

THREE

Third time of the milkman was when he appeared not long after my adult evening French class. This class was downtown and it had surprising things. Often these would not be French things. Often too, there would be more of them than would be the French things. At this latest lesson, which took place on Wednesday evening, teacher was reading from a book. This was a French book, a proper French book – one that native speakers could read without considering it beneath them – and teacher said she was reading from it to get us used to what authentic French sounded like when strung together in full-on passages – in this case, a literary passage. Thing was though, the sky in this passage she was reading from wasn't blue. Eventually she got interrupted because someone in the class – spokesperson for the rest of us – naturally couldn't stand it. Something was wrong and he had a need, for the sake of all things generic, to point it out.

'I'm confused,' he said. 'Is that passage about the sky? If it is about the sky then why doesn't the writer just say so? Why is he complicating things with fancy footwork when all he need say is that the sky is blue?'

'Hear! Hear!' cried us or, if some of us, like me, didn't cry it, certainly we agreed in sentiment. '*Le ciel est bleu! Le ciel est bleu!*' shouted many of the others. 'That would have cleared matters. Why didn't he just put that?'

We were disturbed, and not a little, but teacher, she laughed which was something she did a lot. She did this because she had an unnerving amount of humour – another thing which ruffled us as well. Whenever she laughed, we weren't sure whether to laugh

along with her, to be curious and engaged and to ask why she was laughing, or to be sulky and offended and seriously up in arms. This time, as usual, we opted for up in arms.

‘What a waste of time and a confusion of subjects,’ complained a woman. ‘That writer ought not to be featuring in a French lesson even if he is French if he’s not doing anything about teaching it. This is “learning a foreign language” class, not a class on burdening us with taking things apart which are in the same language to find out if they’re a poem or something. If we wanted figures of speech and rhetorical flourishes, with one thing representing another thing when the represented thing could easily have been itself in the first place, then we’d have gone to English Literature with those weirdos down the hall.’ ‘Yeah!’ cried us and also we cried, ‘A spade’s a spade!’, also the popular ‘*Le ciel est bleu!*’ and ‘*What’s the point? There’s no point!*’ continued to come out of us. Everyone was nodding and slapping desks and murmuring and acclaiming. And now it was time, we thought, to give our spokespeople and ourselves a jolly good round of applause.

‘So, class,’ said teacher after this applause had died down, ‘is it that you think the sky can only be blue?’

‘The sky is blue,’ came us. ‘What colour else can it be?’

Of course we knew really that the sky could be more than blue, two more, but why should any of us admit to that? I myself have never admitted it. Not even the week before when I experienced my first sunset with maybe-boyfriend did I admit it. Even then, even though there were more colours than the acceptable three in the sky – blue (the day sky), black (the night sky) and white (clouds) – that evening still I kept my mouth shut. And now the others in this class – all older than me, some as old as thirty – also weren’t admitting it. It was the convention not to admit it, not to accept detail for this type of detail would mean choice and choice would mean responsibility and what if we failed in our responsibility? Failed too, in the interrogation of the consequence of seeing more

than we could cope with? Worse, what if it was nice, whatever it was, and we liked it, got used to it, were cheered up by it, came to rely upon it, only for it to go away, or be wrenched away, never to come back again? Better not to have had it in the first place was the prevailing feeling, and that was why blue was the colour for our sky to be. Teacher though, wasn't leaving it at that.

'So that's it, is it?' she said, and she was pretending amazement which confirmed further our suspicions about her; in short, suspicions that she was none other than a beyond-the-pale person herself. For yes, even though I was downtown, which meant outside my own area, which meant outside my own religion, which meant I was in a class containing people who really did have the names Nigel and Jason, that didn't mean disorders, disharmonies and beyond-the-pales couldn't go on here as well. You got to know for instance, regardless of religion, who was of normal disharmony and who was a man-overboard person. Teacher certainly, appeared from the latter class. One thing that stood out was that French could never be sustained for long whenever she was the one teaching it. This evening as usual, English had taken over, which meant, also as usual, French was out the window. Next, she had us looking out this window. She had stridden over to it – a straight-backed woman on a majestic caparisoned horse – and had begun pointing through it with her pen.

'Okay, everyone,' she said. 'You need to look at the sky. You need, right now, to look at that sunset. *Magnificent!*' Here she stopped pointing and tapping on the glass in order to inhale this sky. After inhaling it, which was embarrassing, she exhaled it with a giant '*Aaaaahhhhh!*' coming out of her – more embarrassing. Then she went back to pointing and tapping. 'Tell me, class,' she said, 'what colours – do you hear that, *colours, plural* – do you see now?'

We looked because she made us, even though sunsets weren't part of our curriculum, but we looked and it seemed to us that the

sky as usual was turning from light blue to dark blue which meant it was just blue. I knew though, since that recent alarming and alerting sunset I'd experienced with maybe-boyfriend, that that sky that night in the French class was neither those shades of blue. A person of any level of contrariness or entrenchment might have been pushed to have found any blue in the whole of our class's window. We were pushed. Also we were adamant.

'Blue!'

'Blue!'

'Perhaps a bit – no, blue,' came our all-out replies.

'My poor deprived class!' cried teacher and again she was bluffing, pretending sorrow about our lack of colour, our hampered horizons, our mental landscapes, when it was obvious she was a person too defined within herself to be long perturbed by anything at all. And how come she was this? How come she was doing this antagonising, this presenting of an anti-culture to our culture when she herself was of our culture, where the same rules of consciousness regarding the likes of colour – regardless too, of church affiliation – as applied to us ought equally to have applied to her? But she was laughing again. 'There is no blue in the whole of the window,' she said. 'Look again please. Try again please – and, class' – here she paused and, for a moment, did become serious – 'although there's no lack of colour out there really – *there's nothing out there really*. But for temporal purposes please note – the sky that seems to be out there can be any colour that there is.'

'Testicles!' cried some ladies and gentlemen and a *frisson* – the only French of the evening apart from '*le ciel est bleu*' and that literary guff the guy in the book had been posturing – went through us. It seemed to our minds that no, what she was saying could not ever be true. If what she was saying was true, that the sky – out there – not out there – whatever – could be any colour, that meant anything could be any colour, that anything could be anything, that anything could happen, at any time, in any

place, in the whole of the world, and to anybody – probably had too, only we just hadn't noticed. So no. After generation upon generation, fathers upon forefathers, mothers upon foremothers, centuries and millennia of being one colour officially and three colours unofficially, a colourful sky, just like that, could not be allowed to be.

'Come,' she persisted. 'Why have you turned your backs?' For we had turned our backs; it had been instinctive and protective. But she made us turn round to face the sky once more. This time she proceeded to point through various panes at sections of sky that were not blue but instead lilac, purple, patches of pink – differing pinks – with one patch of green that had a yellow gold extending along it. *And green? How come green was up there?* Then, as the sunset was not most visible from this window, she marched us out of our classroom and along the corridor into the *littérateurs'* classroom. That evening their room was empty because they had gone to the theatre with pens, flashlights and little notebooks to watch and critique *Playboy of the Western World*. Here teacher bade us look at the sky from this brand new perspective, where the sun – enormous and of the most gigantic orange-red colour – in a sky too, with no blue in it – was going down behind buildings in a section of windowpane.

As for this sky, it was now a mix of pink and lemon with a glow of mauve behind it. It had changed colours during our short trip along the corridor and before our eyes was changing colours yet. An emerging gold above the mauve was moving towards a slip of silver, with a different mauve in a corner drifting in from the side. Then there was further pinking. Then more lilac. Then a turquoise that pressed clouds – not white – out of its way. Layers were mixing and blending, forming and transforming which was exactly what happened during that sunset a week earlier. 'Will we go and see the sun go down?' maybe-boyfriend, to my startled ears, had said. 'Why?' I accused. 'Because it's the sun,' he said.

‘Okay,’ I said, as if this wasn’t unprecedented, as if people in my environment suggested sunsets to each other frequently. So I said yes, and after my run with third brother-in-law I went home, got showered, got changed, put on make-up and high heels and maybe-boyfriend picked me up where usually he picked me up, at the bottom of my district on our side of the interface road. This sad and lonely road ran between the religions and I would meet him there, not because he was the opposite religion, for he wasn’t, but because it was easier to do that than to have him call for me at my door. Not long after this first sunset, however, he started to complain about our complex, perilous meeting arrangements, saying I didn’t want him calling for me directly, or for us to do anything inside my area because I was ashamed to be seen with him which was unbelievable to my ears. I said there was nowhere to go in my area which wasn’t true and which he knew wasn’t true because it was a known fact that eleven of our religion’s best drinking-clubs existed in my district, including the most popular in the city for our particular creed. So he said I was being evasive which was true but not for the reason of being ashamed of him was I evasive. It was that I didn’t want him calling to the door because of ma. It would have been questions. Then the marriage sermon. Then the baby sermon and, if not them, he’d get accused of being the milkman. Also there were those prayers she’d burst into at any moment, meaning there was just so much discomfiture I could take. So it wasn’t shame of him, or to spare him, that we kept things convoluted and parlous by meeting at that dark and bitter sectarian flashpoint. It was to save me the awkwardness of having to explain her.

At that sunset with maybe-boyfriend which was before his bitter words over the pick-up point, he picked me up as usual on the road of separation and he did this in his latest put-together car. We took a drive out of town to some coastal place where he bought drinks and where we stood outside, along with strangers, all to

await this event, this sun, which I didn't understand, go down. It wasn't just sunsets I didn't understand. I didn't understand stars or moons or breezes or dew or flowers or the weather or the avidity some people took – older people took – in what time they were going to bed at, and at what time the following day they were going to get up at, also what Celsius and Fahrenheit temperature it was outside, and what Celsius and Fahrenheit temperature it was inside, and the state of their bowels, their digestive tracts, their feet, their teeth, where one of them says loudly on the crowded bus, *'Do you know what? I'll have a nice slice of toast when I go home before my dinner,'* and where the companion replies equally loudly, *'I'll have a nice slice of toast in my house as a start before dinner too.'* If not that, then it's *'Did you have a nice slice of toast in your house yesterday?'* *'Yes, but have you eaten yourself since?'* *'Oh, I don't eat. Had scrambled eggs. Have this friend called Pam but stop me if I've already told you, but we used to go and buy kettles and ironing boards together . . .'* and it was entirely in order that I should not understand these things. Same too, with sunsets because it was not being labelled a beyond-the-pale young person and maybe-boyfriend, who was young himself – only two years older than me – shouldn't be understanding and appreciating either, what nobody our age would be odd enough to notice was there. Faced with his behaviour, and with this skyscape in front of me, and with the expectation I was supposed to observe it, witness it, attend in some way and have an appropriate reaction to it, I stood beside him and looked and nodded even though I didn't know what it was I was looking and nodding at. This was when I began to wonder, again, if maybe-boyfriend should be going to sunsets, if he should be owning coffee pots, if he should like football whilst giving the impression of not liking football, no matter I myself didn't like football but my not liking football, apart from that *Match of the Day* music, wasn't the point. Certainly he tinkered with cars and

it was normal for boys to tinker with cars, to want to drive them, to dream of driving them if they couldn't afford to buy them to drive them and weren't sufficiently car-nutty to steal them to drive them. All the same, I did feel worried that maybe-boyfriend in some male way was refusing to fit in. Again this confused me for was I saying then, that I *was* ashamed of him, that mainstream boys, the ones who did fit in, the ones who wanted to beat up Julie Covington for singing 'Only Women Bleed' which they thought was a song about periods when it wasn't a song about periods even though everybody else, including me, also thought it was a song about periods; boys too, who, if they had an interest in you, would blame you for this interest in you – was I saying I preferred to be going on dates with the likes of them? Whenever I pondered this, which I didn't like to do for again it exposed to me my irreconcilables, those uncontrollable irrationalities, I felt uneasy. I knew I preferred maybe-boyfriend to any of my former maybe-boyfriends and that my favourite days of the week were the days I spent with maybe-boyfriend, that the only boy too, I'd wanted to sleep with so far and had slept with so far had been maybe-boyfriend. Also, given that since he'd brought up the idea of us living together and I'd refused, I found myself daydreaming of what it might be like to live with maybe-boyfriend – being in the same house as him, sharing the same bed as him, waking up every day right there beside him – could life together, if that were the case, really be that bad?

So I nodded at the sunset, at this horizon, which made no sense, all the while taken up with these contradictory sentiments, with maybe-boyfriend beside me, with all these odd people, also gazing upon the sunset, around me, and it was at that moment, just as I was thinking, *what the fuck are they*— that something out there – or something in me – then changed. It fell into place because now, instead of blue, blue and more blue – the official blue everyone understood and thought was up there – the truth hit my

senses. It became clear as I gazed that there was no blue out there at all. For the first time I saw colours, just as a week later in this French class also was I seeing colours. On both occasions, these colours were blending and mixing, sliding and extending, new colours arriving, all colours combining, colours going on forever, except one which was missing, which was blue. Maybe-boyfriend had taken this in his stride, as had all those others standing about us. I said nothing, just as I said nothing a week later in this French class, but two sunsets in one week when before that there hadn't been any sunsets – that must mean something. Question was, was it a safe something or a threatening something? What was it, really, I was responding to here?

'Don't worry,' teacher then said. 'Your unease, even your temporary unhingement, dear students, in the face of this sunset is encouraging. It can only mean progress. It can only mean enlightenment. Please don't think you have betrayed or ruined yourselves.' She did more deep breathing then, hoping to encourage us by example into a more doughty and adventurous spirit. In the *littérateurs'* classroom, however, there was no sense of adventure, even less with the others than I think with me. At least I'd experienced the shock of the sky, the subversiveness of a sunset, and only a week previously, whereas from the look of them, and regardless of age, it seemed they were struggling with this encounter for the very first time. Of course the urge to panic was upon me also. I could feel it stirring in the air, as well as sense it coming in ripples, then in wave upon wave from the others. I think though, because I'd experienced this selfsame panic during my earlier sunset, yet had discovered that by keeping still, by not letting it overwhelm me, gradually it had subsided, this time I was accepting of it and so, after a bit of tuning-in or tuning-out, and to get respite from what might have been, after all, a non-conforming, unfamiliar, restful consciousness, I glanced down to street level. This was when I saw a white van parked up

the narrow entryway opposite. I froze, jolted out of the almost peaceful consciousness of just a moment before.

The bonnet of this van was peeping out of the entry, the entry running between the back of a row of drinking-bars on one side and the back of a line of businesses on the other. I managed to unfreeze enough to step away from the window in case he should be in there – with binoculars? telescope? camera? – looking up. And now I was thinking, *fool* – meaning me – for I'd considered myself successful, had taken cheer, self-congratulated in the belief I'd cracked the problem, that by reinstating my runs with third brother-in-law I'd succeeded in keeping this milkman away. So much for hypotheses. So much for inner boasting. Only a week gone by and already my circumvention of him had disintegrated. Why oh why had it not occurred to me that he'd switch tactics from pursuing me in the parks & reservoirs simply to resume interest in me from somewhere else?

Teacher started again. This time it was the fugacious (whatever that meant) black appearance of street trees owing to the crepuscular (whatever that meant) quality of the sky behind them, with the others – still in their own struggle – complaining that our town didn't have fugacity, crepuscles or street trees, black or any colour, before being made to look again and conceding that okay, maybe we did have street trees but they must have been put in half an hour earlier as nobody here had noticed them before. During this, I was telling myself to wise up, to get a grip, that here I was, downtown, which meant that van could be anybody's van and how likely would it be anyway, that he'd so happen to park his vehicle right opposite the college where I so happened to have my night class? Very unlikely. Too coincidental. Therefore, couldn't be his. In proof of this, next time I leaned forward to peep, the van up that entryway was gone. With eagerness I sprang to recovery, forgetting the van, rejoining the class, the sky, the trees, whatever else they were now bickering about. At the same time I dismissed