

GRAY DAY IN PARIS

My new life begins

The start of my first day in Paris. This is where you belong Professor Day, the city says to me as I peep out of my little window at the millions of tiny lights flickering below in the early hours of the morning. Now I see Charles de Gaulle Airport then with a bump, my plane touches down and glides across the frosty runway toward the terminal. I am your new home. I am your new life. Oui?

Ouuiii, but now that I've finally arrived in France, I know I have to learn French and devise a sneaky way to stay here after my year at the Sorbonne is up. Yes, I've secretly imagined living my life in Europe for as long as I can remember, no matter where, and now I'm really here.

Getting to France was easy; staying here might turn out to be impossible.

It's five-fifteen in the morning and I'm zombying around the baggage collection area. waiting for my bags to roll past on the carousel. At last, they arrive and I drag them onto a trolley then find my way, easy peasy, through immigration and security, bleary-eyed after twenty-two hours propped up in the plane with my legs squashed up against the seat in front. After withdrawing some euros from an ATM, I make my way to the bus stand with my two fat suitcases, briefcase and wheelie bag and buy a ticket to Place de l'Opéra, then climb on board the Paris Express with a coachload of other sleepy passengers.

Forty-five minutes in the bus roll by and as I lean my head against the window, I wonder how I'm ever going to teach Australian culture and civilization to a bunch of French students. All I've taught for the past seventeen years is ancient history and the only language I speak is English. It's a good thing my classes are in English. Well, that's what I was told. Most of the French I see written on shops and signposts is all Greek to me except for 'pizza' and 'restaurant', but I'm here at last all because I was the only prof willing to take the plunge and dive into the Sorbonne teacher exchange program.

Distracted by the unfamiliar city we're driving through, my worried thoughts fade as I arrive in the centre of Paris in front of the grand old opera house on the Avenue de l'Opéra. I drag my bags onto the sidewalk, and with eyes closed, sniff the early morning traffic fumes and listen to the city waking up. Magical. It's still dark. Buses rumble past, cars purr, a garbage

truck stops by the curb, bins bang together. A crowd of people bustle up the steps from the metro, others bustle down, people in coats and scarves, rolled up newspapers, the smell of Gauloises cigarettes mixed with Dior perfume tickle my nostrils.

“Excusez-moi monsieur,” someone says as he tries to squeeze past me, pushing me aside with his bulging briefcase.

“I’m sorry,” I say as he leaps down the stairs.

“I can ‘elp you,” a middle-aged woman wrapped up in a full-length bubble jacket says as she throws rice to a flock of hungry pigeons huddled together on the Opera steps.

“No. It’s okay,” I say, and flag down a cab.

“Au revoir,” she says.

“Au revoir,” I say.

“Vous allez où, monsieur?” the chauffeur asks, flinging my bags into the trunk of his grey Mercedes, and I go blank.

“Speak English?”

“Where you want to go?”

“Odéon. Latin Quarter.”

“I know where eez Odéon, Where exactement?”

“26 rue Saint André des Arts.”

“You mean Saint Michel.”

“Oui,” I say, and that’s that. I make myself as small as possible in the back of his cab, wrap myself up in my thick woolen sweater, and watch the traffic crawl by. It’s freezing outside—literally. The sidewalks and cars are covered with a sprinkling of snow. It’s still quite dark—seven o’clockish now. We cross the Seine, pass by Notre-Dame and the Conciergerie, often waiting at red lights, and finally drive into Boulevard Saint Michel. The chauffeur takes a right into the rue Saint André des Arts and pulls up outside a little bookshop. And way up there, on the fifth floor of the dirty grey apartment block, I can see my digs waiting for me behind that little wrought iron balcony.

“Merci,” I say to the cabbie, handing him some euros. Then he dumps my bags on the sidewalk next to some dog poop, jumps back in and drives off, leaving me to figure out how to get inside the building. I’ve misplaced the door code, so now I’m waiting for a monsieur or madame to enter or leave. I don’t have to wait long. It seems that here, people come and go all the time.

“Bonjour,” a plump woman wearing a frilly apron says as I struggle through the door with my stuff. “Vous êtes?” Then she probably notices the glazed look in my eyes. “You are?”

“Gray Day.”

“Bienvenue Monsieur Day,” she says, grinning, and hands me the key to my apartment. “I am ze concierge.”

Then she helps heave one of my suitcases up to the 5th floor, banging it against each step as she goes.

“What is in zis?” she asks. “Rocks?”

“Books mostly,” I reply.

Upon opening the door of my apartment, I’m surprised to find it’s quite big, for Paris that is, or so the concierge says. Most people have one or two small rooms, a loo so tiny your legs poke out, a shower and a tiny kitchenette. Mine has four rooms, all papered with the same ghastly wallpaper—colorful songbirds in entwined tree branches, green and pink. The bedroom has a double bed, wardrobe and dresser, a bit cluttered, but I’m sure I’ll manage. The smallest room has a little wooden writing desk facing a window, so that will be my study, and the big room, the salon, can be my drawing room. It looks a bit like an airbnb with a sign hanging next to the door that says ‘Welcome to Paris’, and there’s a vase of plastic flowers that look a bit tired, and a Spanish-style coffee table made of oak and wrought iron. I nearly forgot to mention the dining-room with an oval table big enough to sit six people around without bumping into the long buffet that takes up one wall.

It’s been a long day, Brisbane to Dubai to Paris, vacuum-packed into my economy class seat like Camp Pie in a can, so I take off my shoes, plonk myself down on the black leather sofa, put my feet up on a poof and stare at the faded Monet print on the opposite wall, ‘Snow at Argenteuil’.

The concierge turns and leaves, and as I sit there gazing at that picture, I feel mighty pretentious. Now that I’m a Parisian, and a professor at the Sorbonne—the fac as they say in France—and it’s just down the road, a five-minute walk away, all I need to know apart from learning the language, is how to become French.

It’s been more than a week since Christmas and I’m glad that silly festive season is over, or so I think. Christmas songs in Australia had been driving me crazy. Yes, fake snow and festivities, Santa in shorts, eating a meat pie on the beach, or surfing at Bondi. Something creaks outside in the wind, pulling me out of my thoughts. Bugger! I get up, open the French windows and shutters and look down from my balcony to see what’s intruding on my peace and quiet. It’s those blooming Christmas lights that stretch from a second-floor balcony across to the other

side of the street. There are rows and rows of those blasted lights, blinking non-stop, that go all the way to the intersection then ‘pop’, they all turn off. I look at my watch. It’s eight in the morning.

Four days have passed since the year started and, with the excitement of being in Paris, I’ve already forgotten my New Year’s resolutions. There were ten of them—my ten commandments. The only one that sticks out is, ‘Thou shalt not whinge for a whole year.’ That’s a toughie, since life gives me more than my fair share of things to moan about. Back home I used to complain about the bushflies that found their way into my ears and mouth, not to mention up my nose, and about the lack of cultural events I desperately wanted to be involved in—concerts, opera, art and not just the arts, but European culture and history as well. So, for once in my life, now that I’m finally here in Paris and determined to stick to my decision not to whinge anymore. Yes, I’ll become a happy little Frenchman, and just to help myself along, so this resolution doesn’t go AWOL like previous ones, I bought two money boxes at the airport in Brisbane—a pig and a cow. The pig is for little whinges and the cow for those biggies. A little whinge will cost me ten centimes, but the big ones will set me back a euro.

Settling into my neighborhood hasn’t been much of a drama, luckily. It has only been a day and I’ve already melted into my surroundings like warm chocolate, living it up in the Frenchiest part of the city—the left bank where every famous writer on the planet has visited including Hemingway and Oscar Wilde. And I’ve already taken care of the essentials—the Café de la Sourire where I’ll have my morning coffee and croissant, the Café des Belles Etoiles in rue l’Odéon for lunch and Luigi’s Pizzeria on the Boulevard Saint Michel for dinner. Even the French eat pizza, I’m told, which is good because pizza is the one thing I won’t give up, not for love nor money, that and a plate of steak and chips.

Being alone is one thing, and I’m used to that, but there’s something I hadn’t really considered—loneliness. This is a big city with millions of people, but you can still be lonely. And what’s worse than feeling lonely in a crowd of people who are having fun? After dinner I need a place where I can retire from the bustle of city life and wallow in my loneliness where I can be alone—preferably a dark, dingy bar where I can fade into the shadows and sip armagnac or Pernod without being noticed. Ah, that’s the life! In the street just near my digs is La Racine, one of those turn-of-the-century bars, brown and austere, smells of oak and alcohol, just the sort of place that suits my needs; a place where I can melt into the shadows and go unnoticed.

Strangely, the first evening I go to that bar, and of all the bars in the city, I spy a woman I think I know. What are the odds? She’s sitting by the window squinting at a *Paris Match*

magazine through her granny spectacles, a glass of whisky on her small round table, a cigarette in a long cigarette holder in one hand and a black walking stick leaning against the wall next to her. Now I remember. She's the little old lady who jumped the queue at Brisbane airport. Yes, she was on my flight. I'm sure.

"Lady, you can board first," the steward said. I was way back in the queue and seeing my opportunity, nipped up to where she was standing and picked up her carry-on bag.

"We're together," I said, and then I was ahead of everyone. "Let me wheel your bag for you," I said to the lady. Her name was Fran, probably short for Francesca or Frangipani.

Then I strode off down the gangway, backpack pulled snugly against my back, Fran's floral wheelie bag in hand.

"Young man," she squealed. I glanced behind, and there she was trotting along to keep up, shiny black walking stick held high as if she were about to clobber someone. "Young man, wait."

No one calls me 'young man' any more unless they're trying to sell me something. My youthful days have long gone, and Fran's have very long gone. My guess is that she's seventyish. (Later she tells me she's eighty-seven.) She's an eighty-seven-year-old woman loaded with fresh Duracell batteries like the pink rabbit in the ads.

"You can call me Gray," I said as I stowed her wheelie bag in the overhead locker above my seat. She smiled and wiggled her lacy gloved fingers at me like a 'thank you' gesture.

I can't take my eyes off that old lady sitting there next to the window at La Racine. It has to be her. But what if she's not Fran? What if she's a countess or something like that? French aristocracy—la Comtesse de Fontainebleu? She's truly dressed up to the nines. What ordinary person would wear silk gloves right up to the elbows and a lacy bodice like people wore in the olden days? She has the same wavy grey hair as Fran. Am I seeing things? Probably.

Staring into my empty armagnac glass, I order another and think about how lucky I am to have been offered a year-long professorship starting in the first week of January—halfway through the French academic year. This is what keeps me sane, knowing that a good old challenge will sharpen my wits. I was very lucky to get this exchange job, and here I am in Paris with my foot in the door. Now I have to figure out how to stay in France for good, and it's likely that even my aunt's fat inheritance won't help me get through the door.

I look up at the old countess who is still flipping through pages of her magazine. I can see her face in the reflection of the window. She's really concentrating but not on the magazine. Is

she secretly thinking of other things or is she waiting for someone or does she just like being alone?

After knocking back my second Armagnac, I head for the little spiral staircase that curls all the way down to the basement to the loo that smells of stale urine. My face in the little mirror looks at me, and the middle-aged man who's rubbing his hands under the drying machine looks at me looking at myself.

Popping into a cubicle, I whip out my weeny and, after I've relieved myself, wash my hands and make my way back up the stairs, my head a bit light, and decide to approach the countess to find out once and for all if she really is Fran or if Fran has a Parisian twin sister. But when I get to the top of the stairs, I stop and stare at her empty chair. Blast! Gone! And I wonder if I'll ever see her again.

After making my way back to my apartment, I clomp up those clunky wooden steps to the fifth floor (there goes ten centimes), drop myself onto the sofa and watch the minute hand of the clock tick its way around its white face in front of the mirror on the mauve marble mantlepiece. Why do clocks tick before they tock? I muse. But there it is. That's my dilemma. I tock before I tick. I've always been quirky, never quite fitting in with serious academic life. While contemplating about what makes me tick, I notice my books next to the clock are leaning to the left, and straightening them up, make up my mind to shop for bookends tomorrow—and curtains to replace the faded blue ones that must have been hanging over those French windows since the revolution.