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**Blue Woman**

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PART 1 (Helsinki)

Every night there's the sound of cars. The cars rushing down the three-lane streets and the rustling of leaves on the mountain-ash-tree.

Those are the sounds.

They enter through the unlatched window. 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. The paths are lined with lamp posts. At night, their pale light falls on the sidewalk and onto the balcony of the small apartment that faces the street. The metal lampshades sway in the wind. The bedroom faces the courtyard that has 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 drive through 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. The spiders are still alive. It is September.

Mountains of clouds gather on the horizon, where warehouses and a giant transmission mast form a border to the rows of prefab buildings. The transmission mast is the only landmark in the identical-looking 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 revolving round the silver world. Each round-the-world flight lasts just a minute, yet it looks slow, almost leisurely. A shadow flies beneath the airplane, and sometimes moves 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 maker. The pot whistles from steam shooting through the pressure valve. IKEA is written in caps on the mugs in the cupboard. The apartment looks like a real apartment, as though a person actually 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 are perched against the coat rack.

Those are the objects.

She throws the walking sticks into the hallway closet. There's the sound of running water in the bathroom. No noise is coming from the stairs. The front door is bolted. The handles on the windows are firmly locked. 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 pours it into her coffee.

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

The wall clock chimes, it sounds like a faint 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 of the unlatched window.

On the wall clock, it's just before three. The silver outlines of the continents display no cities, no streets, no mountain folds and no rivers. She puts the vodka back into the refrigerator. She may be a stranger, and the apartment may not be hers, but at least the bottle should have its proper place. She's in a strange country,

in a country up north, where the trees are different and the people speak a different language, where the water tastes different, and the horizon has no color.

Her heart skips a beat. She distracts herself. She thinks about beech trees and chestnut trees, about lindens and pines, about the scent of wood and earth, and about the quiet, seemingly timeless passing of a tree's life, like the mountain ash outside her bedroom window. She thinks about 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 forest-clearing. But the trees she has in mind grow unscathed in front of a duplex. No one will cut them down, because she's on the lookout. Had been on the lookout.

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 ski lift masts on the snow-clad slopes that have been felled and groomed by snowcats. The duplex lies in a serene valley against a lofty horizon. It's far away from where she is. 900 miles, a time difference of an hour, and twenty hours by car from Helsinki, at 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-clad craggy rocks.

When her mother comes into her bedroom in the attic 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 wraps halfway around it. 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 Cuba Libres and Old Fashions for the tourists during the season, and who sometimes invite her for an orange juice on the house. There

are the tourists' children, who go snowboarding all day, and don't change out of their plastic suits even for dinner. They simply peel off the sleeves, and let the tops hang 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 your lunch box in the fridge. And you'd better eat the apples!" Adina sees the moonlight on her sheets and on her clothes hanging over the back of the chair. The night before, she always picks out her clothes for the next morning, pants with a lining and a green wool sweater that's too large for her. The sleeves flap over her wrists. When she wears it, she feels like a natural scientist on an expedition. She also packs her book bag. There's no time for that in the morning. And anyway, it's still dark 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 of the ride. 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 range forms a natural boundary. Behind the village the forest stretches across the steep slopes. As she walks 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 flash across the tops of the spruces as they climb up from the valley to Harrachov.

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 on the door. 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 enter handcuffed and the cameras will zoom-in on them and capture every detail. From then on, every pore, every flake of dandruff, every flicker of the eyes will be visible.

And when the defense lawyers say "Objection, Your Honor," because her testimony is shocking, the judge will raise her head. She will take her time to scrutinize each defense attorney, and it 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 must die. And 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 there.

"Sala!" That'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.

Behind the rocks, they packed the gravel into black paths to dam up the water.

Where there is no gravel, the bedrock is soft and muddy, interlaced with water that flows in countless rivulets into the city and down to the sea, from the higher-lying marshes and moorland meadows of the surrounding area.

The water drenches the moss, nourishes the 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 steers it there. And the sea rolls into the ramparts of the harbor, and drives it back on land. Gusts of wind carry the water.

They whip across the highways that border the harbor, barely abated by the archipelago, they leak into the buildings under construction beyond the highway.

The blue woman slowly approaches.

She enters the sailboat harbor. She steps over the rusty rails where the boats have been hoisted for the winter. She walks past the boats. A gust of 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 thinks so, too. Leonides. He insists that people must protect themselves from the cold. He would have insisted with his sensitivity and his benevolence. “You’ll make yourself sick the way you try to toughen yourself up!” A benevolence 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 swimming. No family is packing up their picnic on the shore. 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 weather forecasts on the radio that last longer than the news. They report on the precipitation and the wind-force for each of the tiny 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 to the traffic updates on *Deutschlandfunk* radio. In Finland, says the blue woman, water is the only thing that gets clogged. 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 would have to include the atrocities to trees. She talks about the 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 who had commented on the trees, rather it was Tucholsky. And novels by Monika Fagerholm and Carson McCullers had genuinely moved her. I mention my plan 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. I don't ask her about that.

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

But here it's different. Sometimes I go there just to read the newspaper, the *Dagens Nyheter*, *The Guardian*, *Die Zeit*.

We talk about the news 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.