The Fight

by Peter Breyer (December 2020)



Party, Emil Nolde, 1911

He must have been walking for hours when he turned a corner and saw the Negro girl walking toward him. She was with that damned Corsican, talking so intently that at first he thought they would not notice him. “Hi, Franz!” she said.

“Hi, Christie!” He tried to sound as chipper as she

did. They had met only the day before, but already he had decided he was going to marry her.

The Corsican, Vincent, nodded but said nothing.

"We are on our way to the cinema. Would you like to come along? It is about French railway workers," she said.

"Ah, *La Bataille du Rail*. Great film. I already saw it. But thanks," Franz answered with a smile and continued on his way. As a freelance journalist in postwar Paris, he might be able to get a story out of the film, but no, he wasn't about to tag along. He had some pride. He could not conceal his disappointment in Christie. How could she go out with that creep? She was everything he wanted in a woman, beautiful, sweet, and smart. *She thinks I'm white. I'm not about to tell her. She has to accept me for what she sees.*

As he strode back to his room, Franz picked up a bottle of wine. He had acted like an idiot, allowing the sight of Christie—on the street surrounded by her band of French friends—to convince him that finding his dream woman in Paris had come at last. They had spoken only briefly in the Café de Flore, where he had run into her, and she had explained she was in Paris for the summer to work on her master's thesis. She was studying the novels of George Sand in a summer colloquium. He had joined her table and listened to the literary conversation with interest. Perhaps he was living in a Sand novel himself.

In the morning, he woke to the empty bottle of wine lying sideways on his night table. His stomach was growling, his clothes were rumpled, and he stank. When he looked in the mirror, he didn't like what he saw. A disheveled man with bloodshot eyes, in need of a shave and bath. As he turned off Rue de Pigalle, he heard a shouting match in the alleyway. He glanced over to see what the commotion was about. Four men stood around a tri-wheel scooter, the passenger seat piled

high with cartons, and money was being exchanged. Black marketers, he realized. He looked again and realized it was Vincent the Corsican who was standing flat against the building supervising the transaction.

Later that day he arrived at Flore.

"She is for you, I sense it. I don't see the Corsican for her," the sweet waitress said. "He comes here often, always with something to sell. Who knows what he did during the war."

"He told me he was in the Resistance," Franz said.

She shrugged and told him, "Everyone says that they were in the Resistance."

Had Vincent collaborated with the Germans? Franz had known people like Vincent in the States. They had no morals; they simply chose the winning side. How could Christie fall for a phony like Vincent? Was it his complexion? A Corsican of North African descent who was not quite white, not really Black—but something in between. Franz was determined to show Christie that he was the better man. Skin color should have nothing to do with it.

When Christie came into the café, she was with Vincent and his friend Charles. Her presence electrified Franz. He wondered if Christie had spent the night with Vincent. Vincent didn't say a word to Franz, but watched his every move.

When Franz asked Christie if she liked the movie, she smiled. She found it informative that these ordinary Frenchmen would take such chances for their country.

"That is what we did in the Resistance every day," Vincent said. Franz refused to look at him. He was seeing how brazenly Vincent lied.

They ordered their coffees.

"Sand herself could have written the screenplay. It really showed the human side of the Resistance," Christie said.

"What kind of struggle? She made plenty of money with her books," said Vincent.

"Despite her aristocratic background, she was a model for all women today, even Negro women," Franz said.

"But what kind of inspiration could a French noblewoman give to a Negro woman?" Vincent asked in a raised voice.

"Sand dramatized the plight of subjugated women, rich and poor," Franz explained, "to any woman, regardless of her race or social class?"

When Christie nodded in agreement, he felt as if he were the only man in the café. To offset the impression that he was taking over the discussion, Franz reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of Camels, which he offered to everyone. Charles was the only one to accept his offer, grinning happily as he inhaled.

"Thank you very much, but we do not need your American gifts," Vincent said with annoyance. He pulled out a pack of Gitanes, tapped one out, and lit it slowly.

It was time for Franz to make his move. "*Ce matin, dans la ruelle*. Are those the cigarettes I saw you selling this morning?"

"So now you are spying on me?" Vincent responded in a menacing tone. He turned to Charles and reverted to French so Christie couldn't understand. "I have had enough shit from this American farm boy. Let us take him outside."

“Is that what you really did during the war—black marketeering?” Franz said in French, also hoping Christie would not understand.

Vincent turned to Charles again. “I am taking this hick outside to make him understand that he is not welcome here.”

Franz’s fists were clenched, and he felt himself trembling slightly. Charles stayed with Christie. Neither said a word. Vincent led the way. The alley smelled like piss. The walls of the buildings on each side were stained. Garbage was everywhere. A cat slinked away.

“So, you little prick, you try to move in on my woman and then accuse me of being a black marketer?” Vincent said angrily. “It is time for you to leave. You think you speak French, but you sound like a Spanish pig.” Vincent laughed at his own insult.

Franz stepped in toward Vincent until he was inches from his face. Without any warning, Franz shoved Vincent down to the ground, taking him completely by surprise and shouting, “*Va-t-en! Dégages!* I want you gone or I will bash your face in. I know what you do.” He stood over Vincent like a wolf about to devour his prey. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Charles cowering at the exit of the café. Vincent scrambled up, taunting him. “You want that colored slut so bad that you are willing to get beat up for her!”

Franz lunged at him, pinned him to ground, and punched his face. He was incensed and began to pummel Vincent without respite. The nerve of this fucker to call Christie a slut. He felt a rage directed not only at Vincent, but at all those people in his life who had called him half-breed. In the midst of this fury, Franz felt Charles grab him from behind. “Please stop, Franz, stop, you will kill him!” he heard Charles shout. “I will take him away. We will go—I promise we will go.”

It was the word “please” that caught Franz’s attention and brought him to a halt. He stood up. Vincent’s face was a bloody mess. “Hey, sorry, man,” he said. He helped Charles pull Vincent up, and the two of them retreated slowly out to the street. Franz was shaking with fury.

He tried to settle himself, hoping that Christie would still be in the café. He stood outside alone until he could stop shaking. After a few minutes, he ran his fingers through his hair to smooth it out. Still a little dazed, he walked into the café. This would be the first time he would be alone with Christie, and *I need to appear charming*, he told himself. He paused for another second, inhaled deeply, and focused on Christie.

“Franz, what is going on? Where are Vincent and Charles?” Christie asked.

“Oh, Vincent was not feeling well, so Charles took him home,” Franz said. “Listen, Christie, would you be up for a walk?”

“Okay, but what happened? Vincent may seem boorish to you, but he’s really a nice man,” she explained. “I have noticed that when he’s with other men, he becomes competitive.”

Franz didn’t want to tell Christie what Vincent had said about her. “It was nothing, Christie. We disagreed about a few things, that’s all. Too bad it had to get physical.” He wondered if she suspected it had really been about her.

“Men are like that,” Christie said. “Maybe actually fighting it out is more honest than the polite backstabbing we women do.”

“I cannot imagine you going after anyone,” Franz said in astonishment.

Christie laughed. “Get real, Franz. You’re an American; you can picture what I have to put up with back home. And here the French guys are so romantic; they think I’m some kind of Gauguin dream girl. But I bet you know better. I have gotten to where I am because I don’t let anyone get away with anything.” She gave him a slow smile. “You will see.”

There was something so seductive in the way she had said that! They headed toward the Seine, Franz’s favorite place to stroll.

“Franz, I cannot believe you speak French so well. I knew some French majors at Hunter, but they were not nearly as fluent as you are. How did you learn it?”

“I took French in high school, spent three years in the Army here in France, and then studied it more in college. I really love speaking it. It is like another way of seeing the world. It’s hard to understand Paris and the French without speaking their language.” They continued walking.

“I was reading up on Sand in the library and found out she spent most of her life on her family estate in Nohant, watching and writing about ordinary people. I’m planning a trip there next week for my magazine.”

Christie laughed. “I’m impressed.”

“It is about three hours by train from Paris and then another half hour by bus. If we left first thing in the morning, we could be back by early evening.”

When she asked how much it would cost, he told her that he could put it on his expense account. He was lying, but he wanted to sound professional to her.

Christie suggested that her advisor, Roger, could come since he knew so much about Sand. “He would make a great guide.”

Franz groaned inwardly. He had scarcely met Roger Vandevier, but the fat little Frenchman in the expensive shirts was clearly Christie's Cicerone in Paris. He was cordial and knowledgeable, and it was comforting to Franz that she had not suggested Vincent as a chaperone.

"Great idea, why don't you ask him?" he said between clenched teeth.

Christie was noncommittal but asked where he was staying.

"Hotel Soufflot."

"Ah, that's just around the corner from me. I'll let you know," Christie said.

Franz left her at the entrance to her hotel, without even attempting a friendly kiss on the cheek. The next two days dragged along without any word from her. He was beginning to doubt that Christie was ever going to give him any attention when he found a note in his hotel box.

Dear Franz,

It is all set for tomorrow. Roger and I are going to Nohant, so feel free to join us. Roger says we should catch the 7:50 train from the Austerlitz station. We will meet at my hotel at 7:00.

–Christie

Finally, and I should "feel free" to join them! Franz sputtered to himself. The trip had been his idea. But it was good to find out that he was still in the game, albeit in left field. The time without Christie and without the camaraderie of the café crowd at Flore had given him a chance to think. The reality of where his fantasy of love had led him was beginning to take root. Did he really want to go back home with a Negro girlfriend? Even in New York City, he and

Christie would be the object of stares and whispers wherever they went. Where would they live? In Harlem? And what about their children? He remembered with anguish his fourth-grade class where the kids called him *half-breed* when they found out that his mother was part Black. They said it with such scorn. How would Christie react when she found out that his mother was Negro? Living his whole life as a lie by passing for white. He didn't know how to tell her.

He had only a night to decide. Sure, he could go along for the ride, just to see what would happen. But that wasn't his style. His attraction to Christie was like nothing he had ever felt before.

Anxiety overtook him as he approached Christie's hotel the next morning.

No one was in the lobby when he arrived. The hotel clerk rang Christie on the house phone. Franz waited impatiently as the minutes ticked by. Ten minutes late, she came down the stairs in a sundress and a straw hat.

"Where's Roger?" Franz asked.

"Oh, I told him to meet us there. He wanted to drive, but I thought it would be a nice ride on the train, just the two of us. I scarcely know you and thought it would be good to get acquainted. But we had better hurry if we are to catch the train."

"Christie, wait, I want to tell you something…it's important."

"You mean, that you pass? I already knew that from the first time we met. I was just waiting for you to tell me."

"I was afraid. I wanted you to be with me 'cause of me."

"And who is me exactly?" Christie asked. "You don't

have to answer now. We have a long train ride ahead of us to talk about it."

Franz was so filled with joy he could hardly walk. As if she sensed this, Christie took his hand as they walked to the Austerlitz train station. He felt he had hit the ball out of the park and was running for home.

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Peter Breyer has a BA from City College of New York and a PhD from Rutgers University, and has worked as a health care consultant. His short stories and essays have appeared in *Silk Road: A Literary Crossroads, Carbon Culture Review, Dash Literary Journal, Evening Street Review, Existere Journal, Forge Journal, Adelaide Literary Journal, Poydras Review, Sweet Tree Review,* and *Streetlight Magazine*. Max has also worked in the Peace Corps, and is currently a CBD hemp grower in the Hudson Valley.

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