

## Three Colours

The sky detonated in an attack of blue and white as his head bounced off the sand. Behind his shut eyes, in the red-black, four bright stars danced in rings. These points of light were joined by voices that grew louder until they became solid things that shook him. The stars danced faster and an immense pressure bore down on his chest. The air in his lungs grew thicker, forcing its way up his throat to be expelled, shooting from his mouth, then falling back with a weak splash. He dashed the water from his eyes, breathing raggedly. There was a brief clapping, and the sound of laughter looped around, creating more stars that spun and flickered. Blinking, he looked up at the people that crowded in a tight circle above him.

“I can see three colours!” the shrill voice of a woman demanded indignantly.

“Never mind that. Why were you swimming in your clothes son?” a man asked him, his voice gentle, his accent strange. His face was very tanned; black hair still slick from the ocean. He wore nothing but a pair of small white bathing shorts.

“Never *mind* that?” the woman spoke again, and there was horror in her voice. He turned to look up in her direction. She was very fat and wore a diaphanous red sarong and a matching red sunhat. Even her sunglasses were red, with rose-coloured lenses. These she slid far down her short sunburnt nose to, no doubt, make more apparent her accusing stare.

“Three colours!” she shrieked again, the blood rising to her already florid cheeks. “Brown belt. Grey trousers. Blue shirt!” She uttered the words, aghast. A condemning finger was thrust out repetitively as it pinned the colours down.

“Is he mad?” The new voice was soft and inquisitive and belonged to a little girl who stood shyly to one side, twisting the hem of her yellow sundress in her small hands.

“He doesn’t look mad,” the Red Woman continued imperiously, and drawing herself up to her full height said, “He looks like a reactionary!” The man waved her away with both hands, shooing at her as though she were a flock of pigeons.

“You not a reactionary. Are you son?”

The stranger shook his head weakly, not wanting to open his mouth. There was a shout from across the beach and a young woman dashed over to join them. She must also have come straight from the ocean, for she dripped stinging droplets all over as she pushed through the man, woman and child to crouch down beside him. The woman in red started forwards as if to pull her back, but the girl stopped her with a short look over her shoulder. The Red Woman made a small sniffing sound and, looking away towards the sea, put her arm around the child in the yellow dress. The younger woman edged closer to the stranger, shuffling on her knees through the sand. A short blue skirt made of some kind of metallic fabric clung wetly to her hips. Around her neck, strung on a long ribbon between her small bare breasts, hung a necklace of seashells, painted blue. The shells clacked and swung as she bent over him and her palms were cool and sticky when she pressed them to either side of his face. The girl narrowed her eyes and then abruptly stood and gave herself a shake. In the blizzard of flung drops a rainbow emerged and he felt dazzled by the sun that struck him suddenly and sharply between the eyes. He dropped back again and blackness, accompanied by an echo of dismayed voices, swallowed him.

The left side of his body was too warm. The Stranger opened his eyes to a flickering orange darkness, which was immediately interrupted by the face of the young woman. Her blonde hair hung down in ropes of salt and sand, the firelight glowing gently through the swinging curtain. He found that he was lying on a blanket and he sat up cautiously, mindful of his aching body. The others, the man in white, the woman in red and the child in yellow were all huddled around the fire; they stared at him with the flames reflected in their eyes. The blinding heat of the day had been swept away and replaced with a soothing temperatureless night. He watched as the girl with the shell necklace moved from his side and went over to the edge of the fire. She returned with a ceramic bowl of roasted oysters and offered them to him. The Stranger accepted the meal gratefully and used the knife, which she had also provided, to pry open the hot shells. Spearing an oyster on the tip of the blade, he put it into his mouth, chewing slowly. Everyone sat in silence watching him; the only noises were the pounding of the surf and the snapping of the logs in the fire; the empty oyster shells clattered loudly as they

dropped, one by one, back into the bowl.

There was an odd but pleasant taste in his mouth, not unlike the residue left over from the first time he had smoked a cigarette. He swallowed and the taste intensified; his whole mouth felt new, like the mouth of another person entirely, and he ran the back of his hand over his lips and chin a few times to reassure himself that it was indeed his familiar old mouth. He tried on a spasmodic smile, but dropped it quickly when he noticed the Blue Girl watching him.

“You from the big house.” she said. Like the white man, her words were oddly accented, as though she were speaking a language she was not fully in command of. When he stared back at her blankly, she added, “No use saying you not! I know you. I seen your face before”.

He turned to regard her more closely; she avoided his gaze and crossed her arms over her bare chest, as if only just now realising she was shirtless. The Blue Girl scowled as she got up and walked around the fire to talk to the man in the white shorts. She gestured towards the cliffs as she spoke and the man’s affable smile was replaced with a worried glance in the direction she was pointing. The man stood up. “If you from the Big House, you shouldn’t be here. Not on this part of the beach”. The Red Woman stood too, and shooting a final defiant look at the Stranger, she gathered up the Yellow Child in her great, sunburnt arms.

“We going in now” she said bluntly and gestured sharply for the Blue Girl to follow her. The Stranger looked around. He didn’t see anywhere for them to go “in” to, but chose to say nothing. The Red Woman stopped suddenly and, looking back, addressed the tanned White Man.

“Don’t you go getting any funny ideas now,” she scolded him, her finger wagging. “You fished that one out the ocean, he’s yours to put back where he belongs.”

She then stalked off into the dark with the child. The Blue Girl trotted over, the sand at her heels, her shell necklace clacking out a brittle music as it bounced against her chest.

Walking up the beach with the White Man, the Stranger looked back once at the fire. It existed only as a warm orange creature that was small, and growing smaller, as it

jumped up and down in the darkness.

“So,” the White Man began, “Roro says you from the Big House.”

The Stranger turned to him. The light from the moon was dim, but the man’s big, square teeth shone as though they possessed a light source of their own. The name Roro blinked and flashed, growing brighter until it bleached out all else; it shone, a single point of illumination upon the black expanse of his memory.

“Roro?” He spoke the name slowly, unsure if he said it out loud or not. The man smiled at him in the moonlight, he was kneeling now and removing some items from a white leather backpack.

Roro. The name was a word and then a verb and then a feeling that seemed capable of expressing all emotion. He shook his head trying to pin it down, but the sensation was suddenly gone. Turning back, he searched for the fire, but that too had vanished. Only the man kneeling at his feet remained. Out of his bag he took a pair of white canvas shoes and pulled them on. He gestured apologetically to the Stranger’s bare feet and said, “I’d offer them to you, but we wouldn’t want four colours, now would we?” He laughed as he shrugged on a white plastic anorak. Zipping it up to his chin he pulled the hood over his head tying the string tightly in a bow.

“Ready then?” He smiled.

They set off up the rocks and eventually reached a dusty road. The White Man paused and looked in both directions. They seemed to stand there for a very long time.

“Are we going somewhere?” the Stranger eventually asked, but was cut off abruptly by a silencing hand.

“The road is busy,” whispered the White Man. The Stranger glanced up and down the deserted road; it twisted off, a dull brown snake, slithering away into the darkness.

“Take a deep breath and hold it,” the man said. “Don’t take another till I say so.” The Stranger, for lack of anything better to do, gulped down a lungful of air as the White Man’s hand jerked out and, clasping his wrist tightly, dragged him onto the road. They ran through the night, hand in hand; his companion’s canvas shoes slapped the dust and gradually the Stranger’s bare feet began to burn. His feet and his lungs were on fire as the night flew by faster and began to blur around him. Tears leaked from his eyes, rolling

along his temples. The Stranger felt himself rising up as though he were a balloon, attached only by a tenuous string to the body that pounded along relentlessly beneath him. He looked to his left and saw the gleaming white of the man's smile flashing as they glided through the night, hands clasped tightly. The hand tugged at his wrist and they moved higher, leaving their bodies labouring along below. On both sides the landscape lay in rolling fields of grass and the road became a frozen river of dust that wound through the countryside. He felt a sense of vertigo wash over him as his vision doubled, transforming the road into a winding column of water that cut obstinately through a dense jungle. The air grew warm and clinging and the darkness lightened to a creeping navy and then pink. Pulling his eyes away from the phantom body of water, he focused instead on the cliffs that loomed closer, and darkness descended on the land once more. High up, huddled beneath the clouded night sky, stood the Big House. Tall and shining in the moon, the marble of its walls gleamed and the bright yellow lights of the windows throbbed in a hundred golden hearts framed with pillars and balconies of pale stone. The cliff face reared up before them and the Stranger abruptly found himself standing at the foot of a towering wall of rock. A little way to the right he could see a paved driveway carved into the side of the mountain and he started instinctively towards it. The Big House called to him, pulling insistently at his face and hands. But the White Man held him back.

“Stop that,” he said. “Breathe now, you cannot just go marching in the front door.” And suddenly, as he filled his lungs, the Stranger knew that the man was right. His body sagged and he longed for sleep, the terrible emptiness that had replaced his memory yawned, threatening to swallow the house, the cliffs, the White Man, even the night. He began to tremble, and his companion stopped smiling long enough to take him in his arms and comfort him. The Stranger laid his head on the man's shoulder, his wet cheek sticking to the plastic of the anorak.

“Don't take it so hard.” The White Man pushed him away and shook his shoulder gently. “There's another way.” He nodded in encouragement. “Come, I show you.”

The relief he felt made his knees momentarily weak and he clung feebly to the plastic shoulder for support. The man led him around the cliff, and pointed to a dark depression not far above them in the face of the rock. “Through there. Climb slowly

now.” The man smiled on, but something about his smile, a subtle change at the corners of his mouth, indicated that he was waiting. The Stranger stood for a moment longer staring at him. Then he unbuckled his brown belt and, rolling it up, offered it to the White Man, who accepted it willingly.

“I will make this into a great weapon,” he said as he walked away, still smiling.

The Stranger made his way up the cliffs. The cave was not a large one and he had to kneel down to pull himself into its mouth. He splashed into a pool of water as he entered. The interior was pitch dark and the cold water sloshed around his ankles. Stretching out his arms in the blackness, his hands encountered a soft, clinging substance. The cave was nothing but a cylindrical chute and the walls, to his surprise, seemed to be covered with long silky hair. He turned his body in a circle. In the dark, tight space he ran his fingers through the hair that hung in a thick sheet. Bringing a strand up to his nose he sniffed it. He could see nothing, but he was quite sure that the hair, like the absence of light, was black. The scent that enveloped him took him back to another place. The name Roro followed him, and he thought again of the girl on the beach. The name hung on her incongruously; like a straw hat that was too big, it slipped down to cover her face. He reached out and lifted the brim, only to find another face peering back at him, round and flat with full cheeks and slanting black eyes. The hat was not made of straw, but of green palm leaves, their blades stripped from the stalk and woven intricately to form a wide-brimmed sun hat. He remembered her brown hands and the gold bangles that jangled on her wrists as her short, clever fingers worked quickly. The jungle was hot and orange; looking up he saw a flock of pink parrots erupt from the trees to be flung across the pale sky like a handful of streamers. Roro. He held her in his arms, her body plump and yielding beneath the thin fabric of her sarong, her black eyes lined thickly with kohl; her black hair long and fine. He tangled his fingers in it.

Without warning the floor of the cave dropped away beneath him and his fingers dug deeper into the hair that lined the walls. He hung there, suspended in nothingness. Slowly he dragged himself up, clawing at the silky curtain. He grappled with the tresses as he climbed on through the dark warmth of the tunnel. After a time his head bumped against a wooden barrier and he dug his nails into it. Ripping away the rotted planks, he

created a hole that was big enough to haul his body through. Once inside the opening he found himself surrounded with what might have been cottonwool. He burrowed through the spongy substance. The air was thinning and he began to struggle; something was covering his face and he clawed at it frantically.

The sheet came away easily and he flung it off. Looking around he saw that he was lying on a large four-poster bed. He breathed heavily in and out; the mattress beneath his body was soaked with sweat. To his right was an open door that seemed to lead out onto a balcony, and the breeze that came in brought with it the cool smell of the ocean. Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, he stood up; his knees almost gave out as he made his way across the inlaid wood of the floor. Entering the adjoining room, he discovered a large bathroom and he immediately went to the mirror that hung above the sink. The face that stared back at him was drawn and pale and he turned away from it. On a raised platform stood a massive porcelain tub. Climbing its three steps he sat down on the rim and turned on both taps. Warm, frothy water poured out and he peeled off his clothes, dropping them to the floor while he waited for the tub to fill. Sinking down into the water he heaved an exhausted sigh. The tension in his muscles unravelled. From his elevated vantage point he could see the ocean through the large windows that made up one wall of the bathroom. The moon shone over the water, a great blind eye. His thoughts drifted as his body relaxed. The world was still for a time until the soft croaking of small frogs broke the silence filling the evening air. He stood with his head bent, peering into the rock pools. The light over the river was fading, altering the dull brown water, making it pink, and he knew that he should be getting home soon. Roro would be starting dinner and she hated it when he was late. He would just search for another moment; he had his net out and ready. The music of croaking frogs filled the air and he scanned the rocks for any sign of movement. To his left there was a splash and he turned too quickly, starting forwards in the direction of the sound. His back foot slipped out and he rocked wildly, grabbing at the air. With a splash he went under. The faint rosy light lit the muddy water and the rippling surface shimmered above him. The river was not very deep and he sank down allowing his feet to fetch up against the silty bottom. As he kicked off, propelling himself upwards, he was engulfed in a swirling cloud of particles that hung, suspended in

an erratic constellation of microscopic golden suns. His head broke the surface and he lifted his hands abruptly to shield his eyes from the suddenly blinding intensity of the sunlight. The water glistened and flashed all around him and he was caught in a sudden panic as a rough wave broke over his head. Ducking under he sought the riverbed with his foot, but there was nothing beneath him. The water grew cold and black as he sank down to be enveloped by the boundless dark. A terrible fear unbolted inside him as he fought his way back towards the light that was nothing but a bright shifting disk hanging far above. He surfaced again and the water he coughed up was not fresh river water, but the thick salty brine of the ocean. He went under once more. This time he felt a hand pushing his head down. He struggled against it, fighting as he was pushed into the freezing black of the void. He could feel his body softening and dissolving. He thrashed in desperation and, reaching up, he instinctively gripped the hand that pushed him under. With the last of his strength he grasped the wrist and pulled it downwards. He came up gasping as a body landed heavily on top of him. The water sloshed wildly as he leapt out of the bathtub, hitting the marble floor hard. He lay there for a moment shivering in a puddle, trying to draw air into his lungs. A muffled laugh came from behind him.

“Lev! Have you lost your mind! It was only a joke!” an angry voice exclaimed and he saw a young man hauling himself out of the tub. The water ran down off his clothes and he wrung out his shirt, all the while scowling at the other man who stood, struggling to conceal his laughter in the corner.

“I bet you weren’t expecting that!” the other man spluttered. There were tears streaming from his eyes and he choked, still trying to contain himself. “You should have seen your face, Sig!”

“Sorry Lev, we only meant to give you a scare. Siggy took it a bit too far.” Composing himself he walked over to offer him a towel, and clearing his throat, he shot a look at the man who was stepping out of the tub.

The man called Siggy scowled at them both as he stepped out of his wet trousers. He had a long face with olive skin, his hair was shaved very close to his skull and so black that it almost looked blue in the weak light of the morning. He stood in his underwear now and was toweling himself off.

“Now we are definitely going to be late for breakfast,” Siggy complained. His voice

shook a bit as if trying to hold back anger or embarrassment. “It was only a joke, you know, you didn’t have to go so crazy.” He stared down at Lev who still sat on the floor in bewildered silence.

“Come on Morris,” he called back as he left the room.

Once his footsteps receded, Morris rolled his eyes. “Honestly I don’t know when my brother will decide to grow up. You did give him one hell of a fright though, I’ll give you that!” He laughed to himself again and added, “You okay Lev? You look a bit green”. He stood there in silence for a moment as if considering something. “I think I’ll tell Aunt Marty that you aren’t feeling well and that you’d like a tray sent up.” When he didn’t get an answer he continued. “I’m sorry Lev. We didn’t mean any harm. Siggy saw you sleeping in the tub and just thought that it would be funny to ...” he shrugged, and his words drifted off. “I’ll make sure you get something to eat,” he said, before shutting the door.

The Stranger stood shakily; his legs felt like rubber and he clutched at the towel trying to stop his teeth from chattering. Finally he got to his feet, walked over to the large gold mirror that hung on the wall above the basin, and peered into his face again. “Lev?” He whispered the name. It felt right somehow. His eyes were grey, the purple smudges beneath them stood out against the pallor of his sunken cheeks, but it was his face, he was almost certain of it. The shaking that had started in his knees was creeping up through his body and he staggered from the bathroom, back into the bedroom. Dropping the towel to the floor he climbed onto the bed, rolling himself up in the thick duvet. After a time of lying very still his body began to warm and he felt his aching joints release. Rolling over he stared up at the ceiling. He felt that he had suffered through a tremendous ordeal and survived. He flexed his legs, stretching them out over the soft sheets till they hurt. His eyes grew heavy and eventually dropped closed.

There was a brief, anxious rapping. He startled awake as the door was flung open to admit a large woman. She was carrying a heavy wooden tray, which she set down with a resounding thump on the bedside table. She stood, towering above him, with her hands

on her hips and a look of furious concern on her face. He stared up at the giant female in bewilderment. At his look of panic her face softened. Uttering a small, girlish cry, she threw herself down onto the bed and, with a quick motion, flung the covers away from his body. He clutched at them feebly in embarrassment, trying to cover his naked chest and stomach against the chill of the room and the woman's searching eyes. She ran her fingers over him, and they were like warm, plump spiders as they explored his flesh.

"Lev, sweetie!" she exclaimed, "what's the matter with you? Your cousins said that you were too sick to come down." Her voice was strained and her soft hands moved frantically as though they might be able to divine the cause of his illness by touch alone.

"I'm fine!" He croaked out, trying again in desperation to cover his exposed body. She slapped at his hands in annoyance and ran the spiders up his chest to rest with sharp painted claws on his shoulders. She bent her head down and pressed her cheek flat against his. He could feel her lips against his ear as she spoke to him in a whisper.

"Of all my brothers, your father was my favourite."

She drew back and smiled sweetly.

"But you know that. I've told you before, haven't I?" She gave an absurd little giggle, her big masculine face struggling to produce a girlish expression. To his relief she drew the covers back over him, tucking the blankets around his chin. With an air of great seriousness, she set one hand to his forehead and the other to her own. "You don't feel feverish," she said, frowning. She kept her hand there a moment longer, allowing her fingers to trail subtly upwards through his hair. A shiver of revulsion ran through his body. She must have mistaken his reaction for something else, for she gave him a secretive, almost wicked look and pinched his cheek gently as though he were a small boy.

"Eat your breakfast and I'll be back in a little while to check on you." She gave him another conspiratorial look as she rose from the bed, keeping her eyes fastened on him as she backed out of the room.

He was wide awake now. The aroma of eggs and coffee and orange juice wafted over him, but the smell made his stomach turn. He sat up, propping his back against the cushions, and looked around the room. It was a sizeable chamber panelled in dark wood

with a floor of yellow maple. There was a large dressing table on which stood a dozen photographs in silver frames. On the wall to his right was painted the scene of a rough ocean beneath a stormy sky. A small boat rocked perilously low in the waves, its tattered sails flapping in the wind, figures of men dashed about on the decks. The rearing head of a sea serpent broke the surface of the water; its grey-green scales flashed, reflecting the lightning. The mouth of the beast hung open as it descended. The image disturbed him and he drew his eyes away from it. The inlaid wood of the floor gleamed richly in the growing light; he suspected that it must be around noon. There was a soft tap on the door and he clutched the blankets convulsively to his chest in anticipation of the large woman's return. A voice called out.

“Lev? It's Clement. May I come in?” Without waiting for an answer, the face of a girl appeared. “Oh good, you're awake!” She slipped in, closing the door behind her. Walking over, she sat down on the bed and helped herself to a piece of buttered toast from the tray. “I'm starving!” she exclaimed defensively, misreading his look of alarm. “You know how my mother watches what I eat!” She laughed and shook her head as she peered over to inspect the tray more closely. “Are you done with this?” she said more than asked, taking a peeled egg off the tray. Holding it delicately between her thumb and forefinger she bit it in half. “You missed an interesting breakfast,” she said between bites. “Sig was in one of his moods and started a massive fight with old What's-his-name, don't ask me what it was about. Honestly, I wish people would learn that there are just some subjects that are better to avoid when talking to Siggy. Mother got really furious; you know how she is about her 'quiet breakfasts'! She gets all in a flap if anyone so much as raises their voice at the table. Oh but dinners are fine – you can argue all you want over dinner! 'Lively conversation' she calls it then.” She finished her egg and, licking the salt from her fingers, grinned at him cheekily. “You look completely fine by the way, perhaps a bit odd, but then you always look like that.” She reached over to the tray again and took up the small glass of orange juice. “Coffee?” she asked. He nodded weakly in reply, and with her free hand she poured him a cup, dropping in a cube of sugar before passing it to him. He sipped at it, peering at her over the rim. She was a plain-looking girl with a round face and round green eyes fringed in long, sandy lashes. Her hair, too, was a sandy gold and cut in a thatch that stuck out, just brushing her shoulders. She took a sip of juice

and wrinkled up a short nose that was spattered with light freckles. “Too sour,” she complained, as she dropped two cubes of sugar into it, giving it a stir with her middle finger. She shook the droplets off her hand, “Oh, and you should have seen the tension between Mr Corcoran and The Stonewall!” she laughed, making a little snorting sound through her nose. “The Stonewall was saying something about people just being people and everyone doing their best to cope with the circumstances they are given, and you know what Mr Corcoran said to him?” She paused dramatically for a moment searching her memory for the exact words, and then continued with raised eyebrows and an air of reverence. “What a poor part, inconsolable!” She said the words in a wide flowery accent, slowly, putting the weight of great importance on each word. “I was raised on the facts of time and reluctance; as a critic of all things, I can’t help but feel vaguely virtuous and disgusted!” She stared across the bed at him incredulously and he returned her smile uncertainly.

“And old Stonewall just sat there with his mouth full of blood!” she finished, with a little humph of satisfaction.

“He had blood in his mouth?” he asked her, unable to conceal his shock. She frowned at him.

“What? Well no, not really. You are always saying that he looks so pale and is always so quiet because he is sitting there sucking the blood out of his face!” She paused, her mouth slightly open. “You always say that!” Rolling her eyes she reached for a small porcelain bowl; it was the last item on the tray. With her other hand she took a spoon and began to dig out the segments of the cut-in-half grapefruit. She made a sour face as she put the first bite into her mouth, but kept on eating.

“Do you know when Pepi’s coming?” she asked, and he shook his head. He wondered vaguely if he should tell her that he had absolutely no idea who *she* was, never mind this ‘Pepi’. Clement shrugged, “It’s been ages since I got a letter from her.” She was silent for a moment while she finished the grapefruit, then, setting the bowl back on the tray, she picked up the napkin and wiped at her lips and fingers. “Terrible this business about Cosmo.” She shook her head sadly and he carefully arranged his face in a similar expression while he nodded. “I did tell you though,” and she nodded confidentially, dropping her voice to a whisper. “I knew from the very start there was

something not right about him. He was always saying things that were so odd, when he said anything at all, that is.” She sighed and got off the bed, dusting the evidence of Lev’s eaten breakfast from her lap. “I’d better go. The rest of the party will be arriving this evening – that poet that mother is so wild about is coming on the *late* train, apparently.” She said this as though the fact that the poet had chosen to come on the “late” train spoke volumes about his character.

“You know I was the one that told mother about him? She’d never read a page of his work before I told her to!” Clement gave a sigh of disgust and, straightening her dress, she looked at him for a brief moment with her head cocked to one side, then walked out.