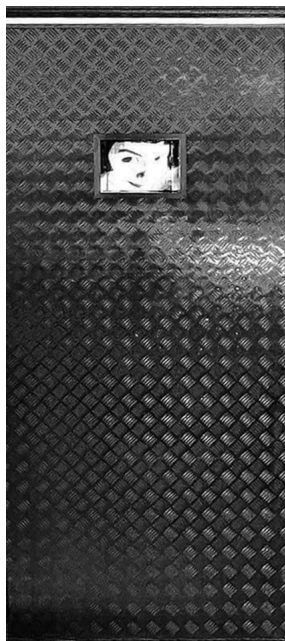


AN EVENING AT THE FAMILIAR RESTAURANT



High quality food. Price is in line with the food and services provided. Also the atmosphere is nice, with live piano music. I suggest to try the lamb and the fish soup.¹

1 Google Review of Bistrot Amélie, Javastraat 138a (closed), accessed February 21, 2025.

We sit at the familiar restaurant, the one my grandmother and I always went to when I was younger. The place is dimly lit, with only a few lightbulbs shining in seemingly arbitrary places from the ceiling. It is dark outside, and rainy. The walls are the color of an intense red, and from a little window in the door that leads to the kitchen, the face of Amélié (from the film of the same name) stares at me with what seems to be, because of the way the photo is edited, a smile with some malicious intent. Someone is playing the piano. Because of the size of the restaurant, the music (if you can call it that) feels slightly overpowering. The restaurant is quite full, with people laughing, shouting (some are considerably drunk), while some are eating in silence. At the table next to us, two people are on what seems to be their first date. What type of music do you listen to? What is your favorite film? Forgive me, I completely forgot, what did you say you're studying? I'm not studying at the moment. Oh. It must have been someone else then. Someone else? You go on a lot of dates? No, I didn't mean— it's okay, I'm just messing with you. The food is really good. I agree. Silence. So, how was your day? Horrible. Really? Yes. Want to tell me about it? No. It's in the past now. I'm over it. Nothing I can do about it. I hope everything is fine. Yes, everything is fine, I think. Well, let's talk about something nice then. Like what? Well, the weather, for example, is really nice today. I don't think so. Oh. I quite like rain. I don't. Oh.

A waiter walks up to us.

"What could I get you?" he asks, smiling widely. His eyes open up, almost as if popping out of their sockets and the smile keeps widening, reminiscent of Amélié on the other side of the kitchen door.

"The fish of the day has turned out to be very popular," he says, the smile widening ever more.

"Is that so?" my grandmother asks.

"Certainly. And for what it's worth, I can say that it might just be the best fish I've ever eaten. Salmon it is. Most people's favorite fish. That's why it is our fish of the day almost every day" he says

Certainly not mine, I think in my head and turn towards the menu, his smile making me a little uneasy.

The waiter's smile fades, and he glances at me for a second with a disappointed look.

"And you're not saying that just because you work here?" My grandmother asks.

"Certainly not. For example," the waiter lowers his voice a little, "the lamb is absolute garbage. Worst lamb I've ever eaten" he says.

"Oh, that's a pity. I was just about to order it" I chime in.

"I would advise against that. Unless you want to— yeah, well. It's your choice of course" he says

"We'll take the fish of the day, then" my grandmother says and looks at me to confirm my approval. I nod.

"Excellent choice! And anything to drink?" he says.

"Just water for me" I say.

"For me too" my grandmother says.

The waiter takes our menus and walks away at a fast pace.

The table next to us has fallen silent, both of them eating, lost in their own thoughts. *I hope nothing bad happened to her today. Or maybe to someone close to her. Did her mother die? Or maybe she got diagnosed with some illness. Loss of appetite, definitely a sign of some illness. Or is she on Ozempic? Pregnant?* The man starts to cough aggressively, as he almost chokes on his food, and after a lot of coughing, a huge piece of lamb flies out of his mouth, landing on the woman's plate. I'm so sorry. It's okay, don't worry about it. The piece of lamb lays there on the plate, half-chewed, wet and soggy.

The waiter walks to our table.

"I regret to inform you that, due to the surprising critical acclaim of the fish of the day, we have run out of it. As in, we no longer possess enough ingredients to make it for you" he says.

"Oh, well that's a pity" my grandmother says.

"Yes, it is a pity. I am very sorry for this inconvenience. But because of this, I would like to offer you our soup of the day. It is very good, almost as good as the fish, though it's hard to compare, them obviously being completely different dishes. And, because of the inconvenience of the situation, you will get it free of charge!" he says.

"Oh, well thank you. But you don't have to do that. It really wasn't any inconvenience at all" my grandmother says.

"Nonsense. I insist!" he says.

"Very well then, we'll have the soup of the day then" my grandmother says and again looks at me, confirming my approval.

"Excellent choice! I'll tell the chef to pay extra attention to making it for you" the waiter says and walks away with huge leaps.

The table next to us is ordering the check. How was the food? Excellent, thank you. Best lamb I've ever eaten. Glad to hear that. The waiter looks at us for a brief moment, snickering. Would you like to pay together, or separately? Silence. The man blushes and lets out an

awkward laugh. Separately. That will be 20 euros each. Oh no, I can pay. You don't have to do that. I insist. Fair enough. Excellent choice, that will be 40 euros. The card declines. Let me get it. No no, it must be to do with the machine. Let's try again. The card declines, again. I'll get it. The waiter prints out the receipt and leaves it on the table. Have an excellent evening, you two. He walks away from their table and looks at us, panicking. He picks up his pace and runs to the kitchen.

I look out of the window. Dark. The rain falls from the sky almost violently. Someone on the street is pacing back and forth, thinking very hard about something. Must be a complex dilemma. Someone is running fast, with a concerned look on their face, seemingly late for some important event.

The waiter comes to our table again, with a bottle of water and two glasses.

"I'm so sorry. I completely forgot to bring your water!" he says.

"It's okay," my grandmother says, "happens to the best of us" she says.

"Yes, well, I do apologize. There's just so much going on today, and it's my first day working here!" the waiter says.

"You're doing just fine, don't worry about it" my grandmother says with a soothing tone. A tone with which you would talk to an upset four year old.

"Thank you. Kind people like you really are the reason I do what I do. Reminds me that there are good and genuine people out there" he says, and as he says this, a single teardrop rolls down his cheek, landing eventually on the wooden floor. He wipes his eyes with his hand.

"Oh, there are good and genuine people all around us!" my grandmother exclaims.

"Trust me, sometimes you forget that while doing what I do. People can be so mean! And when I say mean, I mean malicious! Well, anyway, here's the water. Your food will be here any minute now! I'll make sure of that!" he says, and starts pouring water to my glass. The glass is full, but he keeps pouring, seemingly lost in thought. The water falls on my lap. I don't know what to say. My grandmother is looking out of the window, oblivious to the whole situation.

"Excuse me, I think the glass is full" I say.

The waiter wakes up from his daydream.

"I, for one, always tend to think that the glass is half-empty. I guess it's the pessimist in me."

"I mean, that the glass in which you are pouring water at the moment, is already full" I say.

The waiter runs to the kitchen, wiping his eyes.

"It's a really nice atmosphere in here, isn't it?" my grandmother says.

"Certainly is" I say.

"So cozy, so good, so French." she says.

"Certainly" I say again, as if I had just learned the word certainly.

The young man and woman from the table next to us are leaving. The man has all of a sudden gotten considerably drunk. Or perhaps he's been drunk the whole time. He sways uncertainly around the table as if looking for something. God, what now? I think I've lost my other shoe. Your other shoe? Yes, Isabelle, as I said, my other shoe. In particular, my right shoe. Where the hell could you possibly have lost your shoe? I don't know, do I? If I did, I wouldn't be looking for it, would I? The waiter arrives at their table. Is this perhaps your shoe? The waiter holds a black leather shoe in his right hand. The man examines the shoe with his drunken eyes, seemingly unable to identify it as his. For god's sake Jonas, yes, that is his shoe. Isabelle takes the shoe from the waiter, thanking him. Jonas, please just put this shoe on and let's get out of here. You're embarrassing yourself again, and me. The whole restaurant has in fact gone silent, everyone

following the show with deep focus. Jonas puts his shoe on, and as he does this, falls to the ground. The whole restaurant gasps simultaneously. Oh my god, Jonas, Enough! Isabelle grabs him by the arm and walks him to the exit. By the way, the lamb was shit! I know, says the waiter.

The waiter turns to our table, and him and Amélié both stare at me with their unnerving smiles.

“Everything okay in here?” Amélié asks.

“Everything is fine, thank you very much” my grandmother answers.

“Apologies for that. Should probably deny entrance to him next time. Well, your food is arriving any minute now.” Amélié says.

The waiter walks to the kitchen, this time rather slowly, almost in slow motion.

After about twenty minutes, the food finally arrives. I devour my soup in one minute, having grown hungrier than ever while waiting. I gulp a whole glass of water in one go. My grandmother does the same, and burps loudly. The whole restaurant turns to us. My grandmother gets up from her seat.

“Excuse me everyone, I have no idea where that came from” she says and sits back down.

The waiter runs to our table.

“Well, how was the soup?” he asks.

“Excellent. Really, one of the best soups I’ve ever eaten” my grandmother says.

"I'm glad to hear! I knew that you would like it!" He says and turns to me. "How about you, did you enjoy the soup? Soup," he asks.

"Certainly" I say.

"Excellent" he says.

The rain stops outside. The restaurant is silent.

"Would you like dessert or coffee perhaps?" the waiter asks.

"I think we need to get going," my grandmother says.

"Very well. That is a pity though, I'm certain you would love our dessert of the day. Chocolate ice cream it is. But I assure you, it's nothing like the chocolate ice creams you've eaten before. See, I myself hate chocolate ice cream. Always have and always will. It started from a rather traumatic experience with chocolate ice cream I had when I was about your age," the waiter says and points to me "but, better not to get into all that now.

What I mean to say, is that despite my trauma, I have actually grown a particularly grand liking for our chocolate ice cream. Matter of fact, every day after work, I devour at least two gallons of it, hiding in the bathroom!" he says.

"Perhaps next time. Perhaps we'll try the ice cream next time, I mean," my grandmother says.

"Yes. Next time." he says.

The waiter picks up our plates.

"I'll get back to you shortly with the check" he says.

The waiter jogs back to the kitchen.

The restaurant is getting emptier now. All the big groups have left, leaving behind them a huge mess. The waiter doesn't seem to have time to clean the tables. Why do they only have one waiter working on such a busy evening? I feel a bit bad for him, as he runs around the restaurant. It doesn't seem that he's doing anything productive at the moment though, just running from one point to another. I wonder what happened between him and chocolate cake. The rain has started again, and I listen to the sounds it makes; the raindrops hitting the pavement, the roof, the window.

Two men have just arrived, sitting at the table where the young couple sat before. Have you been here before? No. You? No. Right. I read some Google reviews beforehand, couldn't help myself. And? Yes, well, mostly positive. Mostly positive? Yes, mostly positive.

The waiter arrives at our table with the check. It seems as if he's avoiding our gaze.

"It'll be 90 euros, please", he says.

"Excuse me?" my grandmother says.

"It'll be 90 euros, please. Cash or card?" he says.

"But we only had soup, which was supposed to be free of charge. How can it be 90 euros?" my grandmother says.

"Déflation, what can you do" he says.

"Do you mean inflation?" my grandmother says.

"Déflation, inflation, comme ci comme ca. S'il vous

plaît, payez maintenant” he says.

“Excuse me?” my grandmother says.

“Payez maintenant, s’il vous plaît. Ou je te demande de faire la vaisselle pour le reste de la soirée” he says, and waves his hands in the air aggressively. My grandmother takes her purse out of her bag and pays with a credit card.

“Merci beaucoup. J’espère que vous passerez une bonne fin de soirée et j’espère vous voir bientôt.” he says.

My grandmother looks at him with a never-before-seen anger.

What were those not-so-positive reviews then? Doesn’t matter. What do you mean? Well, if something is mostly good, then why dwell on the bad? I’m just curious. We’re here already, there’s no turning back anymore. I’m a bit scared. It’s okay, everything will be just fine.

The rain falls from the sky, and in under 10 seconds we are both soaking wet. I take my phone out of my pocket and leave a one-star review on Google.



Written by Otso Prunnila

As part of the group show We
Were Never Here, Javastraat
138a.