

The words of your language

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THE WORDS OF YOUR LANGUAGE

Billy's just announced the next topic.

'The one that got away.'

I'm on my third can of Stella and I need a piss. But Andrew's already taken up the challenge and it seems rude to walk away. Besides, as soon as I leave the campfire I'll be ambushed by the swarm of midges I know is waiting in the dark, surrounding our badly protected little company.

And then there's the fire itself, which holds me in its seductive trance. It ripples the air, ripping otherworldly openings in the spaces between the dancing licks of flame.

They're portals, I think. You could travel into one of them, if you didn't mind getting scorched.

I hold my Stella at arm's reach. It's been a while since I've been this buzzed.

'The one that got away,' repeats Andrew.

As he plays for time, my mind fixates on the phrase itself, on its structure, its underlying grammatical patterns. It's a noun phrase, though it doesn't have any nouns in it. 'The' is a determiner, 'one' is a pronoun, and the rest of it is a relative clause. But how can a pronoun follow a determiner? And could you put any other determiner in front of 'one'? I try it out, as Leila has taught me to do.

A one that got away.

My one that got away.

That I'll never be able to ask Leila about this hits me like a punch in the gut.

#

I met her just over three months ago, the 25th of March, two days after the UK lockdown. Her confinement started a week earlier.

She lives on the outskirts of Paris, in a place called Saint-Cloud.

Leila, Saint-Cloud.

Those two names kept me company during solitary meals of dwindling stores of microwaved beans in my cramped flat in Leeds. I imagined Leila and her little girl floating through quarantine on a bed of fluffy, saintly clouds.

In our first video call a couple of weeks later I learned it's pronounced *San Clue*.

That final syllable evoked not heavenly skies, but solvable mysteries.

I guess I should start with the mystery.

#

No, I'll start with the school.

Back in November, four months after graduation, I was reeling from the intense tedium of my call-centre job and despairing for my future. In an unaccustomed rush of motivation I applied to a summer certification programme in Prague, on Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages.

An e-mail at the start of 2020 congratulated me on the success of my application.

Your passport to adventure awaits! Three months later they closed the school.

I drank my way through a fridge pack of Carling, but still couldn't muster any grief about my cancelled adventure.

I'll go some other time, I told myself, when all this is over. I pulled out a pile of handouts from the linguistics modules I'd had to do for my English degree in preparation.

I couldn't understand any of it. I posted a drunken cry for help on a language-nerd forum. *Can anyone tell me what nominal determination is? #linguisticsfordummies*

The thread grew lengthy with impenetrable terminology: definites, indefinites, demonstratives, gender, number, something called a DP. A controversial sub-thread on transnumeral nominals versus mass nouns sparked a heated debate.

By then the shame of my ignorance had compounded the shame of my cowardice, and I rushed out into the undoubtedly pestilent street, only to find the shelves at my local Sainsbury's stripped of booze.

Leila's response distinguished itself from amongst the unfathomable debates and interminable explanations. *Nominal determination is a mystery school*, she'd written. *Only initiates can know its secrets.*

#

'Look around the room you're in now and tell me one thing you see.'

What I was seeing was her.

The crescent eyes set deep within her full moon face exuded a certain inexplicable quality, a gentle kindness drawn from a deep well of sorrow. A few wild, dark ringlets of loosed hair partially eclipsed her face.

'A window,' I said.

'A window,' she repeated, her American accent coming through in the 'o' sound. She'd studied at Penn State. 'Indefinite determination. If you tell someone to look at *a window*, any window will do. We could both look at a window right now. But we are hundreds of miles apart, so we will be looking at different windows.'

'It's my front room window, actually,' I said. I was playing for time, trying to hide my confusion.

‘My front room window,’ she repeated. ‘Possessive determination. The window or the front room or both – they become things that belong to you.’

‘It’s a rented flat,’ I said stupidly.

She smiled indulgently, the crescent of her slim lips completing the perfect half-circle of each of her eyes.

‘Possessive determination does not mean you own something, but that you have a relationship with it. You have a history with your window, you could say. You look out of it every day.’

‘It’s the window I stare out of when I should be doing something productive,’ I confessed.

‘The window you stare out of,’ Leila affirmed. ‘A definite description, preceded by the definite article. It transforms something generic into something specific, a unique window, special to you. Now we can know the nature of your relationship with this window. It tempts you away from your mundane world, it hints at wider horizons. Through it you dream of a life beyond your rented worries.’

It might have been what I learned later was called first-language interference – the lilting intonation, the idiosyncratic turns of phrase – but everything she said sounded like poetry to me.

‘It was a window that I saw first, also,’ she said, ‘when I discovered the mysteries of nominal determination.’

#

She’d not planned on returning to France after she graduated from Penn State in 2015. If she’d known she was destined to go back, she would never have married so young – twenty-two, desperate to continue the life she’d forged for herself on those new shores, her

student visa on the brink of expiration. The following year her daughter was born and Trump was elected president.

Her new husband, Tim, was equally disturbed by both events.

‘He was embarrassed,’ she told me. ‘His belief in America’s greatness was shattered when the man he called “the idiot” came into power. And then, Camille. He wasn’t prepared for her, either. He didn’t know what babies are like.’

He learned that new-borns cry most of the time and disrupt one’s carefully developed habits and beloved little rituals.

He decided that they needed a big shakeup. He convinced his company to transfer him to their Paris branch. His young French wife was homesick, he said.

‘He told everyone I was struggling with a new baby and that I needed to be near my family.’

Her family lived 300 miles away, in rural Alsace.

‘I said goodbye to the last six years of my life – to the only place I’d lived as an adult – and dragged my one-year-old to this apartment Tim found in Saint-Cloud. Paris was more foreign to me than anywhere we could have moved in America.’

Tim spent more and more hours away from their apartment, rounding off long workdays with regular drinking binges with his ex-pat colleagues. Leila stayed at home with the baby. She knew no one in Paris, so she struggled to arrange playdates for Camille. Leila fretted over her daughter’s socialisation and development. At 18 months, she had yet to speak her first word in either French or English.

‘The specialists told me that our bilingual household was the problem. Tim’s French was still only very rudimentary, so I began to speak to her only in English. When that didn’t work I started to do my own research.’

She read every article she could find on language acquisition and quickly became fascinated by the nature of language itself. ‘One day I was pointing to the pictures in one of Camille’s books and saying the words again and again, hoping she’d mimic me. *Apple, apple, apple. Bear, bear, bear.* You know how if you say a word too many times, it starts to lose its meaning?’

My onscreen lips formed and re-formed the word – *apple, apple, apple* – until I’d dissolved into the rhythm of those silent syllables.

‘It suddenly seemed so strange to me that there should be words for all the different things in the world.’

Her eyes grew wider as she reflected on the wonder of that moment. Her focus was fixed on some point beyond the laptop’s meagre screen. The eager face that shared that flat space with hers had faded.

When she brought her gaze back in to look at me, I re-emerged.

I watched my digital reflection redden with pleasure.

#

Camille spoke her first words last September, at the age of three and a half, the day after her father moved in with his new girlfriend. The mystified language therapists pronounced her level of both French and English to be as good as any child her age.

Leila didn’t hear any more news of Tim until a week after Camille’s fourth birthday.

Her mobile rang in the middle of one of our video calls. Her face turned to ash, and she ran from the room, calling out to me in French words I didn’t understand.

‘Maman says she’s sorry but she has to take the call,’ Camille said. She was sitting on the floor watching a French cartoon on an iPad. Her hands were busy forming shapes out of stray bits of wool.

I could just make out Leila’s voice, quaking with urgency, in the other room.

I tried to distract Camille from whatever tragedy had just befallen us. ‘Erm,’ I said, and cleared my throat. I didn’t know how to talk to a child. ‘What are you making?’ I asked.

‘A language,’ she said, without looking up.

‘Oh,’ I said.

In the background I heard the rasping sound of Leila’s choked sobs.

‘Will you teach me the words of your language?’ I asked.

Camille looked at the lone face on her mother’s glowing screen with indulgence.

‘Languages aren’t made of words, silly-boots.’

‘They’re not?’

‘*Non*,’ she said, with authority.

‘What are they made of, then?’

‘Cosy nests, warm blankets and soft cocoons.’ She held up an indistinct ball of multicoloured fluff. ‘Maman made a language for me when I was little, and now I’m making one for Daddy.’

Leila came back in the room to make a frenzied, apologetic end to our call. Her English was more French-accented than I’d ever heard it. Within moments her face had faded from my screen and I watched my own tear-stained face stare back at me, repeating the two syllables of her name until they’d lost their meaning.

#

‘Something struck me in what I was reading about nominal determination,’ she’d said, on the day I was initiated. ‘I looked up to see the light streaming through the window. *The window, my window, this window, this light*. I knew then that language does something much more mysterious than labelling things. It twists and turns, wrapping itself around the elements of our world, like a net cast into the sea. But not quite like a net, which captures what is already there. It makes space for what is not yet there, like a cocoon, or a womb. A

membrane, perhaps. It is only once the language membrane is formed that something new can come into being.'

'That sounds...' I didn't know what to say. 'It sounds like you're describing something supernatural.'

'I guess I am,' she admitted. 'It's how I started thinking about language – as a form of alchemy.'

'A mystery school,' I said.

'Yes.' Her smile wrapped round me like a cosy nest.

#

It was the police who'd called on the last day I spoke to Leila, to tell her that her husband had been in a car accident and was in critical condition in a Parisian hospital.

The greatest damage was to the left hemisphere of his brain. Eventually he regained all his faculties but his speech. She moved him back into their Saint-Cloud apartment and committed herself full-time to his rehabilitation.

I'm afraid we won't be able to continue our lovely conversations, she texted.

Why not??? I whined.

My sweet Jeremy, she replied.

Possessive determination, I observed. I waited a full thirty seconds before sending another message. *I belong to you.*

Oh, Jeremy. I'm a married woman.

Indefinite determination, I countered, petulant initiate that I was.

We're looking through different windows now, she replied.

#

A ripple of riotous laughter announces the end of Andrew's story. All eyes are now on me.

‘You haven’t had a go yet, Jeremy,’ Billy says. ‘What’s your one that got away?’

I note the possessive determiner *your* before the pronoun *one* and my stomach freefalls. Suddenly everything’s devastatingly wide open – the incessant dance of the campfire flames, the bottomless sky, the oppressively distant light of the stars. This trip feels like an irreversible mistake, like I’m looking through the wrong window.

‘I’m desperate for a piss,’ I say, excusing myself.

I stumble to my feet and break away from their circle, exposing my vulnerable skin to the great cloud of invisible predators that now envelopes me.

The moon is wrapped in clouds, the owls send out their soothing sounds, but the words they call are not for me. There is no language in this wide darkness to hold me, to make space for me, to bring me into being.

THE END