

Gray Day in Paris extract

I had fun writing all of the scenes. I particularly liked the blind date at the Paris restaurant (fictional) 'Dans le Noir'.

Rue Petit Poulain is a pokey medieval street lined with busy cafés and boutiques. People are spilling out onto the sidewalk, chatting and laughing. An Uber Eats guy on a scooter buzzes past, fouling the air with stinky fumes, and as I mooch along, I come across 'Dans le Noir'. There's no sign of Shannon. She must have already gone inside. The building is very plain and so is the restaurant façade, like a nightclub—no windows, just a black door and a buzzer. I press it and no one answers. Maybe I should open it and go in, so I do. The lighting inside is dim and spooky.

"Bonsoir, monsieur," the receptionist says. "Avez-vous une réservation?"

"Oui. I'm with some friends."

"Oh, the Irish lady and 'er friends?"

"Oui."

"They went into the dining area already. She left you a message. She says to go in."

"How can I meet them inside if there's no light?"

"My colleague, Yann, will guide you to your table," she says, and calls out to him.

"Then he has a torch," I say.

"No, he's blind."

"Come," Yann says, holding my arm.

I follow him through a thick black curtain, then another. It's pitch black and there's soft murmuring music, soft and calm, and I feel a light breeze from the air-con on my face. My fear of dark places makes my heart race, and I remember the time I was lost inside the ghost house at the Boulia Show. Have to get out. No, get a grip. Don't panic. Unlike the ghost house, it's strangely quiet inside. I want to ask Yann if there's anyone else in there, but I don't because it's so quiet and I don't want to sound like a fool. Without bumping into anything, Yann helps me sit at a table. The chair scrapes on the floor that must be tiled. I can feel the table. It has a cloth on it. There's cutlery and a wine glass that I nearly knock over. So quiet. I know there are people in here because I hear breathing noises. They're quiet. I'm quiet. I'm quiet because they're quiet.

"You must to pour your own wine," Yann says. "Put your finger inside the glass and fill it until you can feel it."

“Okay. Finger in glass. Feel it, then fill it.”

“No sir, fill until you feel.”

Where’s the bottle, I wonder. I want to ask someone, but I can’t see anyone, so I don’t. There are people at my table. I can sense them. I can hear breathing, and someone’s tapping a foot. I think I’m going mad. Why isn’t anyone talking? Then something happens that nearly freaks me out. There’s a hand on my knee. I feel it moving up my leg, squeezing my thigh.

“Oy,” I say, and push the wandering fingers away. Is this my blind date?

“Ca va?” comes a voice at last—a male voice. This can’t be for real. I recognize it. Shannon’s hooked me up with Didier! Panic is surging big time, and my neurons are racing to find a solution. I’ve got it. I’ll change my voice. He’ll think I’m someone else.

“Gray, is that you?” Shannon says.

“Gray?” Didier says.

“No, I’m Grace,” I say, my voice now squeaky and hopefully feminine. “I must be at the wrong table.” What else can I do? By the way, Didier’s wandering hand has gone, so the fake voice must be working.

Now that the entrée has been served, and a strong smell of garlic and mushrooms wafts through the room, people are beginning to open up and chat and laugh and I realize the room is full of people.

“There are four of us at this table, Grace,” Shannon says, and I hear wine splashing into glasses. “Well, there are supposed to be. You’re sitting in someone else’s seat. But not to worry, Gray must have got lost and I can’t text him because mobile phones are forbidden in here.” She sighs and I hear crunching noises like someone chewing a carrot. “Next to you is Didier, and on the other side of you is Amy. She’s American.”

Amy!

It’s pitch black and I’m in a room with two people I never want to be with. Am I supposed to be Amy’s blind date or Didier’s? Either one is just as bad. And if Didier isn’t my date, what will Shannon do when she finds out her blind date is gay?

“Who’s my date,” Amy asks.

“Gray,” Shannon says. “Well, it would be if he’d turned up.”

“Who? Gray Day?” Amy and Didier say together.

“Yes.” “Well, I’ve nothing to say really.” My voice is still an octave higher than usual.

Our evening continues with a lot of chitchat, clinking cutlery and eating noises. Didier tells us about his next Mediterranean cruise, Amy goes on endlessly about the novel she's writing and Shannon's worried about where I got to.

"He must be in here somewhere," she says. "Will someone switch on a light? I've lost my friend."

"Pipe down," comes a male voice from somewhere across the room.

"Madame, we can't to put on any lights," Yann says. "Don't worry. Your friend will be in here somewhere. I call him. Gray Day, are you in here?"

Silence.

The main course is served and it's anyone's guess what it is. I poke at the food with my fork then my finger.

"Tastes like meat," Shannon says. "Smells square much like rabbit."

"I think it is chicken," Didier says.

"A lot of stuff tastes like chicken," Amy says. "Snakes and lizards taste like chicken. What do you think Grace? You haven't said much."

I'm hoping the three of them will forget I'm there. Say something, Gray. Say something you ridiculous stuffed shirt.

"Er." Oops, I nearly speak in Gray's voice. "I go for chicken or rabbit. There's a vegetable too." There, I've said something so now I can go quiet for a bit.

"Broccoli purée," Amy says while making chomping sounds.

Unlike when I arrived, there are now a lot of glasses and cutlery clinking. Food has made the silent crowd come alive. It's loud—loud and very noisy, but then someone drops a fork or knife. A sudden hush descends on the room followed by squeals and laughter. This is my big chance—my only chance to escape unnoticed.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," I say, pushing my chair back. "I have to go to the ladies."

That's a close call, and I praise myself for coming up with this brilliant plan. I'll sneak out and no one will even notice, or care, because I'm the Grace person they don't know. Then I'm reminded that even the best plans can backfire.

"I need a pee too," Amy says, and calls out to Yann.

Argh! I'm off in a flash on all fours, but where to? I have no idea. Wait. I do have an idea. Easy peasy. First crawl along the walls until I reach the door. Next, nip out through the curtains and toddle off home. Shannon is sure to ask me where I got to, so I'll say I was in the restaurant, but it was dark and I got lost. All of that is true. Then she'll ask why I didn't call out or get Yann to take me to my table. That's a tricky one.

This plan will work out if I can find a wall. The best thing is to stay low. Crawl carefully. Now, a weird thought comes to mind and I wish it hadn't, well especially now. What would my students think if they ever find out their professor is on all fours, crawling about in a dark restaurant? This is creepy, then I remember when the power went off at Fitness Fun and how I ended up under a pile of musclemen. This is the opposite. What will happen if the lights come on?

I grab a chair leg, or maybe it's a table leg. There's a scream. "Espèce de pervers!"

"Everything is all right?" It's Yann's voice.

"Non," a woman yells, and then the room is suddenly quiet. "Someone just touch my leg. Under the table is someone."

Now Yann is crawling about under the table. I can hear him; he's getting closer.

"Nothing is here," he says.

At that moment I hear a loud crash. Something hits the floor—a plate and cutlery.

"Oh shit!" It's Amy's voice. "Can someone help me up? I've landed on my ass."

This is my worst nightmare. I seem to go from one disaster to another, and the idea of living alone in a cave on a Greek island or on the top of a mountain is becoming more enticing.

(I'm not making any of this up.)

Well, finally I bump into a wall and creep along it as far as a corner, and so on, until I reach the curtains where I came in. To make matters worse, one of the waiters enters the room with a tray laden with food. I know because he or she trips over me, and the tray crashes onto the tiles and I feel something warm on my neck—sauce, maybe.

"Oh la la la la la la la !" the waiter cries out and someone switches the lights on.

Now I'm really in deep shit.

Luckily though, I'm through those curtains and out of there before anyone knows it's me who has caused the chaos. As quick as a dog on steroids, I shoot past the reception desk, along the street to the quay and across the nearest bridge to the left bank and straight on to La Racine.

That's my life. If anything can go wrong, it does. There's an upside, though. No more blind date. I look at myself in the art deco mirror, order an armagnac and smile. You clumsy, whinging old bugger, I say to myself. Maybe Shannon's right. Maybe I really do need a companion, partner or wife, someone to watch over me.

"Oh, for shit's sake. Not him," Amy says. "Tell me it's not that blithering idiot who came to the writers' group."

"Grace," Amy says. "You stay right there. If someone called Gray comes along, you don't leave."

"That's a fret. You know Gray?" Shannon says.

"Oh, you bet I do. Tell me about yourself, Grace," Amy says.

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