

A BEGINNERS'S GUIDE TO FRENCH

Kristin Murdock **OPEN WINNER**



Kristin Murdock has been putting pen to paper all her life. Sharing a birthdate with Agatha Christie, its no surprise her favourite genre is crime. Once a prize winner in the Scarlett Stiletto Competition for crime writers, Kristin continues to hone her skills and loves country settings, having lived in a regional area of South Australia for much of her life. Kristin has three children who are used to her commenting on places as good murder scenes and an understanding American partner who is never sure whether to turn his back on her!

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At the funeral, held on a bright spring day where you could almost hear the crops ripening, handfuls of golden, plump grains of wheat were sprinkled onto Neil Pratt's coffin. It was one of those quaint country traditions, like a casually raised finger of greeting from the greasy ute steering wheel as it whizzed past or knowing the neighbours kelpie's name and ruffling the animal's head just as you might do to your own sheep dog.

This ritual however, was performed to a background of mumbled farewells and an invisible complexity of individual memories. On the peak of the hill near Mudgella, Neil was duly interred among many who had once been his friends; other small town locals, who in life had discussed local footy scores or complained about the latest cereal harvest.

Like a rudderless boat, Gail Pratt was buffeted by the waves of condolence that were repeatedly offered for her husband. It was unnerving for her to formulate a response and utter it aloud. After fifty years as a sidekick, she preferred to blend into the background of any melodrama. So how the hell did she deal with this?

Not for the first time, Gail regretted she and Neil didn't produce children; someone to share things, dilute the sadness, multiply the happiness. What was the point of regrets though? If only. The saddest words in the universe.

According to Doc Naylor, who had professionally laid his hands on just about every local resident, Neil hardly felt a thing. Heart attack. Jumped out of the ute in the scrub paddock, about to check the new crossbred lambs and bam! - 68 years of existence slowly disintegrated into the dirt of Sunset Farm. Sand over loam, Neil regularly noted, croppable with the right treatment.

Gail, at that moment stretching her legs at that new senior's exercise class in town, was none the wiser.

She hadn't mentioned the class to Neil, but it didn't take long for the only policeman in town to find Gail, who was flat on her back and performing bicep curls. Small towns were like that. Asked Amy, you know, the girl behind the shop counter, said she saw your car heading this way.

Neil had never seen the importance of scheduled fitness.

"Moving a mob of sheep is plenty of exercise," he was fond of grumbling. End of conversation. As for classes on the internet (back when it was all new), well, Neil couldn't see the point in that either.

The crowds of mourners had fragmented into small groups, moving away from the freshly turned earth of the gravesite and returning to their cars.

Gail felt tears pricking awkwardly in the corner of her eyes, uncertain where to turn now that Neil was no longer beside her as he would normally be at such an event. She clasped the iron frame of the cemetery gate, warm and strangely comforting from the sun's bright rays. She longed to be one of the human flow, drifting back to their cars on a receding tide of sorrow.

There was a type of symbiosism among these people, not found in the city where you rarely dared meet the eyes of another. To be honest, it was friendship made, not only through family but through location and the corresponding lack of options, but it was friendship nonetheless.

Sue Thorne, proprietor of the Mudgella Post Office was suddenly in front of her and met Gail's eyes with her own, their blue depths glistening slightly. How many 'Stock Journals' had Sue poked in their mail box (PO Box 108, Mudgella) over the years? What an odd thing to think of.

Gail held Sue's pale hand briefly, unspoken words caught in the air, until the younger woman moved on. A brief respite before the next wave of sympathy.

When Gail came to Mudgella, over fifty years ago, she had been a bright eyed teacher from Adelaide, fresh from years of learning and wanting to share her knowledge with others. Neil, a dark, brooding farmer from the largest property in the district, had taken her to the local show and also the town hall where they once showed the latest pictures, all the way from Hollywood.

In this long gone whirlwind of attention, Gail caught the envious eyes of the other girls in town when Neil drew her onto the dance floor and held her scandalously close. Back in the day when people whirled through sprinkled sawdust on jarrah floors.

Blessedly, the line of well-wishers dwindled, until Gail remained in an uncomfortable threesome with the minister and funeral director. Men whose professions dealt regularly with loss. Gail searched them for tips on how to act on this windy hill, surrounded by people long gone.

Her body slumped in exhaustion. No surprise as she had barely slept since Sergeant Temple had found her at the exercise class, sweaty and breathless, while her husband's body was being transported to the hospital morgue. Always in charge, Neil had just enough time to dial the ambulance apparently. Gail wasn't surprised.

But, exhausted or not, her presence was required at the Footy Club, site of every local wake and organised by a turnover of generations. Steering the ute back into Mudgella, Gail found an ironic smile play on her lips. Country Life! One minute you're helping out a local family whose elderly member has passed away, next minute you become that elderly member!

Time had a way of moving on, however stagnant it feels in the moment. Gail entered the Mudgella Community Sports Clubrooms and obediently cradled the milky coffee that some young Mum (Marge Howell's youngest, was it?), head bowed, had slipped into her hand.

Trestle tables were laden with homemade baking. In spite of the occasion, Gail took note of the velvety texture of the raspberry cheesecake slice. A cooking class to learn about such delicacies, had always been on her bucket list. But there was never the time, nor, as Neil said, was there the necessity, particularly when his mother's CWA cookbook lay in the kitchen drawer, spattered with years of flying cake mix.

Four o'clock. Surely an appropriate time to leave?

"You look tired," some said.

"So drained," noted Greg Carpenter, placing one hand on her arm. He was the local livestock agent, clad in his pin-striped work-shirt, the death of Neil Pratt apparently not warranting an entire day off.

“What will you do now?” many asked aloud, puzzled that quiet, mousy Gail Pratt would consider staying out at the big homestead all alone. She smiled appropriately. Little did they know, she had been on her own for years.

Gail placed her empty cup on the counter. An empathetic young brunette mother, counting down the minutes to the school bus, snatched it up efficiently, dipping it in a sink of lukewarm, swampy water.

Finally, it was appropriate to make her escape, steering the rattly ute down the familiar dusty road, to home and solitude.

Despite what others predicted, back at the huge homestead, things didn't appear quiet or lonely. Neil and Gail had barely spoken for years. Instead it was... Gail looked across the paddock where sheep grazed on the remains of last year's wheat stubble. In her mind she searched for the right description. Calm. Yes, that was precisely the right word.

Opening the screen door, a whoosh of cool air rushed inside from the veranda. Neil detested the doors open in the evening, and the way it allowed the day's accumulated warmth to escape. She bent and retrieved a stone from the garden, propping the wooden door ajar.

Gail drifted through the kitchen, the lounge and the wide, cricket pitch hallway eventually sitting on the long superfluous double bed.

Gail slid a bedside drawer open, long fingers moving deftly through the sensible brown socks. Sensible, according to Neil as they hid the dirt from the sheep yards, allowing Gail to whizz into town at a moment's notice, and still look presentable. A short walk to the kitchen and the sensible bundles found themselves rustling in protest against the garbage bag as they dropped into the bin. Except for one pair which remained lumpy in Gail's hand.

For years, Gail had successfully pilfered small amounts of money from her housekeeping allowance. Housekeeping? Who had that anymore? Once, Gail had mentioned it to a young girl from down the general store. She'd looked at Gail like she was a quaint relic from a bygone age.

Trouble was, Gail was never permitted to get off the farm much or to learn new things. Permitted? She visualised the amused look from that same young girl. No need for such garbage, according to Neil. Waste of time and money.

Gail shook the sock and bundles of tightly rolled notes tumbled onto the kitchen counter. From the kitchen drawer, hidden beneath her long gone mother-in-law's CWA cookbook, Gail withdrew a glossy catalogue. Paris. Happy tourists smiled from the cover and Gail found herself smiling back, but without the blandness she had perfected over time.

If they owned a computer (but, of course that wasn't necessary), Gail would have flicked through the tour itinerary, as she often did at the local library. The Eiffel Tower, Montmartre, Toulouse; exotic colours and decadent aromas far removed from the paddocks and sheep yards.

New found freedom meant Gail didn't shift the money or travel brochure from the counter. Instead, she removed a recently purchased bottle from the fridge and decadently poured herself a wine – for no reason at all! From beneath a pile of newspapers in the corner, Gail located another carefully hidden brochure.

She turned the pages, feasting her eyes on the lists of classes, their names rolling decadently around Gail's imagination – reiki, facebook, scrap booking, tango; a virtual check list of everything Neil deemed unnecessary. With delicious light-heartedness, Gail pencilled a ring around her selections. She chose a pertinent one for her first choice – 'A Beginners Guide to French'.

Old habits die hard. Gail nearly slid the brochure back into its hiding place in the drawer, before remembering there was no need for secrets anymore. Since Neil's heart attack, she hadn't even wiped down the glass door of the oven, and felt ridiculously smug about it.

Gail sipped her wine thoughtfully and peered out the open screen door to the paddocks beyond. If Neil had been observant at any stage over their fifty years together, he may have come across that list of classes and noticed the barely visible pen dot that marked the one course she had secretly attended (I've got a mammogram love, need to go to the city, women's stuff).

'Eating for a Healthy Heart'.

Gail had listened intently to the lecturer and made a pertinent list of notes before returning to the farm. She had memorised the health tips and proceeded to...

Do. The. Exact. Opposite.

Well, for Neil anyway. Plenty of saturated fats and fried food, and he didn't complain once. He had even made a joke about his expanding waist line over the last few months. Gail had smiled indulgently.

Of course she could never be sure whether she had contributed to his ultimate collapse or not, with his family history of heart disease and all. But she couldn't be sure she hadn't either. Did she accelerate the ultimate scenario along a few years? Was it technically murder, or manslaughter at the very least? With Neil gone, Gail had years of freedom to ponder over that. Hell, even being thrown in jail would have provided more freedom than the last five decades. Perhaps there was a series of legal lectures where she could learn such details?

Gail sipped the last of her wine, picked up a pencil and thoughtfully placed a ring around one more course; 'Dealing with Guilt'. It was scheduled for the day before she flew out to Paris.

First up though was 'A Beginner's Guide to French'.

C'est la vie!