

All the Blue

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p 47-54

Part 1, Chapter 6

It is two thirty when the last customers get up and leave. Carla has been busy all evening and has disappeared into the cellar. The cramped kitchen has been wiped down, the espresso machine is gleaming. She has barely exchanged a word with Simon. He doesn't know exactly what he was expecting, but he is starting to feel he was mistaken. Carla must only have been concerned about Marc, like a mother who sees things getting out of hand and intervenes.

Things are fine as they are. He listens to the music and smokes, takes pleasure in being alone in the bar with nothing much to trouble his thoughts, out of step with time. He is not drunk. He's had too much, of course, but he never really gets drunk, not like Marc. He looks around as if to test his eyesight. White tables and orange plastic chairs, cheap ashtrays supplied by the brewery, a pinball machine and a one-armed bandit, a jukebox. No pretensions, a bar that wants nothing from him, its indifference wraps a chummy arm around his shoulder. He could do with a whisky to rinse the stale taste of beer from his tongue. When Carla reappears he picks up his cigarettes and car keys and asks her how much he owes. She looks at her watch and says, no rush, it's early for a Saturday. What'll you have?

Let me close the curtains first, she says. If they see the lights on, the boozehounds will show up and I'll be stuck here till daybreak. Carla tugs fiercely at the broad curtains, they sway from side to side. The sound in the bar changes noticeably. Stay a while, she says as she locks the door. I have to tally the register and put the takings in the downstairs safe. I don't like being here alone with all this cash. On her way to the cellar, she dims the spots above the bar.

When Carla comes back up, she places her cigarettes next to his. She pours herself a second Campari Soda and asks, what'll it be? I could do with a whisky, Simon replies, for the taste. She nods sympathetically and pours, holding bottle and tumbler high for his approval. The glass is half full, they smile. Carla looks away, slots the bottle back in place and slides onto the barstool beside his.

Why do they keep it lit? Simon asks. The both look at the water in the tiled pool, the blue glow that rises from it. They swivel on their barstools and lean back against the bar. I don't know, Carla says. It's the council's doing. Perhaps it's a safety thing. She shrugs.

The longer Simon looks, the more the complete stillness of the swimming pool becomes an optical illusion projected on the glass partition. Do you ever feel, he asks, if you look long enough, that it's not a pool anymore? That you see something else instead? Carla blows a thin plume of smoke and laughs. You're an

odd one, she says quietly. For a second, it sounds as if 'odd' applies not to him but to his question, superfluous in her eyes. A second later he feels like a boy. An odd little boy beside a grown woman.

I think it's beautiful, Carla says. I never tire of looking at it. She says blue is her favourite colour. When John suggested they take over the business, she only agreed because of the pool. And on condition that she could choose the name. *Azzurra*. It's Italian, she tells Simon. Though this blue is not really azure. Not like the sea in Italy.

She asks him if he has ever been to Italy. She is amused by the account of his trip as a fourteen-year-old, a walking holiday in Switzerland organised by a health insurer, travelling by night train. Apparently, on an Alpine trek, they crossed into Italy for an hour or two, not that he noticed. My one memory of Italy, says Simon, is a bite on the leg from a horsefly.

Carla says Italy is the most beautiful country in the world. If ever I lived in Italy, she says, I would wear the lightest of summer dresses every day. And flowers in my hair. I would go to the market with a wicker basket on my arm. I would, honestly, people could think what they liked. And in the afternoon I would go to a little beach, tucked among the rocks, and swim naked in the blue sea. Carla says blue and red are her favourite colours. The red of Campari.

Carla says John doesn't want to go to Italy. John says, my work is here. You're not Italian, he says, this is where you were born.

John says there's no such thing as blue water, that water doesn't have a colour. I know water doesn't have a colour, says Carla, but even so, it's nonsense. In Italy, water is blue. Even when you hold it in the cup of your hand. All the blue in all the world, God took from the sea in Italy. Everyone knows that.

The alcohol has gone to her head. She asks, why didn't you leave with Xavier and Marc? They stare into space again. I don't know, says Simon after a swallow of his whisky. I thought I'd stay for one more drink. Where's your girl? asks Carla. I don't have a girl, Simon laughs. Not here, she says, but during the week, in town, you must have a girl. Tall and slender, a student with long blond hair. And a *tache de beauté* on her lip. A what? A beauty spot, Carla says. Like Madonna in Venice, you know, that video in her wedding dress, lying on a gondola. 'Like a Virgin', Simon chips in. That's the one, Carla says, when the stream of smoke has cleared her lips.

One of those girls, Carla says, who goes lingerie shopping with her mother at a swish shop in town. One set for daughter, one set for mother. And of course she gets good grades. Otherwise you wouldn't be interested. Eline. Or Elise. Nope, says Simon. Not that I know of, but it sounds all right to me.

Why did you stay? Carla says, and her voice darkens. He feels the weight of his words as he forms them. He is not used to talking this way. He says, I thought you wanted me to stay.

Do you mind? he asks, pointing at the tap, breaking the tension. The wooden floor behind the bar is springy under his feet. He concentrates as he pours, leaves a decent head, dips the bottom of the glass lightly in the water and sets it down on a beer mat in front of Carla as if she is a customer. She is impressed, asks if he fancies earning a bit extra on the side. When Simon returns to his barstool, she rests a hand on his leg. Is this a bet? she asks. Did you make a bet with Marc? Is that why you're here?

He feels the warmth of her hand through his trousers. A car stops in the parking lot out front. Someone gets out, a brief burst of conversation, a door slams and the car leaves. Soon after, another door, quieter,

followed by the revving of an engine. That car drives off too, in the opposite direction by the sound of it, past the sports hall and on towards the ring road.

You're not like Marc, Carla says. I can tell by your hands.

For a moment he and Carla look down at his hands. He doesn't know what she means. They are his hands, that's all.

And Marc didn't tell you anything? she asks. He shakes his head. Marc said exactly the same as you did. It only happened twice but the first time he said he thought I wanted him to stay. She looks quizzically at Simon, her face unreal in the blue glow. Did Marc put you up to this? she asks.

Marc, Simon thinks. Twice, he thinks. Why didn't he say?

What does she mean, it **only** happened twice? Did Carla turn him down? He thinks of Marc, the way he talks to her, talks about her. Don't underestimate her, he said this evening. You should never underestimate her. Was it a warning? What only happened twice? And why didn't he say? Was he ashamed because she turned him down? Is he afraid of John, so afraid that he kept his mouth shut, even to me?

Carla senses the change in Simon, she could kick herself. It's not as if she even believes her own insinuations. Hands don't lie. Any second now, she thinks, he will get to his feet, take his keys, his cigarettes and leave. A kiss on my cheek, maybe, a thank you and he'll be gone. And not another word will be breathed about tonight. At best he will go back to being a face at the bar, one among many, and in the occasional unguarded moment a glance will be exchanged, a look that lingers just a little but goes unnoticed by the rest, a vague recollection of tonight, dissolving instantly into the general murmur.

She takes his hand, wants to beat him to it, she finds courage. She is not going to let him go, not like that. She sees his eyes soften, the doubt lift, he has already forgiven her. She is on safer ground already. Simon is with her.

He doesn't understand what she is doing, where she wants to go. She pulls him from the barstool, walks ahead of him through the glass doors that lead to the pool. They pass the cash desk and enter the open space with the changing cubicles, dimly illuminated by night lights in the far corners. She holds onto his hand, does not look back, the light so dim that their feet are in darkness. It feels like a cellar, a dark maze of hallways, doors and cabins. Against the flat smell of chlorine, her perfume is more noticeable, or is it the scent of her glossy black hair? They arrive at another desk, where swimmers hand in their clothes on hangers for safe keeping. On their left is the entrance to the pool, the light. Come, Carla says.

In the high, hollow space their presence is audible. Simon points to the vast windows, but Carla reassures him. The pool is well above street level. No one in the car park or at the foot of the green embankment can see in.

At the pool's edge, the light is stronger than it seemed from the bar. The water at the half metre mark looks no more than a decimetre deep. Simon feels calm and aroused, knowing he and Carla will kiss. He gazes into the water and blinks. He could swear that it is blue.

p 79-82

Part 1, Chapter 9

From the other side of the door, he hears her footsteps approaching. He is standing a metre or two from his vague reflection in the glass, and now he hears the jingle of keys, the lock. A surge of happiness, the rushing in his ears. The long hours since they parted on Saturday night, this endless evening, the snooker, John and Marc, the doubts. None of it was real. He breathes the mild night air.

She shows her face quickly, opens the door no further than necessary and shuts it behind him as soon as he is inside. Her hair is down, the bar is blue. He waits for the turn of the lock, once, twice, that sends the rest of the keys swaying. They watch the key turn, the final hurdle, and Simon places a hand on the small of her back as if to spur her on, and the key has turned, the door is locked. She turns to face him, smiles. She throws her arms around his neck. What is it? she whispers, timidly. They kiss. They stand there for a while, holding each other steady in this dizziness. The world has disappeared. They are mouth and hands.

Carla takes him through to the back, to the little kitchen, she closes the door. She looks at him and slips her panties down under her dress, wiggles her hips and legs until the black lace falls to her feet and she steps out of it. She opens the buttons on his fly, her fingers are careful and purposeful. He raises her leg and they grow quiet with expectation and concentration and in a single, drawn-out thrust they are together again at last. He feels her heat. They fuck against the wall.

He controls himself, waits, listens to her breath and the shape of the sighs close to his ear, echoing words that live behind her eyes. It excites him, how she works to keep him at bay, to stay within herself, dignified, and how she can only lose to her lust. For a moment, he is lord and master. Until a voice stirring deep in her throat turns gently commanding and he is powerless.

They drink at the corner of the bar, Campari Soda, he could get to like the taste. They smoke. There is no need, as there was yesterday, for talking. When they do talk, it is different. Carla asks about Marc, Simon asks about John. Carla says she never even kissed Marc, however did Simon get that idea? Did Marc tell him that? Carla says John is not a man. Simon doesn't know what she means, receives no answer when he asks. Carla says Marc wept, the second night he stayed, it was the drink of course. She thinks he is angry and out for revenge. Simon cannot believe it. He cannot believe that they, at the same time, he and Marc. Carla grows quiet, stares at the blue light. Does it bother you? she asks. She sounds unsure, as if she is taking the blame for Marc upon herself, as if asking his forgiveness. But then he knows she means something else, she means the situation, and how, as it were, it will force him to choose, Marc or her, and so she is asking the absurd question of whether he would rather stop here and leave everything as it was.

They negotiate the maze, wade across the darkness on the floor of the twilight changing area. They are still holding their drinks, the faint light caught in red liquid, their glasses like distant torches. She has spread two beach towels on the floor behind the desk. They put their glasses down next to each other on the wood and kiss. He starts to take off her dress, she does it for him. He sees her naked for the first time. The beautiful round shoulders, her nipples in the angling light of an exit sign.

They lie on the towels, laugh, make love. Carla's hands glide over his smooth, boyish body, his narrow hips, long thighs, his flat stomach. He is unblemished, innately tough and wiry, a child of nature. She was not mistaken, he gives her his full attention. She has no time to catch her breath. Giggling she says, where did you learn to do that? She realises her words are poorly chosen, that they make him twenty years younger, as if she knows more than he does, though all she wants to

say is that she admires him, that she is experiencing this pleasure for the first time, that she feels like a young woman.

They sit at the edge of the pool, their backs against the wall, her head resting on his shoulder. They have swum silently to the far side and back, they have dived towards the lights below, made love against the side, water lapping at their chins. They are tired and sated. Only her thumb strokes the back of his hand, the smallest of motions. The glow of the blue light envelops them. They find themselves in a vacuum, a space capsule beyond planets, a corner where nobody goes. They are together and ageless. No outside expectations.

p 172-177

Part 3, Chapter 2

You mustn't wait too long, she says. When that moment comes, it's there for the taking. Wait too long, it will pass you by and you'll regret it for the rest of your life. She is sitting with Simon in the living room. The table and the chairs, the vases and the ornaments and the grandfather clock are back at their familiar stations. The large painting and the small painting, the work of her artistic uncle, one of her mother's brothers, are there on the wall and every last trace of the decorating has disappeared. She has chosen the right colours and the smell of fresh paint is gratifying. She is proud of her son. She has the sense of living in a bright, new house, the start of a future.

She casts her mind back, she was pregnant with him at the time, explains how they bought this house all those years ago. There's no comparison, she says. This is social housing, but the bank won't give you that kind of mortgage for the last lot on Tuyt's land. But then we had nothing, not a franc to our name, we started out lodging with your grandad and grandma up the town. We slept on a mattress on the floor, took it in turns to wash at the kitchen sink. You earn more today than the two of us did put together, and you know you can expect a little something from us to help you on your way. Besides, she winks, soon, perhaps sooner than your father and I think, there will be two of you to pay off the mortgage and you'll hardly even notice it.

Josiane had given her the low-down last Friday, things are moving fast, there's only the one lot left. Josiane lives a few streets away, one of the detached houses in the better part of the neighbourhood. She has stubborn hair. Her husband works for the council and he says no more lots are being issued. The rest of Tuyt's land is zoned off for agriculture, some of it for nature conservation. Josiane has stubborn hair, grows against the grain, what can you do? She needs to grow it out but she says she can't be doing with all that. Women and their hair, don't get me started.

When Simon's mother is twelve, she dreams of being a hairdresser. She washes her mother's hair, snips off the ends and puts curlers in. Her mother's nerves were playing up by then, but when she has her hair done she is calm and the children stop fighting and the winter sun slants peacefully into the room with its stove and a pan of vegetable broth on a slow simmer. Then they lock her mother away. The big kitchen garden and the animals and the children are left in the care of Simon's mother, and her father tells her she cannot go to college and learn to be a hairdresser. There's too much that needs doing.

It starts with Gabriella from next door. Simon's mother only has a pair of ordinary kitchen scissors to hand. Gabriella is a chain smoker who taps her ash into her palm for want of an ashtray. She says

she has fallen out with her hairdresser. When she opens her mouth, she looks for all the world like the US president Jimmy Carter. Do you want me to tidy it up for you? Simon's mother suggests. That is how it begins. A few months later she holds a salon in the kitchen from seven on a Friday evening. The women drink port, help themselves to the cheese wafers on the table.

Simon is seven or eight, and all the women who take their place in her chair dote on the boy. Such fine little features, he could be a girl, a beautiful girl. In their voices you can tell they mean it, that for once they are not exaggerating. They are right, she is blessed, the Lord in all his goodness has sent her an angel. She knows it's because of Simon that some of the older women come back. They bring boiled sweets and hold his hand and ruffle his hair. She sees how Simon is drawn to the warmth and the bustle in the kitchen. Most of the time, he sits quietly at the table, ready when she nods to hand her a curler, around which the combed wet locks are tightly wound. He eats some of the biscuits and listens to the stories that sweep into the house with the women. And it's as if her evening, as a woman and as a mother, is only complete when Simon, lulled by the constant din from the hood dryer, the inflated space helmet, nods off with his head resting on his arms.

Simon hates it when she winks. It is unbecoming in his mother, not least because half her face creases up. He wants to tell her a wink should be discreet, inconspicuous, aimed at the chosen few. But he keeps quiet. Chances are she'd say, there's only the two of us, who's to see? He wonders how she can tell he and Carla are together, how she can be so sure when he has kept it from her. Could it really be maternal instinct, her connection with her child? Is he an open book to her? And if she has heard it from someone, then who?

He listens to his mother and takes in the two paintings on the wall, which make the spruced-up living room look antiquated once again. The larger is a primordial landscape, empty and rugged beneath a sky teeming with clouds, the smaller a sentimental portrait of a bearded old shepherd in a lopsided cap. The eyes and the nose are well rendered, but the hand resting on his staff by his cheek shows it up as slapdash. He remembers the stories about his great-uncle, told by his grandmother. A man who made figures from brushwood and twine which he 'gave back' to the forest, who wrote poems with a goose feather on paper he made himself, who had phases of painting day and night, and spent a small fortune on flights to the East Indies. Last seen at the village fair, a man of thirty-eight, mumbling to himself. His death, years later in the Philippines, though no one knew for certain.

He thinks of the man and the life he led, and of his house, a converted barn out among the fields. And he wonders why his mother has reserved a new-build property for him on a corner lot down the road. What does his mother think that house should look like? Will she come by late on summer evenings to water the geraniums?

Driving out of the village isn't enough to shake off the world closing in on him. Everywhere he sees houses that are home to people like his parents, or their grown-up children. Hitting the long, straight stretch of road that leads to the motorway, he overtakes at high speed. The day is warm. The blinding sun bursts through the treetops, glints off the asphalt and the dashboard. On the coast the air is cooler, not by much, but he feels the difference as soon as he steps out of the car. He stands in the uneven car park on the fringes of a dune, and looks around. Families in beachwear are lugging heavy bags, sun screens, toys and coolboxes over the broad, paved path that slices through the chain of dunes and on to the sea.

He waits by the wooden cabin at the entrance to the car park, marvels at how men and women display their bodies, unashamed as soon as they reach the coast. In Azzurra you see it too, the

parade of bellies and buttocks, but the confines of a swimming pool provide a solid alibi for nudity. He looks left and right and wonders what could be keeping Carla, this is the spot they agreed on. He lights a cigarette. He feels exposed, unmasked by these naked people. He does not belong here.

After the talk with his mother, he is aching for Carla, her soothing presence. He cannot drive back without seeing her, the day is beyond redemption. It occurs to Simon that John might have turned up unexpectedly at their holiday apartment. All he can do is wait. If Carla is still coming, this is the place she will come to. No sooner has he made up his mind than he sees her cresting the broad dune path. She waves, a slow, extended motion as if she is a long way off, beneath her sunglasses he sees her smile widen. She is wearing a red bikini, a towel knotted low around her hips, her blue-black hair is wet and smoothed back, a woman whose life plays out on the sands of a tropical island. She keeps waving, oblivious to the man with the hairy back who is walking up the path holding his young son's hand and who cannot take his eyes off her. As he reaches Carla, the man looks over his shoulder to see who she is waving at.
