and found a winning lottery ticket under her pillow. Now he looked as though he’d discovered how to turn Parisian pigeon poop into gold.

He was looking good, though, I had to admit it. Slimmer than when I’d last seen him, and sleeker, with his balding pate carefully shaven, giving him a slightly menacing edge. In the past he’d just looked sleazy. Now he was dangerously so.

‘How are things at VianDiffusion?’ I asked, and had the malicious satisfaction of seeing him twitch. Jean-Marie had never forgiven me for pointing out that the brand name he’d come up with when he’d decided to go international had not been quite right for a food company: VD Exporters.

'We supply the meat for this diner, you know,' he said. 'And with Amandine's help, we will conquer the world.' He patted Amandine's hand again.

This time, though, with me as a spectator, Amandine didn't laugh so hard. She went through the motions, but her eyes caught mine and I got a sudden flash of 'don't think I enjoy having him do this'.

'Talking of meat, why don't we order?' she said, impressively deadpan.

'Ah yes.' Jean-Marie held up a heavily Rolexed hand and waved to the guy standing by the till. 'Kevin is the owner of the diner,' he told me. Of course, Jean-Marie wasn't going to deal with any underling.

Kevin came over. I saw immediately that he wasn't a Kevin. He was a 'Kev-EEN', a French guy with an Anglo-Celtic name, like the many Brendans ('Bren-DAN') and Dylans ('Dee-LAN') I'd met. And, like all trendy Parisian guys between about eighteen and thirty-five, he had bushy hair, a boyishly unshaven face, and the air of being unsure whether to be gay or straight.

'Bonjour, Monsieur Martin,' he gushed, shaking Jean-Marie's hand with all the gratitude of a café owner towards his meat supplier. We were introduced, and he lingered just a little when it was Amandine's turn. Not gay then.

'Alors, que prendrez-vous?' Kevin asked, pen and pad at the ready. 'Voulez-vous juste coffee and toast, ou pancakes avec bacon? Ou peut-être le total breakfast?'

I was stunned. I'd never heard French and English slapped together like that by anyone except Jake.

'Moi, je prends pancakes avec maple syrup,' Amandine said without batting an eye. 'Je n'ai pas pris de breakfast ce matin.'

I hadn't eaten anything before going out to meet Jake, so I decided to join in with the culinary Franglais.

'Deux slices de toast, s'il vous plaît,' I said, 'avec beaucoup de butter. Et scrambled eggs avec deux pieces of

bacon, très well done.'

'OK.' Kevin simply wrote it all down.

Even more weirdly, Jean-Marie didn't react at all. This was the man who'd got himself elected as a local councillor on an extreme right-wing platform of obligatory *pétanque* at school, no mention of Waterloo in history books, and defence of French traditions like shooting any endangered species of bird that flew into its airspace. I expected him to insist on seeing a French-language menu but he simply ordered 'toast avec butter', adding that he had to watch his weight, 'unlike the lovely Amandine, who is naturally perfect'. He squeezed her upper arm, and again I saw her messing with something under the table. A Taser, I hoped.

When Kev-EEN had gone, Jean-Marie began to reminisce fondly about the last time we'd both discussed Anglo-French menus. Fondly for him, that is. For me, it was ripping out the stitches in a deep financial wound.

'You remember, Pool, when you got that immense, what do you call it - amende?'

'Fine,' I grunted helpfully.

'Yes, thirty thousand euros, wasn't it? Hoo!' He grimaced in badly acted pain. 'When Pool started his tea room,' he told Amandine, 'his menu had too much English with no translation. You see, on this' - he held up the diner's double-sided plastic menu - 'they are careful. They translate everything in little French letters. French letters? Isn't that something naughty?' He exploded with laughter.

'Yes, it means condoms,' Amandine said, managing to smile. 'What we girls need to protect us against careless men.'

'Oh, you are right,' Jean-Marie said, suddenly serious. 'I hope you carry them with you. Do you have some in your bag?'

Instead of Tasing him or poking a fork through the back of his hand, Amandine smiled as if her boss was being

oh-so-witty. What these French office girls have to put up with, I thought.

'Pool did not translate his menu at all,' Jean-Marie went on. 'They attacked him for, what was it, "cup of tea"?'

'Yes,' I confirmed. 'They were afraid that if I didn't put "tasse de thé", French people might confuse it with "mug of sulphuric acid".'

'Thirty thousand euros for that?' Amandine looked genuinely shocked, as well she might.

'Luckily, I saved him with money,' Jean-Marie trumpeted, and paused as if he expected me to get under the table and show my gratitude. 'Pool was not very happy at first, but, what do you say in English? Every cloud has a golden shower?'

'Exactly,' I confirmed.

'Anyway,' Jean-Marie went on, 'since I have bought half of the business, we are in the position where today, we want to expand.'

This was why we had been due to meet - to discuss opening a second tea room, an idea I loved but couldn't afford.

'Is that why you wanted to meet here?' I asked him. 'To show me how to write a menu?'

'No, not at all. Well, almost not. I wanted to present you to Amandine, who will work with us on the dossier.'

'Great,' I said sincerely. With two of us there, meetings with Jean-Marie might be easier. A pain shared is a pain halved, although he was also capable of doubling it.

'Yes, I hope it will be fun,' Amandine said, with just a tad too much emphasis on the hope. 'We must think what to call the second tea room. I had some ideas—'

A grumpling noise came from Jean-Marie's corner.

'We will talk about this at our next meeting,' he said. 'Today I want you to think of something different.' He lowered his voice conspiratorially. 'You know about this American businessman who decided no more olives in the

airline salads?’ We nodded, remembering the famous story of the guy who saved millions with this one menu change. ‘He was called a genius, yes? But he was not. He did not, how do you say, think without his box?’ I didn’t correct him. ‘The answer was not to take out the olives,’ Jean-Marie went on. ‘It was to cut the whole meal. No more free food on aeroplanes! That was the genius idea.’ He sighed at the brilliance of it. ‘Now they want passengers to stand up, and they take away the toilets, even. Soon they will take out the pilot, no?’

‘Yes, and then probably the wings,’ I agreed. ‘So what you’re suggesting, Jean-Marie, is a tea room with no seats, no toilets and presumably no tea?’

‘No, no, no,’ he said seriously. ‘But I want you to think of this principle for our next meeting.’

Before I could ask him what the hell he was talking about, Kevin came over with the food, reciting a porridge-like mixture of English and French as he slid each plate on to the table. I tucked in, and had to admit it was good. Not as tasty or generously portioned as a real diner in real America, but definitely edible. I understood why the place was full.

‘Voilà. Tout va bien?’ Kevin asked.

‘Très bien,’ Jean-Marie answered, putting one arm around Amandine’s shoulders and the other on my hand. ‘Tout est parfait.’

‘I have a question,’ I told Kevin in English. ‘Why did you call it *American’s* Dream? Why not *American* Dream?’

‘Ah yes.’ Kevin smiled philosophically. ‘We ’ave decided eet is mush more rich in signeeficance. It is American’s Dream, so is it ze dream *of* an American, or *by* an American, or maybe *about* an American? Who is ze dream’s subject and who ze object? And what is ze dream?’

Ask a Frenchman a silly question and you’ll get a silly French answer.

‘You see?’ he asked me.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘All too clearly.’ As Kevin left, I looked across at Amandine and we shared a moment of eye contact before Jean-Marie leapt in.

‘By the way, Pool,’ he said, ‘you are searching for work, yes? And you don’t want to help at the tea room?’

I nodded. There were five staff, and I didn’t want to steal one of their jobs.

‘Well, call this lady.’ With a flourish, Jean-Marie produced a large white business card and slid it croupier-style across the table. There was a multi-barrelled name on it: Marie-Dominique Maintenon-Dechéry, and a French government logo: the tricolour, decorated with the profile of Marianne, the symbol of the Revolution, who was looking fresh and wrinkle-free, as if the République was a frisky teenager rather than a haggard 200-year-old.

‘Ministry of Culture?’ I read. ‘What would I do for them?’

‘Call Marie-Dominique and ask. Oh.’ He put a finger to his temple in a bad mime of pretending to remember something. ‘And Benoît told me some interesting news.’ Benoît was Jean-Marie’s son. He was managing the tea room. ‘Apparently he saw Alexa photographing the place.’

I dropped my fork.

‘Alexa is Pool’s ex-girlfriend,’ Jean-Marie informed Amandine. ‘She left him for ... who was it? An Irishman? Or a Japanese lesbian? Oh no, it was both, wasn’t it?’

In fact he was Irish-American and she was Cambodian, but I couldn’t be bothered to argue.

‘Is Benoît sure it was her?’ I asked.

‘Oh yes. He talked to her.’

‘Why would she be taking photos of the tea room?’

‘I don’t know. She hasn’t called you? Perhaps she is too busy with her boyfriend and girlfriend? That must take a lot of energy, no? No?’ Jean-Marie gurgled suggestively towards Amandine, and suddenly I had to get out of the diner as fast as possible.

Why, I thought as I stepped outdoors into a group of loudly flirting teenagers, does every meeting with Jean-Marie leave me feeling as if I've just been minced in one of his meat machines?

III

I hardly had time to cross the street before my phone started ringing. I took a grudging look at the screen. It was a number I didn't recognise. Or was it? I pulled out the business card Jean-Marie had given me. And there was the number - the woman from the Ministry. Bloody hell, I thought, she's keen. Or maybe Jean-Marie had just told her to call me. Either way, I decided to play hard to get, and thrust the phone into my deepest pocket as I chose a narrow, car-free street and headed towards the river.

I was aiming for the île de la Cité, the macaroon-shaped island in the middle of the Seine where the city of Paris was born. It has come a very long way since it was inhabited by a small tribe of mosquito-bitten Gauls, and today it houses not only a Gothic cathedral but also surely the most impractically positioned flower market in Europe. If you want to buy an immense potted olive tree, where better to come than a market in the very centre of a city where it's impossible to park?

I've always been very fond of the Marché aux Fleurs, though, with its long glasshouses and miniature jungle of urban plants. Whenever you cross the Seine, it's always worth a detour to sniff the orange blossom, fig leaves or whatever is in season. And today I knew I was going to need several nostril-loads of perfume to get me through my ordeal.

I was on my way to the Préfecture, just opposite the flower market, to swap my UK driving licence for a French

one. The changeover was compulsory, so I'd been reliably informed (by Jake), if I wanted to avoid having to retake the test in France, as he'd had to do. It had taken him months of revision for the fiendish French highway code exam ('When approaching a red light, should you (a) brake, (b) accelerate, (c) what's a red light?'), and three failed attempts at manoeuvring his way through Parisian traffic jams. In the end, he'd found a driving school out in a new-town suburb ringed with wide boulevards and American-style roundabouts, and taken the test with an examiner who was a 'good friend' of his driving instructor. And Jake came from a country where they drove on the right. I preferred to do the licence swap. The only bad news, Jake had told me, was that it meant a visit to the Préfecture.

This news alone was enough to make me want to get drunk and crash a Citroën. The Préfecture was the scene of my first brush with French civil servants just after I arrived in Paris, about two years earlier. I'd been sucked into the familiar whirlpool of 'you can't get a residence permit without a recent electricity bill' and 'you can't get an electricity bill without a residence permit', and had ended up photocopying so many documents that Xerox offered me shares in the company.

At least this time I needed only my driving licence, passport, two photos (which, the official website said, had to be 'identical', as if someone might turn up with one picture of themselves and one of their dog) and a completed driving licence request form, which was available from the Préfecture. I guessed that putting the form online would have made things much too easy. Still, I reasoned, I ought to be able to ask for a form and fill it in while I waited. France is a logical country, *n'est-ce pas?*

After an energising sniff at the tangy leaves of a potted kumquat tree, I crossed the square towards the imposing, double-towered grey chateau that houses Paris's police HQ. It looked as though Napoleon had wanted a building grand

enough to represent his ideal of imperial order, but had told the architect that it also had to embody the spirit of French bureaucracy: impenetrability. I joined the line of suitably gloomy people standing outside the fortified main entrance.

For the next twenty minutes I edged closer to the two security men in blue blazers who were rummaging in people's backpacks and handbags. From what I saw, the secret to smuggling a gun or bomb into Paris's central police station was to hide it right at the bottom of your bag, where the guards wouldn't bother to delve. Either that or be a reasonably attractive female. Girls with cute faces or curvy figures seemed to be beyond suspicion.

After the symbolic terrorism test, an arrow sign directed me into a room that had obviously been decorated by psychologists to be as soulless as possible. Colour scheme: pus yellow and hypothermia blue; seats arranged in two facing semi-circles so that everyone was staring at everyone else and multiplying their misery; ceiling hanging low over the scene like stormy cloud cover. Here, thirty or more stressed-out men and women were waiting, their eyes flicking from watch to phone to neon countdown sign. A red number flashed every time one of the two consultation windows was free. I took a ticket from a machine on the wall. It was number 888. Held on its side, the ticket read three times infinity, a pretty long wait even by French waiting-room standards. The neon counter was flashing 851. Brilliant, I'd have time to grow a beard.

A few people, I noticed, were going straight up to the windows to ask a question. A Parisian attitude I'd seen before: 'You expect me to queue? *Moi?* There must be some misunderstanding.'

All of them came away frustrated, though, and were forced to sit down, staring in disbelief at their number as if it was a death sentence.

A mere twenty games of solitaire and ten or so 'guess what I'm doing' text messages later, 888 came up. I made for the glass window, trying to banish all impatience from my mind. In my experience, you only get one chance with a French civil servant. Lapse into exasperation and you're out the door for ever.

'Bonjour,' I said to the middle-aged Caribbean-looking lady sitting behind the fingerprint-smearred glass window.

'Bonjour,' she replied. So far so good. As she checked and then crumpled my 888 ticket, she looked quite friendly. This was going to be a doddle.

'Je viens changer mon permis de conduire anglais,' I told her, smiling as though in three minutes we'd both be at Saint-Michel having a celebratory cocktail.

'Ce n'est pas ici, ça,' she told me. It's not here. So much for our *kir royal*.

'Pas ici?'

'No, you have to go to your préfecture,' she said.

'Mais ici, c'est la Préfecture,' I argued.

'Oui, ici, c'est la Préfecture.'

By some miracle we seemed to be in agreement.

'Well, here I am.'

She groaned and gave a quick glance upwards for divine help.

'No, this is *la* Préfecture,' she said oh-so-slowly. 'You want *votre* préfecture.'

'But I live in Paris. This is my préfecture.'

'No, your local antenna is in your arrondissement. Where do you live?'

'In the Eighteenth,' I told her. I was currently subletting Jake's tiny apartment, which he'd vacated to move in with one of his girlfriends.

'OK.' She typed something into her computer, copied down an address on the back of a police-recruitment flyer and pushed it through the slit underneath her window. 'You have to go here,' she told me.

By this time, after ninety minutes in various queues and one ludicrous conversation, the exasperation was bubbling up in me like an Icelandic volcano, threatening to erupt and prevent aeroplanes landing in Paris for a good fortnight. But, unlike Iceland's mountains, I kept a lid on it.

'Could I have one of the forms?' I asked.

'Oui, oui.' She got up, walked out of her little office and came back a minute later with a small sheaf of papers. 'Voilà,' she said, stuffing them under her window. 'Bonne journée,' she wished me.

Journée? I thought. Can it really still be daylight out there?

IV

The nearest Métro station was Cité. It's on line 4, which is only gradually being upgraded. On a bad commuter morning in one of its rattling old carriages, your only chance of getting a seat is to sleep there overnight. Usually you have to stand up and take the elbows in the kidneys and the sneezes in the face. Now, though, in late morning, most Parisians were entrenched in their offices, and things were quiet. Breezy, even. At their worst, Parisian Métro passengers can make a dead salmon look cheerful, but today they'd been hit by the opposite of seasonal affective disorder. They weren't suffering from SAD. It was more a case of SOD: springtime overdose. Bright T-shirts and serene expressions were the order of the day.

No one even moaned when the lights went out and the train wrenched to a halt in mid-tunnel. There was a deafening screech from the PA followed by what sounded like a robotic alien announcing that Earth had just been conquered. It was the Métro driver, apparently keen to