

A Quiet Dinner

The chicken's tasteless and the vegetables are undercooked. I wonder if they bother to actually cook the veg in hotels these days. For all we know, they could just fling them in the warming oven and serve them up as and when, with the effect ranging from "very al dente" at 7.30 to "traditional" by 10 o'clock.

Not wanting to make it obvious I'm looking at my watch, I reach for the wine bottle with my left hand, my wrist now well clear from the sleeve of my blouse. Eight - fifteen. I study the label for a moment and replace the bottle.

"How's your steak, Ian?" I ask my colleague.

"Good" he says, "Quite rare, the way I like it."

I don't like rare meat myself, and I don't much like having to look at it either. Or Ian, particularly. Still, I'm sure he'd rather be at home with his family and I'd rather be in a million other places. But we're stuck in this hotel for two day's work so we're both trying hard to cheer each other up. I decide not to mention the chicken.

"Good choice of wine" I say, taking a large gulp. It's not bad actually. I make up my mind to have pudding, despite having broken my hotel rules already today with that bread roll at lunch. I turn around to get a view of the side table across the room where they've laid out all the desserts. I'd noticed there seemed to be quite a good selection as we came in, so perhaps that will make up for the main course.

There's a small group there now, all men. They'd been sitting at a long table on the far side of the restaurant, the noise gradually building up as the alcohol no doubt a lot less gradually went down. I'm starting to wish our students were staying here too so we could be a lively group as well, but I know that really I prefer a quiet evening after I've been delivering training all day.

The noisy men are heading back towards their table when suddenly I recognise Ed Pearson. All six foot three of him, clutching his plate and looking about (for the custard?) with exactly the same bewildered expression I once used to tease him about. I turn quickly back to my meal.

"Eyeing up the puddings are you?" Ian asks "You women are always doing that!"

"Mmm, I was thinking perhaps I might go for it later" I say, gulping more wine. All I can think about is that I don't want Ed to see me. Then I realise why – he'll think Ian's my partner! Oh no, that whiney voice, the straggly beard!

What am I thinking? Why should I care what Ed thinks? We finished twelve years ago and I haven't seen him once since then! So why do I wish that Ian could be tall and good-looking just for tonight, please? Just in case Ed should see me.

The group are still laughing away on the other side of the room when the waiter comes to clear our plates. "Will you be having dessert?"

"Well," says Ian, "I think the lady will!"

“Oh, er, I’m not sure now” I say, suddenly panicking at the thought of parading over to the sweet table in full view.

“Really?” asks Ian.

“Coffee in the lounge then?” suggests the waiter.

“Good idea” I reply with relief. The waiter nods and departs. But as soon as he is gone I hear what must be Ed’s group behind me coming towards the exit. They’ll probably be going to the lounge too!

“Sorry, Ian, I think I will have pudding after all! I won’t bother with coffee though, so would you mind having yours in here?”

“I’ll go and tell the waiter” he says, indulging me with good grace.

I turn around. There is nobody left at the long table, everyone else is sitting down and the puddings are all mine. I saunter across. It takes a while to choose – the selection is a pleasant surprise. I finally take a slice of lemon tart and some summer fruits to go with it. Ian doesn’t return until I’ve nearly finished.

“Sorry I took so long” he says “there was a bloke I know in that group that’s just gone out – haven’t seen him for years – his mates have invited me for a drink later, you too of course.

I’m choking on my last piece of lemon tart.

“Oh dear!” I splutter “I’m being punished for having this!” I reach down for my handbag to get out my big hanky. Where is my handbag? Suddenly, I’m not choking, I’m on my feet, foraging under the tablecloth, under my chair, under Ian’s chair, the next table ...

“My handbag’s gone!”

“Oh no, are you sure? I don’t remember seeing you with a bag, perhaps you left it in your room?”

“No. I’m certain it was here. And now it isn’t. Please can you get the waiter Ian?”

He scuttles off. I slump in my seat. That’s all I need! Now, what did I have in my bag? Purse with credit card, cash – how much? Only about twenty pounds. Mobile phone. Make up bag – oh no, I’ll look like a ghost without it! Plastic room key. ROOM KEY! IN A FOLDER WITH THE NUMBER ON IT! There’s the laptop and projector! My car keys. THE CAR! Shit, shit, SHIT!

I can’t just sit here! I run towards reception. I almost collide with Ian, who is on his way back, the waiter behind him.

“Ian, my room key was in my bag, they could take all the stuff from my room, and they could take my car!” I gasp. He turns to follow me to reception and the waiter goes off to search the restaurant area.

The duty manager is called. They have to look up my room number on the computer because I can’t remember it. The duty manager arrives, he says he will accompany me to my room to let me in. Ian volunteers to check on my car. We get to my room. To my great relief, everything is still exactly as I left it. It is not a crime scene. The duty manager picks up the phone.

“Hi, yes, everything’s OK here, nothing taken. Can you get someone to re-program this door lock and arrange a new key card? Thanks.” He turns to me.

“Would you like to go and see about your car now?”

I find Ian in the lobby.

“Your car’s still there” he says, grinning “So they’re going to clamp it to prevent anyone driving it away.” Never before have I considered that having your car clamped could possibly be a welcome event.

“Did they get into your room?”

“No, it’s all OK thanks, they’re just sorting out a new key”

“So now what?” he asks, steering me back towards reception. I feel exhausted.

“Ian, thanks so much for dealing with my car. They’ve reported it all to the police. I’ve got to go and phone up to get my credit card and mobile blocked now. I don’t think there’s much more we can do tonight, I’ll just have to sort out about the car keys tomorrow. I’ll go to my room now if you don’t mind?”

“You sure?” he asks, looking concerned. I nod.

“OK, well if you think of anything, I’ll be in the bar.”

“Yes, of course. Thanks again, see you at breakfast.”

Back in my room I make my phone calls. I feel really stupid about my handbag – I shouldn’t have left it at the table when I went to get pudding, but you wouldn’t expect your bag to get stolen in a hotel restaurant! Oh well, it could have been worse, the car’s OK and so’s my room. I suppose Ed will probably get to hear about this, what an idiot I am. I turn on the TV to try and unwind. It’s hard though, there’s a lot to do tomorrow - I’ve got to get my neighbour with a key to my flat to go and get my spare car key, then I’ll have to arrange for a courier to bring it here. Without any money, I’ll have to get Ian to pay for my petrol home! He’ll have to lend me some cash, there isn’t much food in The phone rings. It’s the duty manager.

“We’ve been handed a bag which meets the description of your missing one. Would you mind coming to identify it please?”

It’s my bag. I’m told it was found in the ladies’ toilets. The car keys are still there! Oh, and my make up too! Only the purse and the mobile are gone. They tell me that they’ve been looking at the security tapes for someone carrying the handbag out of the building, but of course, the thief would have taken it straight to the ladies, removed the purse and phone and put them in a pocket, so it could have been anyone. Well, any woman, presumably.

Not a good night’s sleep.

“Are you sure you’ll be OK with doing the training today?” Ian asks at breakfast.

“I’m sure, honestly, I’d sooner just get on with it and try and forget about my purse. By the way, I need you to pay for my petrol home with your company credit card please. And my room bill, of course.”

So here we are in reception, checking out before we start work for the day.

“The gentleman settling both rooms?” The girl bellows. Ian signs the bill. As I turn away from the desk, I see that Ed is in the queue behind us. I know what will happen next.

"Hi Ed" says Ian "this is Janet, my colleague." I must be the colour of beetroot.

"Nice to meet you, Janet. Er, sorry to hear about your handbag" he says.

"Thanks, just a bit of a shock" I gush. He looks quickly at Ian

"Well, good to see you again!"

That's it! Nice to meet me! Not a hint about us knowing each other, not even a furtive wink. I have no right to be upset, of course, because we've both chosen not to acknowledge each other. But then he was so much more blatant! A few minutes later and I'm out in the car park supervising the removal of the wheel clamps. I see Ed carrying his luggage towards a row of cars. He's determined not to look at me, I'm sure. Part of me wants to go up and accost him, but I know I can't now, I'm committed to carry on with this charade. Besides, it's nearly time for the training to start.

Coffee break and I'm feeling a lot better.

"You seem to be doing OK" says Ian.

"Thanks, yes, I'm just tired now, I'll be glad when I can get home." I can't resist this, I have to steer the conversation, "I'm glad for you that you had some company last night!"

"Yes, it was a quite a surprise catching up with Ed – but we only had a quick drink together last night actually, he went off early. Said he had calls to make. But his mates were very friendly and persuaded me to stay, we had quite a laugh. They were trying to dig up all the dirt from his past!"

"And did you give them any?"

"No, I couldn't do that. Not that there isn't any, I just wasn't letting on."

"Now you're intriguing me."

"Well, he must be feeling very sensitive about the past because, now I think about it, he was a bit off hand with me last night. When I saw him in the lounge I was sure he'd seen me too, but it wasn't till I actually went up to him that he acknowledged me. He said I've changed but I haven't aged that much in twelve years!"

"Twelve years! Er, well, I suppose that's quite a while ago?"

"Maybe, but I'd have thought he'd remember me. We were both single then and we used to go for a beer or two after work quite often. Sometimes he used to say he was having a drink with me when he wasn't, if you see what I mean."

"You mean, he was somewhere he shouldn't have been?"

"Exactly. It got very awkward on the office phone a few times: he was seeing two women at once, you see. I really can't see why it matters after all this time, but for some reason I think he was still really embarrassed about it when he saw me again last night."