

... extracted from 'French for Girls' JP Wright

arrival

Long before the charabanc of exchange students arrived, I had constructed from the letters a clear image of Albert. From the letters, but more from my imagination and from bits and pieces of French film, posters, adverts. The ideal French boy. Quite tall and slender, with hair inclined to foppish length, dark, but not the oiled plumage of his southern cousins. A hawkish nose, of course, and sad dark eyes staring away into a memory. Soft, sallow skin. Long artist's fingers, flawless nails and a lounging posture. One does not imagine bulging biceps in tight white cotton, when dreaming of a gallic *homme ideale*. The lank-maned Italian would display a chest broad and well coated. A German, of course, would have a polished skin taut over efficient muscle; further east and the muscle will be more thickly padded, a hint of the solid, aggressive belly that will soon come. Your Dutchman will be husky, ruddy and cheerfully space-occupying. A Dane steely and wiry and intense, with steely wiry specs and steely wiry intellectual rigor. Our French boy, though, must have a more romantic or philosophical intellect, which is better suited to metaphysics than to engineering. Regarding life more with sorrow than with disgust, he studies it to accept it, not to force change. He will have imbibed with his mother's milk a firm grounding in art, philosophy and wine.

Whatever country you find yourself in, it is easy to pick from the faces around you one you will recognise as being prototypical for the whole nation, disregarding the fact that you have chosen one from hundreds, all the others rejected for not being typical enough. But we are tribal cave-dwellers and are suspicious of strangers, so we reassure ourselves that we know them and put them in their little boxes. Be stylish, be quaint, be invasive, be brusque, be lazy, be careless. But be what we tell you to be. These are the rules, and they apply with particular strength to the French, across the channel at whom we have been glaring with fear, pity, hatred, envy, incomprehension and disgust for centuries. And, (whisper it and do not tell king Henry) also with never-to-be-admitted grudging admiration and a sense of inferiority that we conceal with john-bullish beef-roasting boastful scorn. Inferiority partly because they are fortunate to occupy a country that is larger, warmer, more mountainous, and endowed with longer, wider rivers, but also in the face of an inborn knowledge of art, film, food, and above all a certainty of who they are. Or so it seems from this side of the sea. There is a reason we have had to borrow from them *savoir faire* and *insouciance*. The latter, mind you, seems to me to be an

excuse, set out in advance in case of the failure of any project: if I am not committing myself wholly to this, then I lose no face. This is not an existential threat to me <shrug>.

Even the largest rivers sensibly wind about on their journeys: meanders are their shrugs – *very well, I shall take this path, where the soil is soft and no great rock blocks my progress, and it matters not to me as the sea will no doubt wait*. So, a Frenchman is like a river then? Absolutely itself, knowing not just how to do but how to be. Full of hidden depths and fish. Wet around the edges but able to sweep you away. Something like that, and with thoughts something like these, I prepared myself to be swept, waiting with the rest of my form for the bus to arrive.

It was the first day of the Easter holidays, and we were all packed up and ready to go home. This was in the days when I was boarding still, though home most weekends. I was in third form, and the Kitty-witch had not yet been afflicted on poor old St Audrey's, though no doubt her prep school teachers were already sending letters to warn of the terror that was to come in September. Reckless, the first form teachers were smirking and shaking their heads at the desperation of her current warders and imagining that a poor timid little new bug would pose no threat to them, despite my having warned them when I was in first form myself. They had chuckled complacently in the same way at prep school when I had explained to them that I had a younger sister whom my Mother had tried to smuggle into the house in disguise as a kitten, but who had turned out to be a devil. I had warned them that she looked more-or-less like a human child, but they should not be fooled. They had smiled and nodded and failed to prepare for the hurricane. Now they were beginning to look around and survey the wreckage, mutter under their breaths 'just one more term' and look longingly at the calendar and drinks cabinet, and wave flags across the playing fields at their senior school colleagues to let them know of the coming catastrophe.

No less a catastrophe for me. The social stigma of having a younger sibling in school would be crushing, especially with such a sibling as Tabitha, which is the Tickham minor's real name in case you did not know, though she answers as well to Kitty, pest, witch, piglet, git and any other appropriate term of reproach (which is to say, she answers not at all to any address but goes her own merry way, unless the rest of the sentence should include the magic words chocolate or cake or pie). 'She is a spirited child,' her exhausted teachers would write in reports, and, 'Tabitha always has so much to contribute.' By which they mean that she has the energy and social skills of a particularly lively puppy covered in mud, and none of the redeeming big-eyed innocence. You will notice how early, despite my determination otherwise, she has sharp-elbowed her way into this story, which is none of her business.

Her anti-social tendencies were clear to me from the very earliest stages of her career, when she arrived wrapped like an angry parcel, not crying, not that first day, but glaring around, seeking a target for her fury. Mother was the obvious choice, you would have thought, but the blight is a crafty villain, as political as a venetian contessa. She fixed her glare on me and showed Mother only brown-eyed charm. Even now, Mother is blind to her wickedness and indulges her while she ignores my warnings, just as when I tried to explain, with as much patience as a three-year-old can be expected to have, that I could feel horns beginning to grow under the thick tuft of hair that the little devil arrived with and never lost. Thicker than mine, darker than mine and, despite her lack of attention to it and tendency to decorate it with twigs, leaves, glitter, and bits of whatever else falls into her orbit, more liable to attract the approval of the Mater, or any aunts or cousins come to pay tribute at the family seat, or even passers-by in the street. Witch's hair: perhaps that is the source of her power. One day, I might sneak into her room and shave it off. Ugh. The stumps of her horns might show then. Maybe not.

So three was a difficult age for me, and later, being separated from Mother every day, leaving her to dote on the beast while I went to school, I thought that being five was tough. Of course, it had nothing on twelve, when I was sure that if only I were thirteen, the way would be smooth. I must have forgotten that I had felt the same at ten, at eleven.

I was moved up a year at beginning of senior school, being not only an autumn baby but also rather advanced for my age (fie, my modesty). As a consequence, I am the youngest in my form. Annabelle Haugh-Frost, who would otherwise be the form baby, is but six weeks my senior. I played with her at nursery, was patronised by her through prep as she was a whole year ahead. Every September, we start with me apparently a year behind. She a freshly-minted five-year-old, seven-year-old, ten-year-old; I am still a baby, and by the time I have had my birthday, everyone is looking ahead to the next one. This makes Annabelle feel better about her own lagging behind the hormonal freaks with October birthdays and greasy, pimpled skin. Since the beginning of third form, she had been reminding me "I shall be thirteen this year," (even though it would be well into summer hols), "but you shan't until after we begin fourth form."

The move up was apparently for my benefit – I need to be challenged, they say, and not allowed to be bored, and to fulfil my potential. No-one asked me if I wanted to be challenged. Still, it has saved a year's school fees I suppose. I shall spend the money later, on therapy.

My classmates were gathered in an excited chattering cluster. Weeks of dark dormitory nights had not worn out their appetite for gossip. There was none of the normal mournful parting or

busy planning of holiday get-togethers, though. This end-of-term felt different, as we would all be together anyway on and off during the coming week, part of the entertainments organised for our guests. The anticipation of this dreary prospect was enough to keep them babbling on indefinitely, and Annabelle in particular was endlessly exercised by the question of her pen-friend's qualities. Feeling that I had spent quite enough time that term with of the horse-faced Haugh-Frost and the rest of my form, I had dragged my bags over to Mother's car before realising that Kitty was lurking within and drifting half-way back to the group. Mother sashayed over to me, embarrassed me with an embrace and kisses, and then strolled on to greet Mlle Saucisson and Miss Uptight the house-mistress. Very stylish Mother looked that afternoon in a dress dusky pink or peach with a long line of black buttons, kitten heels to match and a little pill box hat. As though she had just interrupted her promenade along the *Champs Elysée* to patronise a group of lost frumps, not driven into town from the rural depths of Hapeney Fen to rescue her elder daughter from the clutches of school-marms.

"Good evening, Mrs Updyke," she said, and "*Bonsoir, Felice*," she murmured to the French mistress, who is really Mademoiselle Sacrisan and in fact Spanish, but is of course known to all the girls as 'the Happy Sausage'. Or '*Profesor Salchicha*' in the Spanish lessons she gives the seniors. People should really consider, before they commit themselves to the life-long purgatory of teaching, whether they have the name for it, especially French mistresses with doe eyes and an inclination to weepiness.

Other mothers, having in their turn shamed their daughters, joined the little flock, and soon all were bleating about their shocking weeks, their trials at work or at the salon. Their daughters continued to chatter about pop bands, books and ponies. I remained aloof, ignoring alike the beckoning of my friends and the gurning monkey in the car. I continued sculpting and refining the model in my mind of the philosopher king who would soon arrive. What with the drudgery of lessons and the drizzly hours spent slogging around the sports field at the goad of Miss Inslip the games-mistress, there is little enough to occupy the imagination of a girl in the dull weeks of winter term, so I had spent a lot of time contemplating Albert. Inventing Albert. Like an archaeologist or geologist, from a few fragments building a whole. A trading nation from a potsherd; a dinosaur from a toe-bone. Like an historian, inventing a personality from a few scribbled words. From scant evidence, and as much from dreams, I had made a person. Each letter from France aggrandised my sculpture and added qualities to the character of my creation, as onto stereotype I grafted gifts of intellect, gifts of generosity of spirit, depth of feeling and empathy. Height, noble carriage and ease of movement. Equal facility in foil and sonnet; in épée and villanelle. I may have allowed my imagination too much freedom. By that afternoon,

I almost expected the descent, white-winged, from the dark blue sky of a demi-god. What I got was a grinding of gears and a grey cloud of fumes from which emerged a small bus, which coughed itself to a halt in front of the school gates, dripped a little oil, hissed open a door and settled back, coughed once more then was silent. Through the smeared back window peered a row of faces. None of them could be Albert, I knew: the back seat is not for philosophers.

Mrs Uptight and Mlle Saucisson marched up to the bus and, as no-one emerged, seemed to be readying themselves to board when a little flutter of paper blew out towards them, followed by a clipboard in flight and then a stumbling teacher.

“Madam Uptight,” said Saucisson, stooping to grab a piece of paper that had landed in a puddle, before it could set sail away along the gutter, “may I introduce my sister, Dolores?”

“A pleasure,” said the house-mistress to the woman crouched in front of her, scrabbling after the rest of her papers. Both sisters Saucisson went for the clipboard, there was a clash of heads, and our Felice emerged the pyrrhic victor, clutching head and clipboard as her unfortunate sister bobbed back up to shake the house-mistress’s hand, or rather to offer it a damp bundle of paper.

“Madame, I would like to thank you for inviting us to your school and to your country,” recited Dolores from memory, “and I do hope that my pupils will show you their best behaviour and to take advantage of their opportunity for learning here.” Which speech was followed by a wave of those very pupils that spilled through the door of the bus and around and past the greeting party, carrying with it an assistant teacher with the wide-eyed regretful look of a rabbit being borne aloft by an eagle. They filled the pavement, threatening to sweep their teacher back into the gutter, but once the pressure from behind eased, the leading edge of the wave broke up and spread out. They were a tough-looking lot, in jeans and t-shirts and swinging ruck-sacs from their shoulders. They looked around, blinking in the low sun, the joy of freedom after long hours being vibrated in a warm bus lessening as they found themselves in an unfamiliar environment. Rather than making for the horizon, they began to listen to the demands of Dolores and the pleas of her assistant and, while not really forming a tail as requested, did at least cluster round to be counted.

The stray paperwork having been similarly gathered up and returned to its clipboard, there began a sorting process.

“Claude, Pierre, Jaques M, Jaques A ...” Some of the French pupils, and the assistant teacher, were sent groaning back onto the bus, which would take them a few minutes across town to St Custards where a more robust welcome awaited them.

“Marie T, Sélène, Marie S ...” The remainder were one by one escorted by Mlle Sacrisan across to my form-mates, each to be united with their pen-pal, some joyously, some with caution. Half a dozen remained with Miss Uptight, as their pen-pals lived at too great a distance from school to host them. They would occupy one of the dorms, the lucky things, and experience the joys of school food and plumbing.

I began to worry. Neither demi-god nor philosopher king stood among the dwindling group. Yasmine was introduced to Fenella. Salomé went to join Annabelle, who immediately hooked her by the arm and dragged her over to me.

“V, this is Salomé. Isn’t she pretty? We are going to be the best of friends, so you will understand if I do not have time for you this week,” she crowed. I shrugged. “No-one for you?” Annabelle asked. It was beginning to look that way. I dared not answer. I would not ordinarily have cared to have my holidays disrupted by a guest and would have been only too pleased to escape from school, from the teachers, from Annabelle with the thought of being free of them all for four weeks, but seeing the rest paired up, and myself alone, was shaming. Tears threatened, not my usual habit at all, and with tears, more shame. So I said nothing and shrugged. Lucky for me, Annabelle was too distracted by her new toy to take the opportunity to needle me. Salomé glanced back with what seemed to me to be pleading in her eyes as her captor dragged her away. I let them go: her fate was not for me to decide.

Mother, left unattended as the other Mothers began to leave with their charges, floated across to the teachers to murmur supportive French *mots* to the sausage sisters and glance at their clipboard. Where was Albert? Snagged and dragged off by some other girl? Waiting for the bus still, outside *Ecole Irène Némirovsky* in *Les Fontaines sur Siene*, looking doubtfully at the school clock?

The bus sputtered and then roared again and began to fill the air with grey fog. It would leave, and it would take my Albert! Dolores prepared to re-mount the beast, but then stepped aside to let pass one more passenger. All the others having dispersed, it could be no-one but Albert, but I did not need that certainty. In a crowd, I would have seen no-one else. The sun pointed out to me, the rooks rising from their roost in fright at the backfires of the bus called down to me, the clearing of the air as the bus growled away drew my eyes towards, Albert.

Not quite the classical sculpture I had built in my idle mind, but that was soon supplanted by this living image. I need not describe for you in every detail how Albert looked that afternoon – you will have your own image of sublimity. For you, it might not matter that the sinking sun of early spring touched gold on the tip of every dark curl, each of which had its own beauty; the one curling over the finely rolled edge of an ear, a second arcing down towards

one straight eyebrow, another curling forward under a cheekbone, yet another tenderly touching the golden nape of the neck. It will be of no interest to you how that gold flattered a complexion that otherwise might fall on the grey side of tan. You will not care that those shoulders were narrow yet bearing a heavy rucksack. That long delicate fingers curled around a book, and one of those fingers slid between to mark the progress of the eyes through the pages. Eyes dark, of course, but not absolutely: a ring of green jealously surrounded each iris, guarding flecks of gold, again gold, within its bounds. Eyes briefly barred by long lashes blinking away the diesel dust.

On the breeze that was beginning to blow away the spring warmth, I heard Albert's voice in response to Mother's "*Bonjour.*"

"*Bonjour, Madame. Je suis heureux de ...* I am please to meet you." It was a voice light but with a hoarse edge. Light? Let us be frank and say high. But in no way comical. A very serious, level, quiet voice.

Mother gestured towards the car, "*là-bas*", and the two of them set out. Mother gliding, Albert swaggering or staggering under the weight of the ruck-sack, shoulders forward and those slender hands in pockets now, book clamped safely under one arm. I was still hanging, floating, half-way between the two of them and the car. As they passed, Albert tilted head and lifted gaze from the pavement to give me a half smile, just a twitch of full dark lips. I trembled. Not figuratively; not inside. Actual uncontrollable muscle tremors. 'This is the moment,' I told myself, 'that all things are begun again.' The world was to be unspun and remade with the new colours and a new light that insisted on every detail. A storm would lift me from the limpid lagoon I had blindly sailed, crash me through corals, throw me from hand to hand and cast me up on hot white sands where every grain, every detail was intensely felt, and pressed into my memory. After twelve peaceful years that had been washed in watercolour or smudged in pastel, I was to live in one week through gilded Byzantium, luminous renaissance, jagged neon modernity. In one week, the brightest blues were to be discovered, and the most painful yellows, the hottest reds.

Before they had even reached me, any imagined ideal I had held had been replaced by this Albert, as imaginary yet in all but image. 'This one, this one,' my heart whispered. This was the Albert of the letters. The Albert for whom I had been waiting, idly imagining away the time without realising how tightly I had wound the spring of my longing. Blame the golden light, blame the edge of spring and the precipice of my approaching teens. Each breath I took drew bubbles into my blood that tingled my fingers and fizzed up the nape of my neck to burst like fireworks, transforming the grey calm of my brain into a field of explosions. In the

circumstances, I might have fallen in love with anyone, so ready was I to surrender to gravity. But once done, it is done. There was no hope for me.

Of all this of course I said nothing, only followed as Mother waved Albert into the front passenger seat. I climbed in beside Kitty, who was as full of talking as ever.

“Je am pelle Kitty,” she said, thrusting her sticky paw between the seats to grab Albert’s hand. Damn her. “Pleased to meetcha and common sa va.”

“I am please to meet you Tabitha kitten,” replied Albert, throwing me a careful wink.

“Tickham,” cried the little fool, while I blushed and said nothing.

“*Assieds-toi, Tabita,*” said Mother, showing off. She nudged her way out into the traffic while continuing with a gurgling stream of French, questions directed at poor Albert, who politely answered in that same quiet, croaky voice.

Yes, it had been a long journey. No, not too bad on the ferry, but too long on the bus. Yes, they had been given lunch but only sandwiches and yes it was a long time ago.

“Mummy, shall we be stopping to buy pizzas?” asked Kitty, having heard “sandwiches”. Not a word anyone wants to hear when the sun is waist-deep in the horizon and a slight mist is rising from the damp countryside around.

“We have a guest, dear, so we will be eating properly at the table.”

Kitty sighed and tried a new angle of attack. “Albert, do you have pizzas at home? I have been to France and we did not have pizza once, though we did have hot chocolate.”

“*Bien sûr*, we have pizza. But not so often,” said Albert, sadly, turning to glance back, speaking to Kitty but looking at me. I tried to speak, but my throat was dry. Just when I ought to have been practising my sweet attractive grace, a coughing fit was the best I could manage.

“I’m sure we can have pizza later in the holiday,” said Mother.

“You are okay?” Albert said, and I managed to nod. My eyes were watering. Oh please let my nose not be running.

“Will Daddy be home?” asked Kitty. Mother concentrated on driving for a few moments.

“Not this week. For the Easter weekend.”

“Have you got Easter eggs yet? Have you got the big ones?”

“Auntie Bobbie is visiting tomorrow,” Mother offered as a diversion, but Kitty was keen to develop her theme.

“We shan’t have to share, shall we? The eggs?”

And so they went on, Kitty leaping like a drunken knight between her obsessions; Mother backing, slipping sideways, cutting away across the board. Albert, apparently satisfied that I was not about to die, turned to the front again and gazed out of the window at the dim, flat

landscape. I sat and resented Mother with her easy French, Kitty with her complete lack of social inhibition. And Auntie Bobbie too, whose visits were usually as welcome as they were unpredictable. She is younger than Mother and more fun. Less tall, but terribly glamorous and sun-tanned and always just back from somewhere exotic. The last thing I wanted was anyone to distract Albert from me. I was entirely prepared to rely on the tedium of our rural idyll to make me a subject of interest. Better that Mother did not cook delicious feasts. Better if Bobbie were to stay on a tropical beach somewhere. Better that Kitty did not exist at all. I had imagined it would be just Albert and myself. Where, I do not know. In a sort of misty place where nothing could exist beyond the two of us. Certainly not the cracked egg sister, who started up again, disturbing my reverie,

“If there are soft centres, can we swap them?”

“Eh?” I managed.

“Inside my Easter egg. If I have soft centres, inside, can I have yours instead?” she explained, as though to an idiot.

“I don’t care,” I said, which just goes to show how distracted I was. She went on chattering, I went on ignoring her and staring in the dusk at the dark, crisp curls that kissed the back of Albert’s neck.

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