A Year in the Merde

Stephen Clarke

Never the deux shall meet

The year does not begin in January. Every French person knows that. Only awkward English-speakers think it starts in January.

The year really begins on the first Monday of September.

This is when Parisians get back to their desks after their month-long holiday and begin working out where they'll go for the mid-term break in November.

It's also when every French project, from a new hairdo to a nuclear power station, gets under way, which is why, at 9am on the first Monday of September, I was standing a hundred yards from the Champs-Élysées watching people kissing.

My good friend Chris told me not to come to France. Great lifestyle, he said, great food, and totally un-politically correct women with great underwear.

But, he warned me, the French are hell to live with. He worked in the London office of a French bank for three years.

"They made all us Brits redundant the day after the French football team got knocked out of the World Cup. No way was that a coincidence," he told me.

His theory was that the French are like the woman scorned. Back in 1940 they tried to tell us they loved us, but we just laughed at their accents and their big-nosed Général de Gaulle, and ever since we've done nothing but poison them with our disgusting food and try to wipe the French language off the face of the Earth. That's why they built refugee camps yards from the Eurotunnel entrance and refuse to eat our beef years after it was declared safe. It's permanent payback time, he said. Don't go there.

Sorry, I told him, I've got to go and check out that underwear.

Normally, I suppose you would be heading for disaster if the main motivation for your job mobility was the local lingerie, but my one-year contract started very promisingly.

I found my new employer's offices - a grand-looking 19th-century building sculpted out of milky-gold stone - and walked straight into an orgy.

Copyright © 2004 Stephen Clarke
Published by Black Swan / Transworld

There were people kissing while waiting for the lift. People kissing in front of a drinks machine. Even the receptionist was leaning across her counter to smooch with someone - a woman, too - who'd entered the building just ahead of me.

Wow, I thought, if there's ever a serious epidemic of facial herpes, they'll have to get condoms for their heads.

Of course I knew the French went in for cheek-kissing, but not on this scale. I wondered if it wasn't company policy to get a neckload of Ecstasy before coming into work.

I edged closer to the reception desk where the two women had stopped kissing and were now exchanging news. The company obviously didn't believe in glamorous front-office girls, because the receptionist had a masculine face that seemed much more suited to scowling than smiling. She was complaining about something I didn't understand.

I beamed my keenest new-boy smile at her. No acknowledgement. I stood in the "yes, I'm here and I wouldn't mind being asked the purpose of my visit" zone for a full minute. Zilch. So I stepped forward and spouted out the password I'd memorized: "Bonjour, je suis Paul West. Je viens voir Monsieur Martin."

The two women gabbled on about having "déjeuner", which I knew was lunch, and they made at least half a dozen I'll-phone-you gestures before the receptionist finally turned to me.

"Monsieur?" No apology. They might kiss each other, but I could kiss off.

I repeated my password. Or tried to.

"Bonjour, je . . ." No, my head was full of suppressed anger and linguistic spaghetti. "Paul West," I said. "Monsieur Martin." Who needs verbs? I managed another willing smile.

The receptionist - name badge: Marianne, personality: Hannibal Lecter - tutted in reply.

I could almost hear her thinking, can't speak any French. Probably thinks De Gaulle had a big nose. Bastard.

"I'll call his assistant," she said, probably. She picked up the phone and punched in a number, all the while giving me a tip-to-toe inspection as if she didn't think I was of the required standard to meet the boss.

Do I really look that bad?, I wondered. I'd made an effort to be as chic as a Brit in Paris should be. My best grey-black Paul Smith suit (my only Paul Smith suit). A shirt so white that it looked as if it'd been made from silkworms fed on bleach, and an electrically zingy Hermès tie that could have powered the whole Paris metro if I'd

Copyright © 2004 Stephen Clarke
Published by Black Swan / Transworld

plugged it in. I'd even worn my black silk boxers to give my self-esteem an invisible boost. French women aren't the only ones who can do underwear.

No way did I deserve such a withering look, especially not in comparison to most of the people I'd seen entering the building - guys looking like Dilbert, women in drab catalogue skirts, lots of excessively comfortable shoes.

"Christine? J'ai un Monsieur-?" Marianne the receptionist squinted over at me.

This was my cue to do something, but what?

"Votre nom?" Marianne asked, rolling her eyes upwards and turning the last word into a huff of despair at my slug-like stupidity.

"Paul West."

"Pol Wess," Marianne said, "a visitor for Monsieur Martin." She hung up. "Sit over there," she said in slow, talking-to-Alzheimer-sufferer French.

The boss evidently kept the glamorous ones in his office, because Christine, the assistant who took me up to the fifth floor, was a tall brunette with poise and a dark-lipped smile that would have melted a man's trousers at twenty paces. I was standing mere inches away from her in the lift, looking deep down into her eyes, breathing in her perfume. Slightly cinnamon. She smelt edible.

It was one of those occasions when you think, come on, lift, conk out now. Get jammed between two floors. I've had a pee, I can take the wait. Just give me an hour or two to work my charm with a captive audience.

Trouble is, I would have had to teach her English first. When I tried to chat her up, she just smiled stunningly and apologized in French for not understanding a bloody word. Still, here at least was one Parisienne who didn't seem to hate me.

We emerged in a corridor that was like a collision between a gothic mansion and a double-glazing lorry. A long oriental-looking carpet covered all but the narrow margins of creaky, polished floorboards. The ceiling and walls of the corridor were decorated with great swirls of antique moulded plasterwork, but the original doors had been ripped off their hinges and replaced with 70s-vintage tinted glass. As if to cover up the clash of styles, the corridor was lined with enough greenleaved plants to host a jungle war.

Christine knocked on a glass door and a male voice called, "Entrez!"

I went in and there he was, set against a background of the Eiffel Tower poking its finger into the cloudy sky. My new boss stood up and walked around his desk to greet me.

"Monsieur Martin," I said, holding out a hand for him to shake. "Pleased to see you again."

Copyright © 2004 Stephen Clarke Published by Black Swan / Transworld

"You must call me Jean-Marie," he replied in his slightly accented but excellent English. He took my hand and used it to pull me so close I thought we were about to do the cheek-rubbing thing. But no, he only wanted to pat my shoulder. "Welcome to France," he said.

Bloody hell, I thought. Now two of them like me.

Copyright © 2004 Stephen Clarke
Published by Black Swan / Transworld