

CHARLOTTE DELBO

A Scene Played on the Stage of Memory

A One-act Play

Translated from French by Cynthia Haft

CHARACTERS

FRANCINE, 25 years old

PAUL, 27 years old

FRANCINE (*Alone*)

I told him

oh! how beautiful you are.

He was beautiful in death at each second ever more clearly outlined.

It is true that death makes one beautiful.

Have you noticed

how the dead are

these days

how young and muscular

the cadavers are this year.

Death

rejuvenates every day

this year

A boy barely nineteen the other day.

I know there is nothing like it

to make a living man more beautiful

to bring back the face of childhood.

He was beautiful in death

each second more beautiful

death was going to place itself upon him

to jilt his smile

his eyes
his heart
his heart furiously beating
furiously living.
All the more horrible that he was beautiful
all the more horrible that they are
younger and more beautiful
all
lying side by side
beautiful for eternity
and fraternal
side by side
when men are reaped like corn
the corn in its season grain ripe
man in his season
in the summer of revolt
when they lay down the men like ears of corn
face opposite steel
chest open
chest bursting open heart gaping
those who chose.

That was what made him so beautiful
to have chosen
chosen his life, chosen his death
and to have looked straight ahead.

SETTING:

PAUL'S cell at the prison of the Santé, the 23rd of May 1942, just before daybreak. The scene is acted very precisely: nothing is vague in FRANCINE'S memory. The door of the cell is open, a soldier is standing guard. Noise of boots: noise of approaching steps. FRANCINE is surrounded by two German soldiers. She stops on the threshold. PAUL, standing up, leaning against the wall, straightens up as FRANCINE approaches. FRANCINE takes a step toward PAUL and stops. The two soldiers who accompanied her disappear. The one who is standing outside the door of the cell does not budge, his back to the audience. The noise of the boots moves further and further away down the corridor.

PAUL (*Still immobile*)

Francine. . .

FRANCINE

Paul

PAUL

Francine

FRANCINE

Paul

PAUL

I waited for you without believing. It's you . . .

FRANCINE (*Taking a step toward him*)

Yes, Paul. Me.

PAUL

I was waiting for you. Without believing it could be true. I dreamed so much of you that I'm not sure yet.

FRANCINE

It's me, Paul.

He takes a step toward her, hesitatingly, as if he did not dare to approach her, as if he did not dare to touch her.

Paul.

PAUL

Oh Francine. . .

He finally moves toward her. She has her arms outstretched toward him; he takes her arms under the elbows and looks at her.

I did recognize your walk. Is it really you?

FRANCINE

Yes, Paul. It's me. Francine. Your Francine.

PAUL

You're here.

A smile of happiness lights upon his face; he holds her a bit away from the ends of his arms to see her.

FRANCINE

Paul? What? . . . What is . . .

PAUL (*Softly, lowering his head a little*)

They told us we were hostages.

FRANCINE (*As soon as she can talk*)

When?

PAUL

Yesterday, in the evening.

FRANCINE

When?

PAUL

This morning. It's for this morning, soon.

FRANCINE

Oh Paul.

PAUL

Francine, you knew, didn't you? You knew from the first day, since we were caught?

FRANCINE

Yes, Paul. One thinks one knows. This morning . . . soon . . .

PAUL

They told me you were in the same prison.

FRANCINE

Yes, since the beginning.

PAUL

Where are you?

FRANCINE

I couldn't explain it. The corridors turn and twist. They're very long.—
I see you . . .

PAUL

Last night, they asked us if we had a last wish. We asked to say goodbye to you. They promised. They said they would grant us that because we were courageous soldiers. What a tribute . . . *(He smiles almost mockingly)*

None of us dared to believe it. But I hoped. I hoped all night. I awaited daybreak and I dreaded it. What if they had lied once again? I saw the time slip by, slip by, and I was afraid you weren't coming. But you're here.

FRANCINE

Yes, Paul. I am here, near you. I am touching you.

PAUL

When I heard your walk, I didn't move my head. Since last night I haven't dared to look toward the door. I was so afraid you weren't coming.

FRANCINE

Is it you, Paul? It's you, altogether you. I too wonder.

PAUL

They really did go for you. Forgive me.

FRANCINE

Oh Paul. I am happy to see you. Don't tell me you hesitated.

PAUL

No. It's what I answered immediately, without thinking: to see her again, as soon as they asked the question. For the first time I was frank with them Right afterward I felt sorry. I shouldn't have. Forgive me.

FRANCINE

Oh Paul. I forgive you . . . The last joy you give me.

PAUL

We all thought the same way. We've already asked so much of you.

FRANCINE

Who, all?

PAUL

All six: George, André, Jacques, Felix, Jean-Claude.

FRANCINE

Jean-Claude too . . . Then it's Marie-Jeanne that they came for in the cell next door to mine.

PAUL

You aren't together, you and Marie-Jeanne?

FRANCINE

No. I'm with two girls that you don't know. They were in our group, but we didn't know them. Marie-Jeanne is next door and Helene, Jacques's wife, one cell down.

PAUL

They told you last night or just this morning?

FRANCINE

This morning, just a minute ago.

PAUL

Oh yes. This morning. Even . . . How? What . . . How did they say it?

FRANCINE

I woke up to the noise of the door being opened. I saw a soldier on the threshold. He called my name. I got up right away.

PAUL

And then? What did he say?

FRANCINE

He said: "Get dressed, Madame, if you want to see your husband – again."

PAUL

The brutes.

FRANCINE

He closed the door and waited in the corridor while I got dressed. And it was then that I heard another soldier call someone in the cell next door. I didn't know it was Marie-Jeanne. There are four in her cell.

PAUL

I saw her walk by. They left our door open. Noble gesture . . .

FRANCINE

My friends got up too. They helped me get dressed.

PAUL

You're lovely.

FRANCINE

One of them, her name is Henriette, said: "Make yourself beautiful. He must see you beautiful." And she did my hair.

PAUL

You are beautiful. You have your beautiful hair. (*He strokes her hair gently.*)

FRANCINE

Oh Paul. No. *You* are beautiful.

PAUL

For your visit, they let us shave. The barber even came to cut our hair. I wouldn't have wanted you to see me with my beard two months long.

FRANCINE

How beautiful you are, Paul. How soft your skin is. How I love you. (*She caresses his upper arms under the sleeves of his sweater. He bites his lips.*)

What's the matter? Oh Paul, what's the matter?

PAUL

Nothing. It's nothing.

FRANCINE

Nothing? What do you mean, nothing? Let me see.

PAUL

I assure you, nothing.

FRANCINE

I feel something.

PAUL

Bruises. It's nothing. No, you mustn't look. Curiosity is a bad fault, little girl.

FRANCINE

The questioning?

PAUL

It's nothing, I assure you. For me, it was nothing. Jean-Claude and George were more brutally . . .

FRANCINE

Tortured. They tortured you.

PAUL

Don't think of that, dear. Forgive me. I shouldn't have asked to see you again.

FRANCINE

For how long? For how many hours?

PAUL

Forget it.

FRANCINE

Oh Paul. You think I'm so weak.

PAUL

I know you're not. Francine. I thought only of myself.

FRANCINE

Paul. My dear Paul. The questioning. . .

PAUL

We didn't answer a single question. But you?

FRANCINE

I didn't answer a single question either.

PAUL

Oh dearest, that wasn't what I asked. I know. I mean, how was it for you? Did they mistreat you?

FRANCINE

No. Not at all. I assure you, not at all. I said I didn't know anything. That's all I said, then I didn't even open my mouth. Since the silence dragged on and since it must have been their lunch hour, they took me down to the cellar.

PAUL

To the cellar? Where was it?

FRANCINE

Rue des Saussaies. It seemed to me that I went down two flights underground.

PAUL

Were you afraid?

FRANCINE

Afraid? No. Why do you ask that?

PAUL

You didn't know where they were taking you. You weren't afraid that they would beat you?

FRANCINE

The idea never entered my head. I was afraid only for you.

PAUL

Why were you afraid for me?

FRANCINE

During the brief moment when there was light, before the soldier closed the door on me, I saw the padding on the walls—the walls were covered with burlap.

PAUL

It's to stifle the cries.

FRANCINE

I saw that the walls were all spotted with blood. I thought of you, of our friends. I was afraid for them, I was afraid for you.

PAUL

Francine, darling.

FRANCINE

Since it was dark, since tapping on the padded walls was of no use, I wrapped myself in my cape, I stretched out on the floor and I slept.

PAUL

You slept . . .

FRANCINE

Yes, very deeply even. What luck I had to be able to sleep right away, to gather strength for the rest.

PAUL

What, the rest? The questioning began again. You aren't telling me everything.

FRANCINE

When the soldier who came back to collect me opened the door of the cell, he shined his lamp on me, that woke me, and I was proud that he

was visibly shaken when he saw me awaken so peacefully. A tiny victory.

PAUL

And after? Tell, tell me.

FRANCINE

After, nothing. I found myself in the same office as in the morning, with the same interpreter and the same Gestapo officers. They told me that my husband admitted to everything, that he had derailed trains, that he had shot a German officer, a colonel, that therefore I could easily talk myself since my husband had already told everything.

PAUL

Always the same technique.

FRANCINE

I answered that since my husband had told everything, I had nothing to add. (*PAUL caresses her hand, holds it to his lips, touches it lightly.*)

I would have liked to know where you were, how you were, if you were alive. It was the only thing I thought of. When I dared to ask a question, they told me that if I wanted to do something for you, it would be better to answer frankly their questions rather than ask my own. To encourage me, they told me you were very well.

PAUL

It's true, you see. Everything has been well. Rest assured.

FRANCINE

Oh Paul, assured . . .

PAUL

I'm sorry. You know it's not my fault. You don't choose when to be born.

FRANCINE

How could I hold anything against you? But it's so soon to leave each other.

PAUL

My dearest. You gave me six years of happiness. A lot of people die at

sixty without ever having had so much. It's not how long you live that counts. It's how much you get out of life. Every moment of my life with you I lived to the fullest. I can't regret missing anything. I had everything I wanted, everything I could ever ask.

FRANCINE

Me too, Paul—it's short, a life.

PAUL

My love, don't say that. I could have died in Madrid five years ago. When we had hardly lived together. You were ready then.

FRANCINE

Yes, Paul. No, Paul. No one is ever ready.

PAUL

What sense would life have if you lived only to be alive? What sense would love have if we lived only to hold on to it at any price, like a fragile plant which fears the air, which doesn't expose itself, which doesn't live?

FRANCINE (*Aside: what she adds when she relives the scene in her memory*)

Me, I thought that I would have preferred to keep him, him, the man I loved with arms so sweet, with sweet lips, a warm chest, I would have preferred to keep him at any price. (*Return to the scene, to PAUL*)

Yes, Paul, I know all that. We felt so rich that we risked everything we had. Everything.

PAUL

We were rich. Rich from all the future for which we were fighting, from the present of which we drank every moment, always while telling ourselves that that moment belonged to us, in such abundance.

FRANCINE

Oh Paul. (*She leans her head on Paul's chest. Aside: recital from memory*)

I listened to his heart beat which beat in the rhythm which I knew so well, as I listened when I fell asleep in his arms. I listened to it and in spite of myself I counted the heartbeats, I measured how many beats his heart could still give. Each heartbeat devoured the minutes and it is thus that I knew the full measure of my life and of my love.

PAUL

Francine, my love.

FRANCINE

Yes, Paul. Paul, Paul, Paul, how many times do I still have the time to say your name?

PAUL

Time no longer matters. We are at the point when we can stop it. I'm saying silly things. (*He smiles to excuse himself, takes her face in his hands and looks at her.*)

FRANCINE (*Aside: voice from memory*)

I wanted to look at him, to fix forever his look in mine and I didn't dare to do it because I was afraid that he might see that I was looking at him the way one looks at a dying man. (*Silence.*)

Speak, speak, speak, Paul. Continue speaking to me.

(*Silence. Then, voice from memory*)

I said: Speak, continue speaking, and my heart froze. I wanted him to speak, it had to be he that spoke since my words no longer had any meaning. They would stop with him. But whatever he told me would serve since I would remain the link who would transmit them and I almost fainted when at that moment I realized that I will continue to live.

(*To Paul*) How I love you, Paul, how I loved you.

PAUL

How I love you, Francine.

FRANCINE

Speak, continue speaking to me.

PAUL

I have spoken to you constantly since we were apart, each at one end of the prison. At each moment, I spoke to you, at each moment I saw you. You are still more beautiful in person than in those long conversations of my nights and of my days. I spoke to you tonight, all night. It seemed to me that the night would never be long enough to tell you all I have to tell you. Love is a never-ending conversation. Do you remember? You were the one who said that. I was talking to you and I asked you to forgive me.

FRANCINE

Don't say that, Paul.

PAUL

I know that you are brave. I know that you will know how to live without me. You must live.

FRANCINE

I don't know, Paul.

(Aside) My whole life was being swallowed up and I didn't want to show him that I was suffering, that the pain which was engulfing me was becoming unbearable.

PAUL

Yes, I know you are brave. Francine, we have fought with all our heart. I am falling before reaching the goal, but you will see victory.

FRANCINE *(Aside)*

And I was thinking: What does victory matter to me without you?

(To PAUL) Oh Paul, we never thought that victory would be like this.

PAUL

Yes, Francine. Remember, we used to say it.

FRANCINE

Oh Paul. To say and to know, what a difference.

PAUL

We are winning. Our side is rising all over. George was able to get news from the outside. They are retreating everywhere.

FRANCINE *(Aside)*

It was false. Prisons are always full of false good news. In May 1942, you knew where Hitler's armies were. They were advancing everywhere, they were almost at the Volga.

PAUL

That's why they're in a hurry to crush those that they are holding. But they won't get all of us. Thousands are rising who will replace and avenge us.

FRANCINE

Yes, but Paul. You . . .

PAUL

We are fighting for freedom. That the fighters may not be in the parade, each of us knew it before plunging into the fight, and none would want to desert because he risked falling before the end. That would be horrible. It would be dying for nothing, to die without having done anything with your life. We have chosen, you and I.

FRANCINE

I didn't choose to lose you, never. I always thought we would fall together if we fell.

PAUL

Dearest. All the fighters are not hit at the same time. Fortunately. Where would the victory be if we all succumbed? You will live. Oh, how happy that makes me.

FRANCINE

Paul.

PAUL

Dearest, be as strong as you have always been.

FRANCINE

I am, Paul. I will be.

Silence. She caresses his hair.

PAUL (*With a gay smile*)

You see. You sometimes said you wouldn't want a bald husband.

FRANCINE

I said that to you?

PAUL

Yes, yes. You said that to me. And even that you wouldn't want a pot-bellied, short-winded husband.

FRANCINE

I said that to you? (*She tries to play the same game he is playing*)
And you answered that I had nothing to fear because you would never live to be old.

The SOLDIER who was on guard in front of the cell moves toward FRANCINE to take her away. PAUL, in a swift gesture, tells him: "Just a minute," and his gesture carries such authority that the guard leaves and takes up his watch again in the corridor.

My mouth is all dry.

PAUL takes a tin pitcher from the table and pours some water into a mug which he holds out to her. She drinks and gives back the mug and he drinks from it.

Talk to me some more.

PAUL

Last night, when the officer called us to tell us . . . he offered us our lives and immediate freedom for our wives if we agreed to make a declaration that would be made public in which we would say that we retracted our previous mistakes and that we were at the disposition of the Hitler Youth Organization. The paper was all ready. All that was left to do was to sign. We didn't even look at it. (*Pause*)
You wouldn't want to get out at that price, would you?

FRANCINE (*Aside*)

I thought that to know he was safe, to get out and to get out with him, even for just one day, even for just one night and sleep once more next to him, to feel him warm and alive against me, I thought that was worth any price and I was ashamed.

PAUL

Would you?

FRANCINE

No, Paul.

PAUL

You will soon be free in any case. Victory is near.

FRANCINE (*Aside*)

Could he foresee that I would have to pass through Auschwitz and Ravensbrück, wait three years to see victory? Everyone thought at the time that the women didn't have to fear for their lives. No one knew what deportation was. That Paul hadn't known often consoled me, after, when I was in camp.

(*To Paul*) It's all the more horrible, Paul.

PAUL

No, dearest, it's what gives me strength.

Noise of approaching boots. The sentry enters and signals that this time it's time. The two soldiers arrive. PAUL takes FRANCINE'S face in his hands and looks at her. Then he takes her hands, takes them to his lips one after the other, kissing the hollow of the palm.

Francine, my love.

FRANCINE

Paul, my love.

But she cannot detach herself from him. One of the soldiers moves to pull her by the arm. Before he can touch her, she moves away from PAUL and follows the SOLDIERS with resolution. The cell disappears into darkness.

FRANCINE (*Alone*)

The two soldiers took me back to my cell through all the long corridors, scarcely lit up. I walked between them and I know I stood very straight. Then I felt my chest being torn apart. He hadn't called me "little girl." In the morning he always said: "Good morning, little girl." I wanted to turn back, run, throw myself at him, tell him: "Say to me: little girl, the way you used to, once more." I jostled the soldiers, they restrained me violently. I fell on the flagstone and it seems to me I stayed there a long time like that, unconscious on the flagstone. When I came to, I saw the soldiers standing, waiting. Where was I? What were those soldiers doing, bending over me from so high up? I needed a minute to remember and

then I thought that my heart would burst. Had they already led Paul away? Was he already walking toward . . . They helped me stand up again. I brushed off their hands by shaking my shoulders. I was ashamed at having been so weak in front of them. And I started again to count the time which Paul still had left in rhythm to the beating of his heart which was beating in my chest with mine.

It was a morning full of birds. When I was back in my cell, day had broken, all the birds of the neighboring gardens had begun to sing. A chorus dominated by the whistle of a blackbird.

(CURTAIN)