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Blue Woman

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PART 1 (Helsinki)

Every night the sound of cars. The roaring of cars on the three-lane streets and the rustling of leaves on the mountain ash tree.

Those are the sounds.

They come in through the window opened a crack. The sea can't be heard. The Baltic Sea to the south, beyond the prefab buildings, in a bay where the reed covered shores quickly freeze over in winter. Lamp posts line the street. At night, their pale light falls on the sidewalk and the balcony of the small apartment that faces the street. The metal lampshades sway in the wind. The bedroom faces the courtyard, where there's a playground, a bicycle shed, and the mountain ash tree. The walls of the apartment are white and bare, except for the mirror in the hallway. In the kitchen, there are two postcards hanging above the sink. On one of the cards, yellow cabs driving the streets of New York. The other is a black-and-white photo of two women sitting at a sidewalk café in Paris. They are wearing cloche hats from the 1920s and elegant skirts.

Those are the images.

The flower pots on the metal shelf of the balcony are empty. Spider webs have spread inside them. The spiders are still alive. It's September.

Mountains of clouds gather on the horizon, where warehouses and a huge transmission tower border the rows of prefab buildings. The transmission tower is the only landmark in the identical streets.

Nobody knows where she is. The clock on the wall reads half past two. The silver dial displays a world atlas. There is no second hand, just a small red plane going round the silver world. Each round-the-world flight lasts only a minute, yet looks slow, almost leisurely. A shadow flies with it, under the plane, and sometimes gets a little ahead of it, depending on how the light hits the shiny earth.

She could be anywhere.

Nina. Sala. Adina.

In the kitchen there are a few pots, a kettle, and a stained espresso pot. The pot whistles when steam escapes from the pressure valve. IKEA is written in capital letters on the cups in the cupboard. The apartment looks like a real apartment, like a person lives there. There are a few books, candlesticks, glossy magazines about cooking and travel. A worn-out carpet is lying on the floor in the hallway. Walking sticks lean against the coat rack.

Those are the objects.

She puts the walking sticks in the hallway closet. Water is running in the bathroom. No sounds are coming from the stairwell. The front door is locked. The handles on the windows are locked shut. Just an outer window can be opened a crack. The opening is too narrow for her to stick her head out. That's fine with her, even though the sun is shining and the apartment is heating up.

An open plastic bottle is standing in the kitchen. She measures a capful of liquid and spills the swig into her coffee.

“Just a sip,” she says, as though somebody were there.

The wall clock strikes with the sound of a quiet church bell.

“Salut, Sala! Here’s to you.”

Raising her cup, she nods to the dirty panes of glass enclosing the balcony. “To you and good luck!” Wind blows in from the gap in the open window.

The clock shows nearly three. The silver outlines of the continents reveal no cities, no streets, no mountain folds and no rivers. She puts the vodka in the refrigerator. She may be a stranger and the apartment isn’t hers, but at least the bottle needs to have its proper place. She’s in a strange country, in a country in the north, where the trees are different and the people speak a different language, where the water tastes different and the horizon has no color.

A quick beat of her heart, out of place. She distracts herself. She thinks of beech and chestnut trees, of linden and pine, of the scent of wood and earth, and of the quiet, seemingly timeless passing of a tree’s life, like the mountain ash tree outside her bedroom window. She thinks of how puny her racing heart seems compared to the indifferent splendor of these trees and their promise of eternity, eternal as long as they’re not threatened by clear-cutting. But the trees she has in mind grow unharmed in front of a duplex. No one will cut them down, because she’s watching out. Had been watching out.

That is the past.

In her mind, she has the right to be in the past. Snow is falling. It’s winter and she’s still a child. On crystal clear nights, the moon shines wanly on the paths and illuminates the fir and spruce trees and the poles of the ski lifts on the snow-clad slopes cleared and rolled by snowcats. The duplex stands in a gentle valley against a high horizon. It’s far away from here. It’s 900 miles, an hour’s time difference, and twenty hours by car from Helsinki, in a mountain range on the Czech-Polish

border. She is lying in her old room under the roof. She has decorated her bed with a string of lights. When she sits up, she can see Čertova hora from the window. Just the peak of the mountain looms against the night sky, with its snow-flecked craggy rocks.

When her mother comes to her attic bedroom to say goodnight, she lowers the blinds and turns off the string of lights. As soon as she leaves, Adina opens the blinds again. She wants to see how the moonlight falls on her skin and transforms her. She pulls the nightshirt up to her belly. Her legs look thin in the pale light, more vulnerable than during the day. She puts a hand on her thigh; it fits halfway around. She bends her leg, a shimmering thing, the knee just a bone. She imagines a boy, a boy who doesn't have a face yet, not even a body, he only has this hand, which is hers and feels good as she runs her fingertips over her thigh.

There are no boys in the village. There are only the bartenders in the cocktail bar of the four-star hotel, who mix Cubra Libres and Old Fashioneds for the tourists during the season and sometimes give her an orange juice on the house. There are the tourists' children, who are on the slopes all day with snowboards and don't take off their plastic suits even for dinner. They peel off the sleeves, and leave the tops hanging from their hips.

"You've got to get up early tomorrow," her mother says, as she turns off the string of lights and the artificial blossoms extinguish with an afterglow. "Your sandwich is in the container in the fridge. And you'd better eat the apples!" Adina sees the moonlight on her bedding and on her clothes hanging over the back of the chair. She always picks out her clothes for the next morning the night before, padded pants and a green wool sweater that's too big for her. The sleeves flap over her wrists. When she wears it, she feels like a naturalist on an expedition. Her book bag is also packed. There's no time for that in the morning. And it's dark anyway

because she doesn't turn on the light. She has it all worked out so that she can brush her teeth and make it to the bus on time. The bus doesn't wait, even though she's the only passenger for the first fifteen minutes. In the evening, when there's ice on the narrow, curvy road that winds up from the valley to the village, she has to walk the last few miles home because the bus driver won't put on snow chains just for her.

The village is wedged between mountain massifs. The Krkonoše mountain ranges form its natural boundary. Behind the village the forest looms on steep slopes.

Walking back the last few miles home, Adina sticks close to the snow banks at the side of the road. The road has no lights. But the snow shimmers. And the headlights of the cars driving up from the valley to Harrachov shine across the tops of the spruces.

She pushes her knee back onto the mattress and looks at her legs. Two moles. A scar on the right knee, the rest is smooth and white. That is the focus.

The focus belongs to the present. As a child, she never would have noticed the white smoothness of her legs. It wouldn't have mattered to her. In her bed at Čertova hora, she never focused on such things. Her mother switched off the string of lights and Adina fell asleep. That's what makes it credible. Everything else is added on.

"Drama," she says aloud and takes the last sip from her cup. Wind blows in from the gap in the open window. Water is running in the bathroom. She can't afford drama. If you give a statement, you have to be precise. She doesn't know how to give a statement. She will have to go to court. There is a court in Helsinki. It's located near the cathedral, like a white rock looming over the surf. But she can't just go to the courthouse and knock. She's in a country where she doesn't speak the language. She doesn't know who to turn to, all she knows is that she needs a

lawyer, and lawyers cost money. She knows she has to testify in a wood-paneled room and in front of a jury, just like she's seen in the barkeepers' American TV shows. The judge will wear a black robe. And the defendants will come in handcuffed and the cameras will zoom-in on them and film everything, capturing every detail. From then on, every pore, every flake of dandruff, every flicker of the eyes will be recognizable.

And when the defense lawyers say "Objection, Your Honor," because her testimony is shocking, the judge will raise her head. She will take time to scrutinize each defense attorney, and that will take a long time, because for men like them, one defense attorney is not enough. Objection overruled, the judge will say. Please, Adina Schejbal, continue speaking.

And the men will sense who they are up against. Their handcuffed hands will start to tremble. And the jury will rise. The room will fall silent when the jurors ask: Which one should we kill? And there will be silence in the court when they ask who has to die. And then they'll hear her say: All of them.

It will feel like wet birch leaves glistening in the morning light. A shimmer, a spray as if the birch trees had just dipped their leaves into the sea.

"Sala?"

The sea that opens beyond the prefab buildings, and that she can't see from here.

"Sala!" It's Leonides.

"Are you daydreaming again, Sala?"

Leonides, his soft chin. His brown corduroy jackets and shiny ties. With his penchant for eating three apples a day, never sleeping naked, and liking nature only in paintings, especially by Dutch painters. She will never hear Leonides say that name again. Sala.

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On the rocks of the shore, beyond the birches, at the end of the bay, the blue woman appears. She is so distinct that she outshines all else.

The light falls sharply on the rocks.

Beyond the rocks gravel is heaped into black paths to dam up the water. Where there is no gravel, the ground is soft and muddy, interwoven with water that flows from the higher-up marshes and moor meadows into the city, and in myriad rivulets down to the sea.

The water drenches the mosses, feeds blueberries, wild rosemary and ferns, seeps into the muddy banks, soaks through the cracks in the stone and collects just below the asphalt of the streets. The rain brings it along. And the sea, rolling against the harbor wall, drives it back ashore. Gusts of wind carry the water. They whip across the highways bordering the harbor, barely abated by the offshore islands, and into the buildings beyond the highways which are still shells.

The blue woman slowly approaches.

She enters the little sailboat harbor. She steps over the rusty rails onto which the boats are hoisted for the winter. She walks past the boats. The wind blows her scarf upward and she takes it off.

She stops and arranges her hair, and the scarf flutters in her hand.

When the blue woman appears, the narrative has to pause.

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(...)

“Sala?”

Leonides, his calm voice. His composure. He thinks Adina is a beautiful name. But he prefers Sala. Sala sounds stern and clear to him, a pet name that suits her well, and the way he pronounces it, with a voiceless S and the accent on the first A, she agrees too. Leonides. He, who insists that people must protect themselves from the cold. Who would have insisted with his sensitivity and his solicitude. “You’ll make yourself sick the way you try to toughen yourself up!” A solicitude that is hard to bear, now that she wants to cling to him as if to a warm wall, but he is not there.

(...)

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When the blue woman appears, nobody is at the harbor. No sailors. Nobody who swims. No family packing up their picnic on the beach. Just her. She is wearing an ankle-length light-colored suede coat, black boots with square heels and a blue scarf.

We sit in the shade of the birch trees and strike up a conversation. We talk about the weather. About the radio weather forecasts that last longer than the news. They report on the precipitation and wind force for each of the small islands followed by warnings for regions where the Finnish military is holding maneuvers. They link weather and war the way the word ‘Kugelhagel’ does, as though the two were equally inevitable. I find it difficult to translate the word *Kugelhagel* into English.

Hail of bullets, the blue woman suggests *Shower of shots*. She has a penchant for languages

I compare the Finnish weather report with the traffic updates on *Deutschlandfunk* radio. In Finland, says the blue woman, water is the only thing that gets backed up. We talk about global warming. The longer summers in the north, the violent storms. About trees, about the birch, that deciduous outsider with its supple trunk. Speaking about trees is almost a crime, for it is a kind of silence about atrocities! That's how a dead German poet once put it.

Today, the blue woman replies, that also includes the atrocities done to trees. She talks about books she has read. Some I know, some I don't. The German writer who had made an impression on her was not Brecht, the one with the trees, but Tucholsky. And novels by Monika Fagerholm and Carson McCullers had truly moved her. I mention my plans to write a novel. Usually, I don't tell strangers I am a writer. But the blue woman wants to know what brought me to Helsinki, and it was in Helsinki two years ago that the idea for the novel first took shape. I tell her about the Collegium for Advanced Studies in Fabianinkatu, where I was a fellow, about the large daylight lamp in the community room and the two masseurs, Tuomas and Hariis, who give the fellows at the Collegium a free massage once a month.

The blue woman says that Finns like it when people take an interest in their country. Her English is flawless. It's hard to say whether she is Finnish herself. I don't ask her about that.

I praise the libraries with their inviting architecture, the open atmosphere that I enjoy, though I always used to steer clear of libraries with their gloomy atmosphere, no talking rule, elitist dust.

Here it's different. Sometimes I go there just to read the newspaper, the *Dagens*

Nyheter, The Guardian, Die Zeit.

We talk about what's in the papers, the darkness we see in Europe. She is well informed about everything.

“Now it's time for you to be on your way,” she says, as it gets dark.