

CHRISTIANE FRENETTE



after

the

red

night

a novel translated by
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MAY 1950

REVIEW - NOT FOR RESALE

Three days after the red night, Marie still hasn't come back to the house. The nuns at the convent hope that she, the best student in the class of 1949, would stay a while longer, to give them a hand. Since the hospice was evacuated on Saturday night, Marie has hardly slept. The first night she had spent inside the cathedral with the children. All terrified. The older children and the younger ones asked her if it was the end of the world. She had no reply.

Three days after the red night, Romain turns up at home with bag and baggage. His new life is beginning. At last. As soon as he arrives he goes to the scene. An entire district razed. Physicians — colleagues, he can say now — who'd come back from Europe when the war was over, had told him what they'd seen. Bombardments, villages set ablaze, destruction, hatred. Suddenly he felt as if he were there. Romain is speechless in the presence of people who search the rubble where their house had been. The slightest charred spoon found is a sign that life might go on.

Three days after the red night, Thomas still refuses to leave his room, despite the pleas of his parents. The nightmare is

ending. Soon, men will come, they will calm their son with an injection, then take him away. Far. As far as Quebec City. Thomas is not like other young men. His parents have known that for a good while, but they hoped for a reversal of things, they cling to the idea that, with time, Thomas would find his way. He's not a bad boy, he doesn't bother anyone. Withdrawn, reserved, he only goes outside to walk his dog. In the evening or at night. On Saturday, though everything had keeled over, Thomas hadn't found his way, he had taken the emergency exit. Shortly after the fire broke out, he was pacing the streets, crying out to anyone who'd listen that it was he who had set fire to the Price Company lumberyard. Too busy, people paid no attention to him. At one point a man had ordered him to go home. Thomas had continued to proclaim his guilt. In the middle of the night, when the whole district was ablaze, he had begun to thrash about and to cry out in pain. He asked for help, claimed he'd been burned. His dog followed him, whimpering. Finally, his father found him and took him home. Since then, Thomas has been holed up in his room with his dog. He cut his sheets into long strips and wrapped them around his arms, legs, and chest. Now and then he howls. Outside his door, his father tells him again and again that there's nothing wrong with him, that there are no burns on his body. When he hears those words, Thomas howls even louder. Soon, men will come.

Three days after the red night, Joe is running home from school. Just time enough to change his clothes and grab his glove and his bat. He and his friends are to meet in a few

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minutes at the back of the vacant lot behind the hardware store. Some slightly older boys have challenged them. At this moment nothing exists for Joe but his will to win. Later this evening, before he goes to sleep, he thinks that he's just lived the most wonderful day of his life. Sinking into sleep, he murmurs that he's the best hitter in Joliet, Illinois.

Three days after the red night, Lou is not yet anything but a breath that is travelling towards the light. Three days after the red night, she has a premonition about the infinitesimal smell of ashes that reaches her when the greater part of her journey is behind her.

MAY 1955

REVIEW - NOT FOR RESALE

“*H*ow could I forget it all?” Thomas wonders, his body given over to the swaying of the train, forehead pressed against the window, eyes staring vacantly. Over four years he had searched, tracked his memory, with no result. Then, gradually, bits had come back to him. The first time, the previous November, six months ago, he’d been working — pruning shrubs and burning leaves. He had raised his head abruptly and looked towards the St. Lawrence: the sun was going down, setting Lévis ablaze. Firelight. His dog had appeared to him then, in the middle of a fire. Panic-stricken, the animal was whimpering, with restraint, pathetically, as if he were forbidding himself to howl, to avoid rubbing it in. The dog, his whole body trembling, pressed himself against Thomas’s legs. And that, in particular, is what Thomas remembers. So he was there too, in the nightmare.

That nightmare he knows by heart. How many times did his old psychiatrist tell him in detail about the red night? How many times has Thomas read the newspaper clippings that recount hour by hour how the fire had started and progressed? The doctor had brought them to him, saying: “Take

a good look at the pictures too.” Thomas had read and reread. He had examined every detail of the photos until his eyes were worn out. The gaping hole in the city, the burned-up part of the world, must resemble his brain. He couldn’t remember a thing.

During his years in the hospital, people had told him over and over who he was and where he came from. That was how he’d learned that he had parents; that he was the only child of a respected Rimouski couple. Many of them — nurses, doctors, nuns — told him continually. They had spread the word: Thomas was intelligent, eventually the spark would appear. The young man made himself into the devil’s advocate: “Your arguments aren’t very sound,” he told them. “If I had a father and a mother as you claim, they’d have come to see me here in the hospital ages ago!” The reply: “Rimouski is a long way from here, you know. Do you need proof, Thomas? Is there anything you lack? Cigarettes, for instance? Have you compared your clothes with those of the other residents? Your room may be tiny, but it’s all your own, you can count on the fingers of one hand those who have one. Come on, we didn’t invent your parents to ease your anxiety; your father exists, the proof is that he provides for you, provides for you very well. Now don’t worry, you’ll get your memory back.”

They were right. Eventually, Thomas remembered. Not everything, but the essentials. Of his life, he had spliced together minute fragments and large sections; he had almost

got back his childhood and adolescence, was even reconciled with the young man he had been during the year before the hospital. The fire was once more a personal memory that bore no resemblance to the newspaper accounts. He had reconstituted a nearly complete story, one that was plausible at any rate — his own. At night before he fell asleep, when he murmured his name he no longer felt like a stranger.

Thomas closes his eyes for a moment. The sun has disappeared behind the trees. He won't see it set. That will happen in less than an hour. His head is splitting. The usual pain. A while ago he had hoped that the coolness of the glass against his forehead would reduce the intensity. Not a day goes by without that pain coming to remind him that he has become a *hothead*. As a child he had been terrified of the word. His father had used it to talk about a gang of boys who one night had broken nearly all the windows in his warehouse. Thomas, who must have been five or six at the time, had imagined the worst. For one whole summer he had been afraid of coming across one of those boys with a healthy body and a charred head. The second memory that came back to him after the memory of the dog was this child's vision: those apocalyptic boys prowling around his father's warehouse.

Thomas rummages in the pockets of his jacket. Aspirins. He hates swallowing them without water. "Will there be someone at the station?" he wonders, without anxiety.



EVERY NIGHT AT PRECISELY this time, Marie is exhausted. So worn out that she doesn't even feel her fatigue, her body shuts down, dissolves, as if to allow her to stay alive until evening is over. She wishes all her thoughts would disintegrate as well. Marie is finally alone. She put the children to bed earlier than usual. Romain will be home late. He's on an official assignment. One of his patients has asked if he will go with him to the station. His son is coming home after being away for five years. A childhood friend of Romain's. A complicated business involving a fake runaway and psychiatric internment. Romain seemed overwhelmed, something extremely rare, he is usually so stoical, whatever the circumstances. Marie pours herself a Scotch — a mortal sin, a man's drink — and collapses on the velvet sofa in the living room, which is never used. She fiddles with the crystal tumbler, a wedding present that's not used often either, that spends its life as a luxury object on display in the china cabinet in the living room, useless but so very chic.

Marie raises her arm and sets the glass precisely in the path of a ray of the setting sun. The regal colour of the Scotch, its heavenly taste, the sound of clinking ice cubes, the crystal, the mystery of the prism. Marie anticipates: in a moment, after just a few sips, the warmth will spread into the muscles of her arms and legs. Then into her head. And so the small fire of the Scotch will be enough to erase her thoughts. Marie will feel fine. Not for long — she won't have a second drink — but this pause will burn up all the beginnings of sentences that are jostling inside her and that always begin with: "I

don't want." Marie sighs; the little fire is beginning its journey. Just as it arrives at her head, upstairs the baby starts to cry. Marie's muscles tighten. "I don't want any more children," she says, staring at her Scotch as if it were Romain.

The train is a few minutes late. Romain watches Thomas's father pace the platform, head sunk into his shoulders. In the car the man had begged him for help. He didn't know how things would develop, in what mood he and his wife would find their son. A five-year absence matters. Romain had promised, he wouldn't let them drop. In fact, it is Thomas whom he didn't want to let drop. Because of the incredible confession his parents had come to make in his office a few days earlier. Because of childhood. For Romain, Thomas represented something that had never existed: the kind of affection that's at the same time violent and carefree, that is born between children. Thomas. The escapades, the strong summer wind, the icy water of the river, catching snakes, the dreams, the perpetually skinned knees. Thomas from the house across the street, Thomas from elementary school, until life came between them. It had been far more than five years since he'd last seen him.

How many years? Romain counts. To begin with, there was the first separation around the age of fifteen or sixteen. Romain had gone to another college that his father considered more apt to train his son and make him worthy of his own ambition. Thomas had begun to isolate himself and had stopped going to school. His lack of interest — that was what had moved

them away from each other, thinks Romain. Then, when he got it into his head to study medicine — or, rather, when his father had put the idea there — Thomas had withdrawn into a reality that no one comprehended at the time. He wanted to clear by himself a path that led nowhere. As for Romain, he swore by well-marked itineraries. For some years they only saw one another when Romain came home at the end of the school year. They were no longer in tune. And to punish Thomas for betraying their shared childhood, Romain played the card of superiority. He showed off to Thomas his new knowledge and the condescension that went with it. Then they hadn't seen one another again. Thomas had moved to the side of ignorance, Romain had stopped trying. And now he was the ignoramus, with his childhood and Thomas's laughter caught in his throat and blocking the way to the words that — as a good and empathetic doctor — he might speak to a father consumed with fear, who has just squeezed his arm at the sight of the train's headlights on the horizon.

As soon as the train begins to slow down, Thomas goes to the exit. At his feet, two travel bags. One is light: his clothes. The other, as heavy as if it were full of stones: his craft. Mainly treatises on botany, horticulture, truck farming, plus some small gardening tools. A craft he'd been taught in the hospital, then practised for two years in the gardens and greenhouses of the Plains of Abraham, which he has just left, driven by his memory that was eager to start all over again.

Thomas is calm. As you are after running away when you've gone as far as you can and want to come home. Neither hero nor victim. Nothing to prove, nothing to mourn. Only an appetite for life.

If there's no one to meet him, too bad, he'll go to a hotel. A room, four walls, that's something he knows. And then Thomas will walk, go to see what's become of the hole in the city facing the river, go to see with his own eyes what has been reborn from the burnt earth.

If he had it to do again, Thomas would act differently. He wouldn't send his parents a letter announcing that he was coming home. Nor would he phone to confirm the date and the time. This way of re-emerging had seemed natural to him: he was Thomas, he'd spent the first twenty-four years of his life here, in this city, surrounded by his parents. He was simply starting over where he'd left off. To the question about his family's five-year silence, he would oppose his own silence.

In fact, he had sensed that silence when his mother had choked on the telephone. The voice of Thomas. "Hello, Mama, it's me." She hadn't asked how he was, had stammered a few platitudes about his father and the weather. Thomas had sensed his mother's discomfort and had quickly moved on to the information about his arrival. She had said: "Wait, let me get a pencil." She's taking her own sweet time, Thomas had thought. Her voice had trembled when she asked him to repeat what he'd told her. He had complied, slowly, trying to put into his words the tenderness that sons

feel for their mothers. She had ended the call, saying: “That’s fine, Thomas, just fine, we’ll be expecting you.” She too had tried to put into her words the love that mothers feel for their sons.