

# Merde Happens

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Extract

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## *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

## AN APPETIZER

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.

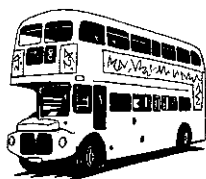
I gripped the edge of my seat.

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.