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**[The Bully by Stephanie V Sears, Caol Ila with two teaspoons of marmalade mixed in](https://www.cafelitmagazine.uk/2024/06/the-bully-stephanie-sears-caol-ila-with.html)**

I was nine when I arrived in Marseilles from the United States with my parents and brother. Though my maternal tongue was French, I spoke it with some hesitancy and a slight Yankee accent. The new school was a Catholic institution directed by nuns, and in dire contrast to the open spaces and sports-oriented co-ed school to which I had been habituated back in America. I was taken aback at first by the much smaller and walled recreational area, and the more exacting curriculum both in hours and level. I was considered as ‘la petite Americaine’ despite being just as French as I was American. To be thought of as a foreigner in your own country breeds diffidence. Despite a lithe physique, I had both nervous energy and a swift temperament. My sensitivity to unfairness being extreme, I was correspondingly touchy, the way people often are in my mother’s southwestern region of France. Had I lived in seventeenth century France as a male, and not met with an early demise, I would have spent my life dueling. In short, I was easily provoked.

We wore dark blue skirted uniforms and our bare knees were often skinned on the gravel, while playing. Spindly plane trees here and there gave little shade against the Mediterranean sun, and seemed intended principally to soften the overwhelming air of incarceration. The nuns, in black veils and robes, evolved around us like a flock of disciplinary crows and did nothing to alleviate my feeling of imprisonment. Rebellion had begun to seethe within me. In this mood, I focused my attention on Ginette Lazotte’s large frame two rows ahead of me. Indeed, I could not avoid her. Whoever had planned the seating had overlooked the fact that Ginette, a giant, though no older than me, blocked my entire view of the teacher. Day after day, I stared at her powerful back, dissecting her person and gestures with increasing dislike.

Was it the short, crinkly, blond hair that stuck out more on one side of her head like a Brillo pad? The home-knitted sweater that, emulating her hair, fell off one shoulder in straggly fashion? She was in the exasperating habit of thrusting a sturdy socked leg into the aisle between the desks; I imagine, it was to trip someone. For that ‘bully’ was written all over her. The fact that she invariably answered incorrectly when quizzed by the teacher, was not the crux of my dislike. I was indifferent to her school performance. But she had a lisp, and given her monumental bulk it struck me as absurd. Her features were set against a nacred, slightly freckled skin, in small, regular lines, except for the upper lip that curled with disdain and stubbornness when she spoke.

One spring morning gilded with sun, suffused with bird trills, the fatal occurrence took place. During the morning’s short fifteen minute recess, a ‘pain au chocolat’ was distributed to each of us and we were allowed to mingle. Having just arrived, I was only starting to get acquainted with others and so used that time to seek out new friends. Ginette, who was not one of my options, galumphed past me, eating her ‘pain au chocolat’ in a way that sprayed crumbs over my desk. A hot glow of excitement electrified me: opportunity had arisen. Outrage swept through me like a bush fire. I sprang to my feet, the top of my head reaching to her shoulder. Curtly I asked her to remove the crumbs from my desk.

‘Do it yourself,’ was her slack-lipped reply.

‘Wipe them off,’ I repeated, feeling the blood drain from my face.

‘Or else?’ she asked, accentuating the obnoxious curl of her upper lip.

‘We’ll have to fight it out.’

‘I am terrified!’ She said with a cruel grin.

After lunch, during the one hour midday recess, we came to stand opposite each other like two outlaws in a Western or, as I preferred to envisage it then, like two characters out of Greek mythology which we had just begun to study. Though, admittedly, the heroics of the occasion were poorly enhanced by our prim uniforms.

A few other classmates, some five or six, having overheard our exchange, stood around indecisively, convinced that they were about to witness the rapid annihilation of ‘la petite Americaine’. The prospect left them uncertain about which side to take. They did not know me very well, and their feelings toward Ginette seemed characterized by indifference. Should they show sympathy for the underdog, or side with the sure winner, they wondered.

Ginette Lazotte and I, however, were in no mood to dither. We lunged at each other like wolves. A few pitying looks in my direction had awakened the hardened criminal in me. At first, I still had hopes of clobbering Ginette. Where I got such optimism, I have no idea. But the thug in my brain was busily conjuring up every dirty trick that might be used to my benefit. Twisting articulations into grotesque angles, pinching, biting to the blood, tearing out handfuls of that candy floss hair, anything to bring down the stronghold of that giant in a final cloud of dust…

Alas, nothing of the sort happened. Meanwhile, Ginette had rid me of most of my buttons and of one milk tooth. Thrown about like flotsam, I somehow rebounded, though in an increasing state of disrepair: bloody, bruised, disheveled, toothless. While Ginette, with the slow assurance of a mastodon, plowed through me. My credit soared, however, when I spat out my tooth into the palm of my hand and, with an innate sense of drama, paused to look at it.

The number of onlookers grew. I was openly cheered on, though on that first day, the outcome remained inconclusive. The close of recess interrupted our fight and the spectators breathlessly encouraged me to fight harder the following day. I don’t remember Ginette receiving a similar accolade. Though, as far as I could tell, she still had all of her teeth.

My hopes of physically beating Ginette were replaced by a more subtle understanding of how to win. A night’s pondering made me grasp how an underdog like me could spark a superb blend of commiseration and admiration, among my classmates, on the condition that I never surrender. In this way, I thought that I might destroy Ginette more completely than I had hoped.

The fight continued for two more days. Accepting Ginette’s physical superiority, I threw myself into it with a simple strategy: to endure and make it last as long as possible so that everyone would observe her failure to vanquish my spirit. In fact, I quickly gained the popularity vote, and sympathy towards me turned into downright affection. The number of on-lookers grew until the gathering brought together nearly the whole of the student body present in the playground. I began to wonder why no nun had interfered between us yet.

Opinion had definitely turned against Ginette. Only later did I suspect the nuns of not interfering because they wanted me, the underdog, to gain moral victory over Ginette, the bully.

By the third day, Ginette seemed to fully understand her situation. She lost all will to finish me off, realizing that the more she battered me, the more I triumphed. I could tell by the sluggish, almost melancholic way in which she moved, that she had lost all self-assurance and was wondering how to escape her predicament. Meanwhile, despite my general state of disarray and physical decline, new energy came to me. Sensing Ginette‘s confusion, feeling even pity for her, I found an opening to wallop her across the face with the strength left in me. She fell to the ground, more from surprise and mental collapse, I’m sure, than from the physical impact. Effusive cheering rose. She got to her feet again, greeted by grim silence. But instead of resuming the fight, she sullenly marched off, while I was embraced amidst a happy clamour.

From then on Ginette grew almost invisible. No longer did the sturdy leg stick out between the rows. She seemed to have shrunk so that I could now see the teacher.

No longer ‘la petite Americaine’, I was called by my name, and acquired at least three good friends in class. The fight had given the nuns the opportunity to get rid of Ginette. They did so at the end of the school year. Our fight having exposed her as a bully, her parents were asked to look for another school.

Machiavellian nuns!

I remember seeing Ginette’s parents one day when they picked her up. They seemed like nice people. Yet I could tell by details in their manner and dress that Ginette’s social background was modest. I believe now that this was the determining factor for her expulsion, more than poor performance in class, or even her bullying.

I never saw nor heard about Ginette again. Though oddly enough she still hovers in my memory with her near albino pallor, large frame and crinkly hair, as a fey, other-worldly creature.

As to who was the real bully, I leave it to you, reader, to decide.

**About the author**

Stephanie V Sears is a French and American ethnologist, essayist, journalist , poet whose writings have been published in: Insula (UNESCO), Eco hustler, Zoomorphic, Wildlifeextra.com, The London Grip, The Journal of Wild Culture.....and others. She has recently turned to short story writing

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