

PARIS

Grace's long gray hair fell loosely around her face as she stared longingly at the picture of the Paris street scene. The familiar scene was on a long-used dinner placemat that was backed by thick strong cork. She had been reading a novel and having breakfast at her usual place on the mat when the taxi came. For no reason she could admit to she left the novel, picked up the tray, her old black purse, and brought them both with her to the medical testing center. She would only be here for two days for tests, but it was such a dreary room. The placemat was almost the only thing in the room with any color. But then, maybe the dreariness was in her mind.

She sat on a bed neatly made with white sheets, surrounded by sparse furnishings consisting of a small white dresser, tall white cabinet, and one chair upholstered in tan naugahyde. She shut out the depressing vision, closed her mind to the possibilities of what the medical tests might find, and returned to the Paris scene.

The painting style was slightly impressionist, lending romance to the scene, but it was still realistic enough for Grace to walk her fingers over the street, read the shop names and pull up memories of her time there with Stan. She pronounced the French names, translated their meanings, followed the street as far as it went and imagined what lay beyond. Choosing her favorite table at the café, she imagined what it would be like to sit there on the sidewalk under the umbrella, sipping wine and watching people go by.

She started to create images of the people she might see, noting their style of clothing and guessing at what their occupation might be. It was an old people-watching game she and Stan had played. One old lady who appeared quite tired asked Grace if she could share her table. Searching her memory for high school French, Grace found words that she hoped answered, "Yes, please join me for a glass of wine." In her imagination Grace reached for the bottle of wine but realized it was empty. Lost in her delightful fantasy, Grace asked the waiter for another

bottle. To her amazement, she noticed a full bottle in the painting. Reality tried to muscle in and asked her, had the bottle in the picture always been full? Had she just not looked at it carefully before?

Her thoughts were interrupted by a short rap on the partially open door. Grace's daughter, Mary, peeked around the door. "Mom, you all settled in?"

"Yes, Come in dear."

Mary came in carrying a dress and coat on hangers and put them in the small closet and put some underwear in the dresser drawer. "After your tests, I thought you might want a fresh outfit to wear to the doctor's office." She gave her mother a long hug and then looked into her eyes. "When we spring you from this lovely place, why don't you stay with us for a while, With the kids gone we have two extra bedrooms and we would really love to have you, you know."

Grace smiled at her daughter, held her face tenderly and gave her a kiss. "I know dear, and I do appreciate the offer. Maybe after the doctors finish their test and things settle down a bit. Right now I still think a lot about your father, and I'm now very good company."

It had only been six months since Mary's father had died and she wished she could do something to ease her mother's pain. An uneasy silence settled over them and for want of conversation, Mary asked, "What are you doing with that old placemat here?"

Feeling a little stilly, Grace shrugged. "It keeps me company I guess. It's been there for breakfast, lunch and dinner for five years. This scene always reminded us of the place we stayed in Paris. See this street here? This is like where we walked our first night and . . ."

"And when you walked around the corner there was a wonderful statue on the left and straight ahead was the Eiffel Tower all lit up."

Grace laughed. "And you've heard my stories too many times. Sorry, but that trip was so great and one of the last things we were able to do together. We bought this set of placemats there and we always joked that this table back in the corner here was our table."

Mary looked at the picture and laughed. "Well your waiter is falling down on the job. He left an empty wine glass on the table."

Grace grabbed the placemat and was about to tell Mary she was looking at the wrong table, but then she saw the empty wine glass sitting there on her table and quickly shut her mouth

to prevent the words from escaping. Grace stared at the picture as her mind wrestled with confusing, conflicting facts. She was certain she had brought the right placemat and she was also certain it had never had a dirty glass left on the table. Was she going mad? Had she suddenly lost her memory?

Mary noticed the worried look on her mother's face and wondered what was wrong. Then when she spoke, Grace seemed not to hear her and continued to study that mat. She spoke again louder.

Mary's voice with a worried tone cut through Grace's confusion. "Mom, did you hear what I said?"

"Ah, what was that again dear?"

"I said I'd be back tomorrow at three to take you to your four o'clock appointment."

"Ok, thanks Mary. See you at three."

Still concerned, Mary gave her a goodbye hug. She saw her mother went right back to staring at the mat. Mary stood there a moment watching Grace and looking at the mat. Then she pointed at the picture she said, "Hey, I didn't notice your waiter before. He didn't leave a dirty glass, He's just ready to pour you another."

Grace looked down at the picture and barely stifled a yell. There at her empty table stood a waiter poised to fill the glass with wine. There was no doubt. Grace was certain that waiter had not been there five minutes before. She looked from the placemat to Mary and back to the picture. "Me either", she said quietly.

After Mary left, Grace rose and quietly shut the door to her room, shutting out the sound of the nurses at the work station across the hall. She sat back down on the bed, took a deep breath and apprehensively looked down at the glossy picture. How could this be. She'd had this picture memorized for years. As if testing her memory, she ran her fingers across the scene. As her eyes reluctantly moved to her table, she let out a gasp. The glass was no longer empty. It now sparkled with a deep red burgundy. Fear overcame fascination. Almost guiltily she looked towards the door and thought of the nurses beyond. They would be certain she was going crazy. Perhaps they would be right. "Senility," she mumbled under her breath. "Oh, my! Is this what it seems like

from inside?

She nervously set the placemat on her lap, closed her eyes and took a deep cleansing breath. She was just tired she thought. A good nights sleep and she wouldn't have to worry about such fantasies. She picked it up again and as her eyes focused on the scene, she let out a small sniffled yell and dropped it on the bed. Now a young waiter looked out at her holding a glass of wine as if offering it to her. In frightened disbelief, she reached out with one finger and touched the glass.

In the next moment she was totally confused by finding herself sitting, not on the bed, but in a chair in a sidewalk café in Paris, holding a glass of wine. She stared around her, taking in the whole scene, one so familiar, yet so different from really be here. All her senses were now at play. She heard quiet voices speaking French, traffic moving by on the street, laughter, a bicycle moving by, wonderful aromas of baking bread, roasting meat, and the nearby perfume shop. Delighted by the scene, Grace didn't even ask if why or how or if she was going mad. She just soaked it in, feeling nothing by elation.

A woman's voice asked in French if she could share the table. Grace was so startled she just turned and stared at the woman, unable to answer. Thinking Grace had not understood her, the woman tried English. "Would you mind if I share your table?"

"Why no," answered Grace somewhat hesitantly. Then she smiled and said, "I would be delighted. Please sit down."

The two women drank sipped the wine in an uncomfortable silence, then began to make small talk. Grace drew the woman out by asking polite questions about the local shops. As the waiter arrived with the bottle offering to pour them a second, two things happened that totally disrupted the scene.

The woman leaned in toward Grace and in a confidential tone said, "You seem to be such a nice woman. Why are you out for wine in your nightgown and Robe?"

As Grace looked down at her attire, she was both astonished and embarrassed. At that moment she also heard a knock on the door to her room. In a split second she was returned to sitting on the bed.

A young nurse's aid entered the room with a food tray and set it on the bed side table.
"Good evening Mrs Marton."

Grace looked to the girls name tag and answered, "Good evening, Cindy."

"We have a special diet dinner for you tonight." As she moved table over to Grace she saw the glass of wine in Grace's hand. "Oh, no, Mrs. Marton, where did you get that. You must have a very specific diet tonight because of your tests tomorrow. Did your daughter bring that?"

Grace looked at the glass, full of wine, and mumbled, "You can see that?"

The young aid laughed. "Of course I can see it. I'm not blind. The nurse better not see it though."

Grace stared at the girl a moment, thinking, The glass is real. It's not just my imagination. She can see it. She looked at the worried look on the girls face. Then to solve the immediate problem she said in a conspiratorial tone, "Well then, Cindy, maybe you better dump it there in the sink. I wouldn't want to break the rules."

Cindy dumped the contents, rinsed the glass and handed it back to Grace who squirreled it away in her purse.

All through dinner, which was clear broth, tepid tea, juice and Jell-O, Grace was going over and over the events of the afternoon. No matter how hard she tried to be rational, no matter how she explained away the fantastic as imagination or wishful thinking, she kept coming back to two thoughts. Mary had seen the empty glass and the waiter in the scene and Cindy saw the wine glass. After dinner the nurse was in and out of the room several times, checking her vitals and giving her pills, including a sleeping pill. When things finally settled down, Grace picked up the tray again and dared to look once more the scene. She found the lights at the café were out. All the tables sat empty, umbrellas folded. It's just as well she thought. I'm too groggy to deal with the consequences of another visit to the café tonight.

She put the tray on the floor next to the bed and leaned it against the wall. As she closed her eyes, she thought about Stan. No wonder she was hallucinating about Paris. She and Stan had been married for over 50 years. This last six months without him had been so empty, so lonely, so lacking in purpose. Just before sleep overtook her, a strange thought came into her mind and she mumbled, "Mary Jane and Sniffles, puff, puff, piffles." She chuckled to herself. It was an old

comic book from her childhood, about a little girl and her pet mouse. Mary Jane could say the magic words, make me as small as Sniffles. Then she and the mouse could jump into a picture and go on great adventures. With that final silly thought she went to sleep.

The next day, during all the unpleasant tests the doctors had set up for her, Grace thought of nothing else but the strange experience she had in . . .well, in Paris. No matter what she was experiencing in the clinic, her mind was escaping to Paris. No matter how logically she told herself that the experience was just a trip of her mind, she came back to one thought: the wine glass. It was real. She had been holding it in her hand when she came back. Cindy saw it. It was real. It still was in her purse. If it's real . . . The one thing she was sure of was that she could tell no one, not even Mary. No one could believe it. They would think she was losing it.

That afternoon as she showered and dressed in the clothing Mary had brought her, Grace wondered if it would be possible to go back and maybe stay in the Paris scene longer. "This time, not in my robe," she laughed. "Crazy" she mumbled. That made her think about her other choices. What was her life to be now? That would of course depend partly on what the doctors found. If she was ok, then what? Stay in her apartment, live with her children, move to a retirement home and play Bingo with the other old ladies? She had read of one old gal who moved to a cruise ship rather than a retirement home. Might be a good adventure, but it would be alone again. After fifty years with Stan . . . Being alone in a crowd can be far lonelier than simple solitude. She combed her hair and put it up on her head with combs, put on a touch of lipstick, and declared herself ready.

She heard the sweet, sad notes of Sidney Bechet's *Si tu Vois ma mere*. She had it on her ipad and had Played it so many times since Stan's death that she often heard it playing in her head, but this was actually playing in the room. She checked her ipad. Not on. Almost knowing what she would find, she picked up the placemat and sat down in the naugahyde chair. The scene had changed. It was now evening and the door to the small jazz club was open. The music flowed out.

Grace looked across the scene to their table and was not surprised by what she saw. It was

no longer empty. Stan was sitting at their table. Two glasses of wine were poured. She simply touched him tenderly and said, "Hello, Stan." Tears formed in her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. "I miss you so much, my dear. Life has very little purpose without you. I would give anything to be with you again in Paris."

When she wiped the tears from her eyes and looked again, Stan was holding out a glass of wine for her to take. She stared for a long moment. She looked briefly around the dreary room. She didn't have to think about it. "Why Not," she whispered. The choice was instantaneous.

"Just one moment, dear. I need to send a text to Mary."

Getting out her phone, she typed: "Dear Mary, After this unpleasant set of tests, I've decided to treat myself to a little trip. Please forgive me for the sudden departure and tell the family not to worry and ask the doctor to postpone my appointment. Oh, one very important thing, VERY IMPORTANT! Please take my Paris scene placemat home with you and keep it safe. When I return I may take you up on staying with you for a while. I will want my placemat. Love Mom"

Mary was livid and frightened as she yelled at the nurses. "What do you mean, you didn't see her leave? The only way out of that room is right past your nursing station and out the front door. How could you have missed her? Were you paying any attention at all?"

The manager of the facility, Mr. Dowd, maintained a calm tone and did not respond with matching anger. "Mrs, Campton, people who come here are free to come and go at any time. We don't have any reason to confine them or watch them. You said yourself that your mother notified you that she had made a sudden decision to take a trip. The clothing you brought her is gone and so is her purse. Her other belonging were folded and stacked on the bed for you Now I am sure she will get hold of you again if any further explanation is necessary."

Mary couldn't argue with that, but was so close to tears that she didn't dare speak, so simply nodded and took the sack with her mother's slippers, robe and nightie and yesterdays clothing.

Dowd smiled and reached out to touch Mary's shoulder with a reassuring pat. "Don't worry, I'm sure you will hear from her soon. She struck me as a very capable and resourceful

woman.”

Mary thanked him and turned to leave. Then she stopped, remembering her mother’s instructions. “Her placemat. I must take it home with me.”

Dowd looked confused but one of the nurses said. “Oh, yes. It’s leaning against the wall there by the bed.” She picked it up and handed it to Mary.

When Mary got to her car she put her mother’s belongings in the passenger seat and sat for several minutes calming down and trying to decide what to think about her mother’s sudden decision.

“Well, Mom. Wherever you’ve gone it must be someplace you couldn’t take you precious placemat.” Mary picked up the mat and looked at the picture, trying to find that empty table her Mom said was her’s and Dad’s. She was confused because all the tables had people at them. She checked again. All tables full. Could her Mom have had two different mats with her? No, Mary knew all four pictures of the Paris scene. This was the one her mother used. Mary searched for the location of the table at the far end of the sidewalk café. As her mother had the day before, Mary sat in confused silence, staring at the picture. She knew it was the right table. She had looked at it the day before and it had been empty except for a dirty glass and the waiter . . . There he was, the same waiter, but now sat two people sat at that table, a man and a woman. A tingle began at the back of her neck and seemed to seep through her body. Those two people looked very much like her mother and father, just slightly stylized in the romantic vision of the artist. Mary’s hand went to her mouth as if stifling a cry as she recognized the dress and coat she had brought for her mother to wear and noticed her Mom was holding a cell phone in one hand and a glass of burgundy in the other.

Mary remembered the strange distraction she saw on her mother’s face the day before when Mary had pointed out the empty glass. “No wonder, Mom. What a trip. Trip,” she repeated, hearing the irony of that word. Mary could not explain what was happening, but she had no doubt that it was real. She also knew she could tell no one. They would lock her up. She reached out and tenderly touched the woman in the picture. “Have a good trip, Mom.”