

This opening extract is exclusive to Love♥reading.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Talk to the Snail

Stephen Clarke

Thou shalt be wrong

(if you're not French)

WHEN DEALING WITH A FRENCHMAN, YOU NEED TO BE aware that there is a voice in his head. It is constantly telling him, 'I'm French, I'm right.'

Even when he's doing something that is quite obviously illegal, antisocial or just plain stupid, he is sure that right is on his side.

Of course, the French aren't unique in this. We Brits think we invented Western civilization. The Americans are convinced that they live in the only place on earth where people are truly free. The Belgians are certain that they invented French fries. We're all sure that we're right about something. The difference with the French is that they not only think they're right, they're also convinced that everyone in the world is ganging up to prove them wrong. Why, they wonder, does everyone on the planet want to speak English instead of le français? Why does no one else play pétanque? Why does the world prefer Hollywood blockbusters to French movies about Parisians getting divorced? Ce n'est pas normal.

Their reputation for arrogance comes from this. They're not sure of themselves. They've got something to prove to the rest of the universe.

Observe a Parisian driver when he or she comes up against a red light. 'How dare this coloured bulb assume it knows best whether it is safe to cross this junction?' the driver thinks. 'It's obviously safe to go through, there's nothing blocking my way except a few annoying pedestrians.' He ploughs through, certain that the universe is on his side.

It's the same with much of the French service sector. How can the customers possibly be right? What do they know about the service industries?

The list goes on and on.

Pushing L'Enveloppe

One of the best ways of seeing the French person's innate sense of rightness in action is to visit a crowded post office. The people who work here have even more reasons to be right than the rest of their compatriots. They have two layers of rightness that they wear like armour.

First, of course, they are French.

Second, they are state employees and therefore impossible to fire. Even if they were to snooze all day or feed all the letters through a shredder, the worst sanction they could expect would be a transfer to some distant outpost of the French empire like Tahiti or Calais.

In a relaxed rural post office, this can be to the public's advantage, because the people working there will be able to take the time to help their customers (and thereby show how right they are about things).

But if you walk into a busy urban post office at nine a.m., things might not go so smoothly.

There will probably be a long queue of people wanting to withdraw money from their post-office bank accounts, pay their electricity bills in cash, or simply post a letter because they don't have change for the automatic franking machine.

A post-office cashier who's just coming on duty will enter the room, sum up the size of the queue, see the urgency of opening another window, and smile inwardly. Or sometimes outwardly. He or she will then proceed to interrupt their co-workers' transactions in order to exchange good-morning kisses or handshakes.

Any grumblings from the queue will be answered with a look, or an overt comment, to the effect that, yes, we state workers are human beings and we have the right to greet our colleagues just like anyone else, non?

They are in the right and are therefore totally shameless.

Next, the new arrival will sit down at his or her counter and settle in, starting up the computer, slotting in the cash drawer, checking that the books of stamps are all in place.

Any customer who dares to venture from the 'wait behind this line' barrier up to the counter at this point will be politely told that the worker has to get properly prepared before receiving customers. That is normal, non? In what other job does a worker have to start work before things are properly prepared?

They are in the right and therefore completely unhurried. The only thing to do is stay patient. It can be tough.

Once, in my local post office, I was praying that fate would not send me to the counter nearest the door, because it was about to be manned by one of the worst cases of 'I'm Right, You're Wrong' I've ever met, even in France.

Monsieur Right was just coming on duty, and was apparently testing his seat for signs of bounciness deficiency that might oblige him to put in for a month's sick leave if he sat on it for a whole morning. He could see all the people waiting, and seemed to be relishing the groans of frustration emanating from his audience. I was next in line, hoping desperately that he'd keep bouncing until one of the other counters was free.

But no, fate decided to be cruel to me that day.

'Bonjour,' I said loudly, as you must.

'Bonjour,' he replied, slightly put out by my merriness. Outside of the post-office combat zone, I'm sure I would have got on fine with the guy, who was a fairly laid-back, jeans-and-earring type and probably listened to the same kind of music as I do. But on his throne, he was obviously a complete tyrant, the Sun King hoping to burn my fingers.

I told him that my postwoman had left a slip telling me to come to the nearest post office to fetch a parcel, which is the usual practice when a delivery is too big to go in the letter box.

'Do you have ID?' he asked me, which is also the usual practice.

'Yes, I do, but there's a problem. You see, the slip says that the parcel was addressed to Red Garage Books, which is the name of my company. But I don't have an ID card in that name because there is no person called Red Garage Books.' I attempted a little philosophical laugh, which is necessary in France when you want to show people that you are joking.

'Ah,' he said, grimacing as if I'd just pierced his other ear. 'If you have no ID then I can't give you the parcel.'

'But I know it's for me. I'm the only employee. Look, I've brought along a piece of stationery with the logo on it.'

'That is not official ID. I can't accept it.'

'I understand that,' I said, diplomatically acknowledging his rightness. 'But I don't know what else to do. I know what's in the parcel, though. It's books. Can't you just check, please?'

The guy agreed to go and look. These counter assistants are human, after all. And, like all French counter assistants, if you show them - politely - that you aren't going to go away and leave them in peace (yes, two can play at being in the right), they will back down.