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## Merde Actually

### Stephen Clarke

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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 towtruck 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 *la 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.