

Septembre

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.

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-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 silk worms fed on bleach, and an electrically zingy Hermès tie that could have powered the whole Paris metro if I’d 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-style tinted glass. As if to cover up the clash of styles, the corridor was lined with enough green-leaved 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."

"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.

Jean-Marie looked pretty cool for a company chairman. He was 50 or so, but his dark eyes shone with youth, his hair was receding but slicked back and cut short so that it didn't matter, and his royal-blue shirt and golden tie were effortlessly chic. He had an open, friendly face.

He asked for some coffees and I noticed that he called Christine "tu" whereas she called him "vous". I'd never managed to work that one out.

"Sit down, Paul," Jean-Marie said, switching back to English. "Is everything OK? Your voyage, the hotel?"

“Oh, yes fine, thanks ...” A bit basic, but it had cable.

“Good, good.” When he looked at you, you felt as if making you happy was the only thing that mattered on the entire planet. Sod global warming, does Paul like his hotel room? That’s the important issue of the day.

“Everyone seems to be very happy here, kissing each other,” I said.

“Ah, yes.” He looked out into the corridor, apparently checking for passers-by to French-kiss. “It is the *reentrée*, you know, the re-entry. Like we are returning home from space. To us Parisians anything more than ten kilometres from the Galeries Lafayette is a different planet. We have not seen our colleagues for a month, and we are happy to meet them again.” He snorted as if at a private joke. “Well, not always very happy, but we cannot refuse to kiss them.”

“Even the men?”

Jean-Marie laughed. “You think French men are effeminate?”

“No, no, of course not.” I thought I’d hit a nerve.

“Good.”

I got the feeling that if Christine had been in the room he’d have whipped down his trousers and proved his manhood on her.

He clapped as if to clear the air of testosterone. “Your office will be next to mine. We have the same view. What a view, eh?” He held out an arm towards the window to introduce his guest star. It was quite a star, too. “If you work in Paris, you don’t always get a view of the Eiffel Tower,” he said proudly.

“Great,” I said.

“Yes, great. We want you to be happy with us,” Jean-Marie said. At the time he probably meant it.

When I first met him in London he made his company, VianDiffusion, sound like a family, with him as the favourite uncle rather than the godfather or big brother. He’d taken over the meat-processing business about ten years earlier from his dad, the founder, who’d started out as a humble butcher. They now had four “factories” (basically, giant food mixers – mooing animals in one end, mincemeat out the other) plus their head office. Turnover was massive thanks to the limitless French appetite for hamburgers, or “steaks *hâchés*” as they

patriotically call them. It seemed to me when Jean-Marie recruited me that he was looking to lift the company out of the offal. My new “English” project was designed to make people forget his bloody beginnings. Perhaps that was why he greeted me so warmly.

Now to see if the rest of my colleagues would love me as much as he did.

“One thing, Jean-Marie,” I said as he ushered – almost carried – me along the corridor towards the meeting room. “Do I call everyone tu or vous?” Not that I was capable of calling them either.

“Ah, it is quite simple. You, in your position, call everyone with whom you work tu. Except maybe anyone who looks old. And except if you have not been presented to them yet. Most people here will call you tu also. Some will call you vous if they are very less senior or if they think they don’t know you. OK?”

“Er, yes.” Clear as onion soup.

“But in your team everyone will speak English.”

“English? Shouldn’t I try to integrate?”

Jean-Marie didn’t answer. He gave a final tug on my elbow and we were inside the meeting room. It took up the full depth of the building, with windows at both ends. Eiffel Tower in one, courtyard and a modern glass office building in the other.

There were four other people in the room. A man and woman stood huddled near the courtyard window, and another man and woman sat silently at a long oval table.

“Everyone, this is Paul,” Jean-Marie announced in English.

My new workchums turned to meet me. The two men were a very tall, thick-set blond, about 40, and a younger, skinny guy who was bald. The two women were a natural honey blonde, about 30, with a tightly pulled back pony tail and a jutting chin that just stopped her being beautiful, and a round-faced, kind-looking woman, 35-ish, with large brown eyes and a dowdy pink blouse.

I shook all of their hands and instantly forgot their names.

We sat down at the table, me and Jean-Marie on one side, my four new colleagues on the other.

“OK, everyone. This is a very exciting moment,” Jean-Marie declared. “We are, as the English say, branching away. Flying into new horizons. We know we can succeed in the restaurant business. The fast-food industry in France could not exist without our minced beef. Now we are going to take some more of the profit with our new English tea cafés. And we have someone here who knows this business.” He gestured proudly towards me. “As you know, Paul was chief of marketing of the chain of French cafés in England, *Voulez-Vous Café Avec Moi*. How many cafés have you created, Paul?”

“There were 35 when I left the company. But that was two weeks ago, so who knows how many there are now.”

I was joking, but everyone in the room gaped at me, believing totally in this Anglo-American dynamism.

“Yes,” Jean-Marie said, bathing vicariously in my reputation. “I saw their success and I wanted their head of marketing, so I went to London and decapitated him. Decapitated?”

“Head-hunted,” I said.

“Yes, thank you. I am sure that Paul will bring to our new chain of English cafés in France the same success as he has known with the similar concept in England of French cafés in, er, England. Maybe you can continue to present yourself, Paul?” he said, apparently exhausted by his last sentence.

“Sure.” I gazed along the line opposite with my best imitation of co-workerly love. “My name’s Paul West,” I told them. I saw them all practise saying my name. “I was in at the creation of *Voulez-Vous Café Avec Moi*. We launched in July last year – July the fourteenth of course, Bastille Day – with five cafés in London and the southeast, and then launched the others in the major British cities and shopping centres in three waves of ten. I’ve brought a report with me so that you can read the full story. Before that I worked for a small brewery – beer company,” I added, seeing their frowns, “and that’s about it.”

“You rilly yong,” said the skinny bloke. Not accusingly, but annoyingly.

“Not really, I’m 27. If I was a rock star I’d be dead.”

The bloke made apologetic gestures. “No, no. Ah’m not

criti-sahzing. Ah'm just ... admira-tive." He had a weird accent. Not quite French. I couldn't place it.

"Ah, we are all admiring Paul, that's for sure." Jean-Marie again managed to make me feel like I was receiving a gay come-on. "Why don't everyone present himself?" he said. "Bernard, start please."

Bernard was the tall, stocky one, with a flat-top haircut and a neat blond moustache. He looked like a Swedish policeman who'd retired early because of bad feet. He was wearing a sickly-blue shirt and a tie that just failed to be red enough. He could have had "dull" tattooed across his forehead but that would have made him too exciting.

Bernard smiled nervously and began.

"Yam bare narr, yam responsa bull ov communika syon, er ..."

Shit, I thought, didn't Jean-Marie say the meeting was going to be in English? How come some people were allowed to speak Hungarian?

Bernard of Budapest carried on in the same incomprehensible vein for a couple of minutes and then started to enunciate something which, to judge by the look of acute constipation on his face, was of great importance. "Alok for wah toowa king wizioo."

Hang on, I thought. I don't speak any Central European languages, but I got that. He's looking forward to working with me. Holy Babel fish. It's English, Jim, but not as we know it.

"Thank you, Bernard," Jean-Marie said, smiling encouragingly. Had he chosen the crappiest one to highlight his own excellent English? I hoped so. "Next, Marc."

Marc was the bald skinny one. He was wearing a dark grey shirt, unbuttoned at the collar and unironed. Turned out he'd spent a few years in the southern USA, hence the weird accent, which made him sound like Scarlett O'Hara after too much Pernod.

"Ah'm ed of hah tee," he said.

"Ed of hah tee," I repeated approvingly, wondering what the hell this was. Something to do with tea, anyway. Relevant.

"Yah. Compoodah sis-temm," Marc confirmed.

“Oh, I.T.,” I said. He glowered at me. “Your English is excellent,” I added quickly. “How long did you spend in the USA?”

“Ah’ve done a yee-uh uv post-grad at Jo-ja State, then Ah’ve worked fahv yee-uhs inna inshance firm in Atlanna. In da hah tee departmon, a coss.”

“A coss,” I agreed.

“OK, Marc. Stéphanie?” Jean-Marie the MC again.

Stéphanie was the blonde woman with the jaw. Her accent was strong and French, her grammar terrifying, but my ear was getting tuned. Stéphanie was the “responsa bull ov poorshassing” (purchasing) for the main meat-processing part of the company, and was now “vairy eppy” to be “ap-wanted responsa bull ov poorsha sing” for the proposed chain of “Eengleesh tea saloons”.

It was obviously as exhausting for her to speak as she was to listen to, and at the end of her short speech she gave Jean-Marie a look that said I’ve done my 50 press-ups and I hope you think it was worth it you sadistic bastard.

“Thank you, Stéphanie. Nicole.”

The other woman, the dark, short-haired one, had a soft voice, but she spoke very clearly. She was the financial controller on this project, as she was for the whole company.

“You’ve been to England, haven’t you, Nicole?” I said. “Quite often as well, to judge by your accent.” Rule one of office life – always flatter your financial controller.

“Yes, my usband was Hinglish,” she said, smiling wistfully. Oh dear, dead or divorced?, I wondered. Not the time to ask.

“Do not be fooled by Nicole,” Jean-Marie said. “She looks like she is very kind, but she has a heart of iron. She is the reason why our finances are so good. She is our real boss.”

Nicole blushed. There was some unrequited stuff going on here, I decided. Jean-Marie praising her professional skills, Nicole wanting to rip her bodice open and have him praise her boobs. Or was I being stereotypical?

“Well, your English is so much better than my French,” I told them, taking special care to look Stéphanie and Bernard,

my fellow linguistic invalids, in the eye. "I've bought myself a teach-yourself French CD-Rom and I promise I'll start teaching myself *toot sweet*."

They were kind enough to laugh.

As we were all chums together now, I decided to throw in my little idea. Nothing controversial.

"I thought we could decide on a working name for the project," I suggested. "Just something temporary, you know, to give us an identity as a team. Something like Tea Time."

"Oh." It was Bernard, jerking himself upright. "No, we av nem. Ma Tea Eez Reesh."

I frowned, the others laughed. I turned to Jean-Marie for help. He was looking elsewhere.

"My Tea Is Rich? As a brand name for the tea rooms? It's not really a name," I ventured. "It doesn't really *mean* anything."

"Uh." Bernard was crap at English but clearly very good at monosyllables. "Ma Tea Eez Reesh eez funny nem. Eaties Ingleesh oomoor."

"English humour? But we don't say that."

"Oh." Bernard turned to Jean-Marie for support.

"Of course it should be my *taylor*," Jean-Marie explained.

"Your taylor?" I felt as if I was in the middle of a surrealist film. In a minute Salvador Dali was going to fly in through the window with a baguette sticking out of his trousers.

"My taylor is rich," Jean-Marie said.

"Is he?" Here comes Salvador, I thought, but all I could see out the window was the Eiffel Tower as usual.

"My taylor is rich is a typical English expression."

"It's not."

"But French people think it is. It was in the old language books."

"OK, OK, I think I'm with you," I said. The others were peering at me as if I was about to get the joke at last and laugh. "It's like my postilion has been struck by lightning."

"Uh?" Now it was the French team's turn to look lost.

"It's from *our* old language books," I said. "I get you now." I put on a eureka smile. Everyone nodded. Misunderstanding cleared up. Problem solved. "But it's still an awful name." I

mean, I had to tell them for their own good. For the good of the project.

“Oh!”

“You absolutely want Tea Time?” Jean-Marie was not looking keen. “This is a bit flat.”

“No, not absolutely. Just as a provisional name. I suggest we get a market survey done before deciding on the definitive brand, but meanwhile let’s choose a simple working title. If you don’t like Tea Time, how about Tea For Two?”

“Oh no.” This was Stéphanie. “Dis is flat also. We want fonny nem. Like Bare-narr say, Ingleesh oomoor.”

“And, er, if we coll eet Tease Café?” Marc said.

“Tease Café?” I was lost again.

“Yuh. Tea, apostrof, s, café,” Marc explained. Stéphanie nodded. Good idea.

“Tea’s Café? But that’s not English either.”

“Yes,” Stéphanie retorted. “You av many nems with apostrof. Arry’s Bar. Liberty’s Statue.”

“Brooklyn’s Bridge,” Marc said.

“Trafalgar’s Square,” Bernard added.

“No ...”

“Roll’s Royce,” Bernard said, on a roll.

“No!” Where did they get this crap?

“In France this is considered very English,” Jean-Marie was playing interpreter again. “There is an American café on the Champs-Élysées called Sandwich’s Café.”

“Yes.” Stéphanie confirmed this with a prod of her finger on to the table.

“OK, but it’s not English,” I had to insist. “It’s like when you call a campsite ‘un camping’ or a car park ‘un parking’. You may think it’s English, but it’s not.”

“Oh.” Stéphanie appealed to Jean-Marie the referee. An attack on the French language? Yellow card, surely?

“Each country adapts the culture of the other country,” Jean-Marie said. “When I was in England, all the restaurants had strawberry crême brulée. But crême brulée is crême brulée. Why not have a strawberry baguette? Or a strawberry camembert?”

The French team nodded their approval of Jean-Marie’s firm but fair discipline.

“Yes, it is like you Ingleesh you put oronge joo-eece in shompagne,” Stéphanie said. “Merde alors.”

The others winced in sympathy at this desecration of their national treasure.

“But you put blackcurrant liqueur in champagne to make kir royal.” I’d read this in my guidebook and now wished I hadn’t. French eyebrows knitted at my English know-it-all repartee.

Jean-Marie tried to pour some virgin olive oil on things. “We will make a market survey. We will test these names and others. We will make a list of our suggestions.”

“Right.” I nodded like a plastic Alsatian in the back of a car, eager to accept this brilliant idea coming from the French diplomat.

“Bernard can maybe organize it,” Jean-Marie suggested.

Bernard smiled. He was the man for the job. From the dull twinkle in his eye I could tell he was confident of persuading the pollsters to go with his idea.

“OK, very constructive,” Jean-Marie said. “This is a real Anglo-style meeting. Taking decisions.”

Decisions? We can’t agree, so we decide to pay a consultant who’s going to be bribed into agreeing with the guy with the crappiest ideas. Didn’t seem very constructive to me. But then it was my first ever French meeting. I had a lot to learn.

Outside of the office, my entrée into Paris society was just as depressing.

Jean-Marie was paying for me to stay in a hotel about a kilometre west of the Arc de Triomphe, not actually in Paris at all. It was just off an eight-lane highway called, romantically, Big Army Avenue that charged out from Paris proper towards the skyscrapers of La Défense business district.

The hotel was a non-descript modern building made of artificial stone the colour of snow that’s been peed in by a dog. My room was decorated in the same colour. It was supposed to be a double but the only way for two people to stand on the floor at the same time would have been to have intercourse. Which was perhaps the idea, though there wasn’t much of that kind of action going on while I was in it.

Anyway, the hotel was in a posh suburb called Neuilly, pronounced Ner-yeé, and not Newly as I called it the whole time I lived there. It was dull but had two or three shopping streets full of the kind of small stores that you don't get in the UK any more. Fishmongers, cheese shops, chocolate shops, raw-meat butchers, cooked-meat butchers, horsemeat butchers, there was even a shop selling only roast chickens.

So when the batteries in my mini hi-fi system went into their umpteenth coma, I thought I'd go to my friendly local electrician's shop to buy a mains adapter. I wandered out one Saturday and eventually found a little painted shopfront full of radios and torches and other small electronic gizmos.

Inside there was a long, fingerprint-marked glass counter and a chaotic shelving system stacked with everything from tiny watch batteries to hoovers and food mixers. Amongst all the boxes stood a middle-aged guy with a grey nylon overall and an equally grey face. The Addams Family's Parisian cousin.

"Bonjour." I smiled as an advance apology for the bad French that was to come. He didn't smile back. He just stared at me from under his barbed-wire eyebrows, weighing me up and coming to unpleasant conclusions.

I should perhaps add that I wasn't wearing my Paul Smith suit at this point. I was in an orange floral shirt that I found in the Portobello Road. It had a kind of Hawaiian-paint-factory-explosion motif that I thought made me look laid-back and friendly, especially when accompanied by long surfer shorts and fire extinguisher-red trainers. I had noticed that not many other people in Neuilly were dressed like this, but it was a pleasantly warm autumn day, and I never dreamt that it could have any influence on my chances of buying electrical equipment.

"Je," I began, and then suddenly realized that I didn't know the French for hi-fi system, mains lead, plug, adapter, or, to be totally honest, electricity. I mean, in the UK, if you want to buy anything electrical you just go to a superstore and help yourself. At the very worst, the most you have to do is point.

"J'ai un hi-fi," I ventured, giving the last word a French lilt – "ha-fa". The electrician didn't look perplexed, which was encouraging. Though he didn't look interested, either. I