April 2017

A Queer American Evening

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.winthrop.edu/anthology/vol2017/iss1/42
Dawn unfurled her golden fingers over the little, All-American town of Parry, New York, and with her rosy red lips, blew the gentle kiss of morning.

Somewhere in this town a postman walks along a narrow dirt path, worn by his own feet over the years, taking satisfaction in the mark he has left on the town he was born in and will never leave. He slips a letter into a makeshift mailbox—a tree limb and an old milk crate, that inevitably falls every year during some malicious storm but miraculously reappears.

The letter is addressed to a Mr. Croix Petit, whom the postman has never had the pleasure of meeting. Not that he’d really like to, or even have the need. He knows everything about him, and prefers to leave his appearance to his imagination. In his mind, Mr. Croix Petit hangs perpetually midair, one foot hovering over American soil and the other leaping from the splintering boards of a ferry, one that has just made yet another long journey from some alienated country full of people seeking a better life. The postman pauses for a moment and digs his heels into the ground. He wonders what brought Mr. Croix Petit to a foreign land. Surely, he has no family here, and while he speaks the language, it has been almost six months and he still does not have a wife. He couldn’t have left Paris to become a shepherd in a quiet American town, and be so lonely at that. The postman shook his head, and started on his path again.

A pair of eyes emerged from behind some calico curtains in the quaint little farmhouse over yonder—which, after roaming the land looking for a comfortable little place to spend the rest of its days, curled up beside a babbling stream and pasture suitable for sheep farming. Fixated on the postman, they did not blink or stray until the mysterious man was out of sight. When the coast was clear, the Mr. Croix Petit darted out to the mailbox so quickly that the curtains were half tempted to come with him. Without hesitation or even bothering to look at the sender, he ripped the letter open.

June 30th, 1919

Dearest—

If you might find it suitable, I should like to arrange another meeting with you, preferably in private, and away from your noisy flock of sheep.
Although it is my understanding that that does not give us many options. I suppose we could go to quarry and find ourselves alone there, but I have been told by that nosy postman that it is ‘haunted.’ I think he knows, my Croix. But they all know, I think—they just won’t admit it to themselves. But anyway, I suppose that leaves us with only one option. Meet me at the train station on Friday afternoon and we’ll take one of those luxury liners to Paris for the weekend. See you then, sweet.

Yours faithfully,
Frances Girard

Croix’s face lit up with a smile, and Dawn, seeing that the farmer had taken upon himself to illuminate the land, drew her shining veil beyond the great, milky clouds. Running back up to the safety of his cottage, Croix skidded to a halt in the parlor and gently collapsed into his old, oak rocking chair, that sighed in relief when finally, somebody gracious enough had come along to set it in motion again. Clutching the letter to his chest, Croix rocked absent mindedly as he stared out the parlor window. It was high noon and Dawn’s gentle mist of sunshine had transformed into melting rays that seemed to instantaneously scorch the Earth, and the sheep were not happy. One wandered out of the pen and pressed its face against the parlor window, bleating to no one in particular.

“Bonnet, chère,” Croix laughed. “Whatever are you doing?”

“BAA—AA—AA.”

“Bonnet,” Croix stood up a little in his chair, checking to see if that was really her. The blue tag dangling from her ear confirmed it was. Croix figured that if he had to tag and identify each of his sheep, he might as well give them names. “Bonnet, Francis wrote again today. And he spelled his name with an e, again. How queer. He is adamant that if someone were to find our letters, they’ll see the e and think he’s a woman. Ha! How queer!”

Croix inhaled sharply. He had forgotten that the word “queer” was officially banned from his vocabulary. He used to never even think about the word. It hadn’t rained in three months? Well that’s awfully queer. Mr. Nicholas Martin didn’t pay his taxes for the second year in a row? How queer of him. Fanny, the minister’s daughter, was seen kissing her best friend Juliet on the lips? Queer.

And it was queer that Croix and Francis had taken so quickly to each other, after meeting at the sole restaurant in town, the Café de Moutons. It was a scene Croix often replayed in his head, searching for some memory of a sign or instant
spark that could have told him he was about to meet the love of his life. But that feeling, of a hand holding fast onto another hand, the warmth of another man in his bed, the comfort of having another person to endure a long miserable life with—it was all in the hands of the future.

The taste of whiskey takes him back. Croix never really was a drinker, but he figured since everybody else used alcohol to deal with their problems, he might as well. The bartender slid his drink across the polished bar and nodded to him. Croix kept his head down and didn’t acknowledge him.

“You new here?” The gruff man asked.

“Oui. Yes.”

“Yeah, you’re the fellow that just came over from France, ‘oui?’” The man chuckled. “Yes.” Croix replied, speaking carefully as to mask his accent.

“What brings you to Parry? Were you a shepherd in France?”

“No,” Croix laughed, looking up at the man with a smile. “No, I wasn’t, and now I’m dearly paying for it.”

The man tilted his head, intrigued.

“I originally came to New York City, from Paris. I had dreams of opening my own restaurant, of being one of those famous chefs that everybody flocks to see. I read a headline somewhere that a new restaurant opened in New York every week, and I—well, now I’m a sheep farmer who has no splendid idea what he is doing.”

“You failed.”

Croix’s eyes dropped to his golden amber drink. “Yes,” his voice wavered, as if he just admitted it to himself for the first time. “I failed.”

The bartender lifted his head and cracked his knuckles. A faint smile grew behind his unkempt mustache. “I failed, too.”

“Pardon?”

“I failed. I’ve heard your story a thousand times. And I’ve lived it myself. I was born and raised in New York. Ever since I was little—” The bartender gazed high overhead at the twinkling chandeliers. “Ever since I was little, I dreamed of opening my own delicatessen. I dreamed that before I was even born. It was my grandfather’s dream, too. And finally, one day, it came true.”

“But?”

“But,” The man’s gaze fell back down to the restaurant as he extended his arms. “Now I’m here. A bartender, who has no idea what he’s doing.”

Croix smiled and started into the glistening cup of sorrow in his hand. “Glad to know I’m not alone.”

The men stood in silence for some moments.

“But you know,”
the bartender finally spoke, startling Croix and sending ripples through his drink. “I guess it’s not so bad. I mean, I work in a restaurant, right? And Francis—he’s the owner—he lets me experiment in the kitchen. Café de Moutons is supposed to be French cuisine, but a little pastrami never hurt anybody.”

“That’s—”

“Hey, you should meet Francis. We could use an extra hand around here, if you’re willing. Unless you’re all tied up with your sheep, that is.”

Croix remained silent for some moments. He had never heard the phrase ‘all tied up’ before. At best he imagined himself huddled up in his flock, tied up by a rope and laid across some railroad tracks somewhere like in the picture shows. But he could sense the fear that an opportunity might be at stake. “No, no. I am not—tied up. Yes, I’d like to speak to Francis.”

Moments later Croix found himself talking to a man with a worn face and brittle gray hair, although Croix could see that he wasn’t terribly old—only forty or so. For the most part their conversation had been polite and introductory, with Francis inquiring about Croix’s former life in France.

“And I just packed up and left, I left it all behind.” Croix smiled.

“Amazing,” the bartender leaned in from behind the counter. “You didn’t have a mis—sus or anything?”

“No, no,” Croix laughed. “I’m a single man.”

“And you’re how old, 32?” the bartender asked, amazed.

“Yes, 33 in two weeks.”

“Well that’s no problem. Ol’ Francis here is still a fine young bachelor himself, say, 45 now, I reckon?”

“29,” Francis smiled, revealing a slight gap between his front teeth.

“Well I’m baffled! Say, you two, why don’t you want to get married? I know women can be a handful to deal with at times, but, you know—” The bartender’s eyes twinkled as he repeatedly nudged Croix and winked at Francis.

Both men not-so-subtly cringed.

“Well isn’t that queer,” the astonished man muttered under his breath, returning to his task of polishing the counter.

In that moment, Croix and Francis looked at each other. They both knew. It was as if the universe had aligned so that these two men would click, here in this dingy, upstate New York, pseudo-French restaurant.