The Finishing School

Muriel Spark

Extract

'You begin,' he said, 'by setting your scene. You have to see your scene, either in reality or in imagination. For instance, from here you can see across the lake. But on a day like this you can't see across the lake, it's too misty. You can't see the other side.' Rowland took off his reading glasses to stare at his creative writing class whose parents' money was being thus spent: two boys and three girls around sixteen to seventeen years of age, some more, some a little less. 'So,' he said, 'you must just write, when you set your scene, "the other side of the lake was hidden in mist." Or if you want to exercise imagination, on a day like today, you can write, "The other side of the lake was just visible." But as you are setting the scene, don't make any emphasis as yet. It's too soon, for instance, for you to write, "The other side of the lake was hidden in the fucking mist." That will come later. You are setting your scene. You don't want to make a point as yet.'

*

College Sunrise had begun in Brussels, a finishing school for both sexes and mixed nationalities. It was founded by Rowland Mahler, assisted by his wife, Nina Parker.

The school had flourished on ten pupils aged sixteen and upwards, but in spite of this flourishing, mainly by reputation, Rowland had barely been able to square the books at the end of the first year. So he moved the school to Vienna, increased the fees, wrote to the parents that he and Nina were making an exciting experiment: College Sunrise was to be a mobile school which would move somewhere new every year.

They had moved, leaving commendably few debts behind, from Vienna to Lausanne the next year. At present they had nine students at College Sunrise at Ouchy on the lake. Rowland had just taken the very popular class, attended by five of the students, on Creative Writing. Rowland was now twenty-nine, Nina twenty-six. Rowland himself hoped to be a published novelist one day. To conserve his literary strength, as he put it, he left nearly all the office work to Nina who spoke good French and was dealing with the bureaucratic side of the school and with the parents, employing a kind of impressive carelessness. She tended to crush any demands for full explanations on the part of the parents. This attitude, strangely enough, generally made them feel they were getting good money's worth. And she had always obtained a tentative licence to run the school, which could be stretched to last over the months before they would move on again.

Copyright © 2004 Muriel Spark
Published by Penguin

It was early July, but not summery. The sky bulged, pregnant with water. The lake had been invisible under the mist for some days.

Rowland looked out of the wide window of the room where he taught, and saw three of the pupils who had just attended his class, leaving the house, disappearing into the mist. Those three were Chris Wiley, Lionel Haas and Pansy Leghorn (known as Leg).

Chris: Seventeen, a student at College Sunrise at his own request. 'I can do university later.' And now? 'I want to write my novel. It struck me that College Sunrise was ideal for that.' Rowland remembered that first interview with red-haired Chris with his mother and uncle. There was no father visible. They seemed to be well-off and perfectly persuaded to Chris's point of view. Rowland took him on. He had always, so far, taken everyone on who applied for entrance to College Sunrise, the result of which policy helped to give the school an experimental and tolerant tone.

But we come back to Chris as he and his two friends were watched from the window by Rowland: of all the pupils Chris caused Rowland the most disquiet. He was writing a novel, yes. Rowland, too, was writing a novel, and he wasn't going to say how good he thought Chris was. A faint twinge of that jealousy which was to mastermind Rowland's coming months, growing in intensity small hour by hour, seized Rowland as he looked. What was Chris talking about to the two others? Was he discussing the lesson he had just left? Rowland wanted greatly to enter Chris's mind. He was ostensibly a close warm friend of Chris - and in a way it was a true friendship - Where did Chris get his talent? He was self-assured. 'You know, Chris,' Rowland had said, 'I don't think you're on the right lines. You might scrap it and start again.'

'When it's finished,' said Chris, 'I could scrap it and start again. Not before I've finished the novel, though.'

'Why?' said Rowland.

'I want to see what I write.'

Copyright © 2004 Muriel Spark