

hi everyone,

just a quick note to let you all know that while I haven't been in touch much lately i am still alive and kicking over here, so not to worry. i am, however, engaged in a battle to the death with the rusty and slow moving cogs of french bureaucracy. like most battles with large and powerful (although frighteningly disorganized and more antiquated than the little Mac Classic we had when i was ten) machines, i think i am bound to lose, but i keep fighting just the same. i am comforted by the fact that if i lose i probably won't know it for years, so slow-moving is this giant machine. i am, on the one hand, threatened with deportation (and at this point, let me tell you, that is starting to sound appealing...) and on the other hand threatened with taxes by french customs, as they are holding my new laptop (an american product, purchased in the united states, and given to me, a united states citizen who is officially illegal in france, by my generous american family as a christmas gift) hostage. i am required to send them a copy of the receipt so that they can determine the value of the computer and tax me accordingly (which will undoubtedly unleash a new barrage of paperwork). then once the tax has been paid they will release the package to the (notoriously unreliable and slow) post office to be delivered. but they won't actually deliver the package, they will deliver a notice that i can go pick up the package. then i will have to engage in a sort of game of chance, guessing at the hours of operation (i could conceivably look them up, but it would make no difference as operating hours in france are a matter of pure whim) and hoping against hope that, after traveling across town on public transit, the postal workers are not sipping wine and laughing at me behind the ominous gate across the post office doors. despite several desperate phone calls and emails trying to verify that customs has received the copy of the receipt that i sent them (both by email and by certified post), i am making no headway. everyone I talk to is either too busy to look up my file (it's not like it's their job or anything, obviously they have more important things to do, such as chat with the co-worker next to them about the cute panties they bought at the annual sales which started a few days ago) or they pretend to have such a hard time understanding my accent (yes i have one, but it's not that bad for the love of pete!) that i eventually get frustrated and hang up. and don't forget that half the time when i call no one even picks up the ever-loving phone! those three hour lunch breaks can be a major pain in the ass when you're not the one taking them... i asked one of my co-workers for advice, figuring that a french person might have a better idea than i do of how to deal with this, and he told me that the only way to be sure that customs received the documents is to go in person (with extra copies in hand just in case). the problem with this is that the customs office is in paris! now, i ask you, how can a country, touted as one of the most civilized and sophisticated in the world, possibly have risen to such high esteem when they can't even manage to deliver a bloody parcel?!!! it's one of the great mysteries of french "civilization", right along side how they eat so much cheese and never get fat. i'm not counting on it, but i'm hoping that the slow moving arms of customs and the post office are nevertheless quicker than

their deportation counterpart. here's the story with the deportation nonsense: when i arrived in october i was required to attend a meeting with the other primary school assistants in my region and we were immediately inondated with, what else?, piles upon piles of paperwork. you will probably remember my woeful first email about needing such and such document before i could complete this or that document and so on. well, needless to say, all the various necessary forms were not completed that first day, and certain documents had to be turned in later. i dutifully completed all of the forms and, about a week and many hair-pulling, nail-biting hours later, personally delivered them to the designated office into the hands of the woman responsible for our files. i specifically asked her if i had completed everything correctly and included all the needed documents. she cheerfully assured me that i had. I breathed a sigh of relief and said to myself, "well, I suppose that wasn't so bad". little did i know... upon my return from my fabulous christmas vacation in london (the british are such an orderly, polite, efficient people) i found a letter waiting for me. actually, that's not quite true, i found a notice that i had a letter waiting for me at the post office. why they never seem to actually deliver mail, and only deliver notices that you have received mail, is a mystery to me, but that's another story...i went to pick it up and it said, as i believe i have already told you, that my file was incomplete (!) and that I should consider myself in an "irregular situation in french territory" and that, furthermore, the prefecture de police was being informed of my irregular status. needless to say, i panicked. In any other country this would be very serious news, and i sprung into action, calling Mme Lheman (whom i have taken to calling "the lemon" due partially to the pronunciation of her surname and partially to the sour taste pronouncing it leaves in my mouth. never, in my estimation, has a more worthless fonctionnaire aimlessly wandered the winding corridors of the French administration, and unfortunately for all of the assistants, she has been placed in charge of handling all of our myriad worries and tribulations, which is to say that we are on our own) and sending endless streams of emails to the "inspection academique" the rectorat, "l'education nationale", the office of imigration and so on. i have probably made thirty phone calls and sent as many emails to various people who should, presumably, be able to help me, and all of them direct me back to the lemon who never, not once out of the twenty times i've called her office in the last two weeks, answers her phone. nor does she return calls when i leave her messages (in the most courteous tone i can muster). i'm convinced that she also doesn't know how her computer functions, because she does not respond to emails either. in short, she's worthless. in the meantime i am an illegal immigrant and nobody, including the directors at all three of my schools, all of the teachers i work with, my landlady, and the "inspectrice" of the region i work in, seems to think any of this is a big deal. "are you still getting paid?" they ask. "yes." "well then, don't worry about it. it's just a detail of the administration francaise." it's true that i am still getting paid, and i really couldn't care less about administrative details, but I am inclined to think that this is slightly more than a detail. if i get sick i can't go to the hospital

because, as an illegal immigrant, i'm not covered by social security. legally i can't work (although I continue to do so since no one seems to care and I have nothing better to do). but what actually worries me is that i'm planning a trip to morocco at the end of february and i can't actually leave the country right now, because they would not let me back in. I also can't apply for the government housing subsidy that generously reimburses most of my fellow assistants over half of their monthly rent. this, too, is more than a detail. at any rate, i've decided that the only thing to do is to go and present myself in person to the lemon on friday, taking with me every possible document she might ask me for and at least three copies of each, and hope to get something useful out of her (although i'm afraid that might be asking a bit too much). In the meantime, i remain illegal and computerless, engaged in a brawl with the excruciatingly slow and inefficient machine that is the "administration francaise". my romantic ideals about french society shattered, i can only hope that i make it through the rest of the year without smashing a wheel of the stinkiest camembert i can find into the broad gallic nose of some hapless postal worker or useless fonctionnaire. i never thought i would say this but I long for the simplicity, efficiency, and friendliness of american bureaucracy. keep that in mind while you're doing your taxes this year, and thank your lucky stars that you are not french, or worse, an ex-pat in france. quelle horreur! i will leave you with that because what was supposed to be a quick note has turned into a long and rambling vent. rest assured that apart from that things are fine (i went skiing in the alps this weekend!) and that even if i lose my battle with bureaucracy no one will know it until long after i'm safely back in the states.

bisous,  
rebecca