

## Blue

Cathy Sweeney

One day you wake up and notice that your right ankle is blue. Your husband claims you are seeing things. You think about changing your life, but instead you have an affair with a man from work. You buy new underwear in M&S and shave your legs and paint your toenails turquoise to complement your blue ankle.

The man from work books a table at a Nepalese restaurant near where he lives and at the end of the meal you both drink free shots of sambuca. On the mantelpiece in the man's apartment there is an unframed photograph of a girl. It is his daughter. He sees her every other Saturday and the last weekend of every month. He wants to tell you more about his daughter but that is not what you have come for. The sex is straightforward but you have forgotten how to kiss. You bump your lips against his mouth and give up. When he takes his clothes off you expect him to be blue, like your husband, but he is not. His skin is pale and firm, covered in black hairs. No blue anywhere.

You tell the man from work that you believe in marriage. You don't want your children to come from a broken home. He agrees and you continue seeing each other. In a park during lunch hour—the two of you sitting on a bench eating paninis and drinking cappuccinos from paper cups—he asks if you would like to go on a city break and you say yes.

You go to Paris and stay in a hotel on the tourist trail. In the mornings you have breakfast in a pleasantly naff bistro. Music plays in the background. Cover versions of well-known folk songs. In the afternoons you have straightforward sex on

the white-sheeted bed and sleep for an hour or two. Through the open window you can smell the heat and dust of the city.

You go to work and come home from work and watch TV and sleep and take the kids to football or dancing or piano lessons and clean the house and drink more than you should and shop online and have sex with your husband and continue seeing the man from work. It is in the hairdresser's, at the weekend, sitting on a swivel chair trying to read a magazine, dehydrated from too much coffee, that you notice your other ankle is turning blue. You remember very little of the city break in Paris. The only image that remains is of lying on the white-sheeted bed in the afternoon with the smell of the city coming through the window.

Your legs turn blue. You take a wellness formula and buy expensive work-out clothes, and then you forget about it. You notice that more and more people are turning blue—young people, old people, even kids. You expect to hear commentary on the TV news or online or at the water cooler in work, but you don't hear anything. You notice that people who turn blue take up exercise—running or kettlebells or cycling or kickboxing or yoga—and talk about mindfulness. On the train home from work—your car is in the garage—you stare at a woman sitting across the aisle from you. She is wearing white pumps and a white skirt that accentuate her blue legs. She stares back at you as if to say WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU LOOKING AT?

The man from work wants to go on a picnic or to the cinema or on other breaks to other cities. You think about it and say no. Once a month you go with him to the Nepalese restaurant, drink free shots of sambuca and afterwards have straightforward sex. You like having an affair. It makes you feel interesting. Overnight your thighs and buttocks and stomach turn blue. You look at yourself in the mirror. Your body is like the body of a person in one of those 'warts & all' reality TV shows.

You observe that some people do not turn blue. Old women in cafés wearing bright headscarves. Young men playing guitars in parks. You think about striking up conversations with them, but you decide against it. You also notice that those who have turned completely blue—like your husband—have a blue smell. It is not quite the smell of nothing. More like the smell of an empty aerosol can or the inside of a shell that has been bleached. A smell in which all the pheromones have been used up. You buy your husband perfume to disguise his absence of smell, but he doesn't use it.

The man from work becomes difficult. One night after too much wine and sambuca he says things that sound like lines from a film:

I WANT A REAL RELATIONSHIP.

YOU ONLY HAVE ONE LIFE.

OF COURSE IT IS DIFFICULT.

WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU ANYWAY? DO YOU EVEN KNOW?

His voice is thin, as if it is coming down a phone line, and there is spit coming from his mouth. You think maybe he will hit you or strangle you or write a letter to your husband and ruin your life.

You stop seeing the man from work. You erase all his contact details from your phone, iPad and laptop. You leave your job and take some time out and then get a new job at higher pay.

Your kids turn into teenagers. Your daughter is too thin and your son gets into trouble at school. You check your kids for signs of blue. For weeks you observe them closely, but you find nothing. You look behind their ears and inside their underwear and along the soles of their feet. 'MUM', they say. 'WHAT THE FUCK?'

You are very busy with your new job and never think of the man from work. All you remember of the affair is that you went on a city break to Paris and slept on a white-sheeted bed in the afternoons.

For one reason or another you stop having sex with your husband and a year later you get divorced. You move into an apartment with your teenage kids. You buy furniture in Ikea and employ a Polish man to put it together. You paint the apartment magnolia but it soon starts to turn blue. At first you try to prevent the blue from spreading. Wherever you see the beginnings of blue you scrub or vacuum or disinfect—in the hallway where the skirting board is loose or under the sink in the kitchen or behind the wardrobe in the bedroom—but as the months go by you lose energy.

You decide to be a better parent and meet up regularly with your ex-husband to discuss the kids. One day you and your ex-husband take the kids on a family day to a park outside the city. It is a disaster. Your daughter refuses to take out her earphones and when you bring up the subject of school your son tells the two of you to 'GO FUCK YOURSELVES'. It starts to rain and when you get up to leave, the grass where your daughter and son have been sitting is blue.

The rest of your body turns blue. Not all at once, but gradually, until one day you are completely blue. Your clothes are blue. When you look in the mirror your face has deep blue lines and your teeth when you smile have a blue tinge. Your breath is blue. Your periods are blue. Your coffee in the mornings is blue. Your car is blue. Even the permit sticker for the car park in work has faded blue. You accept that you are blue and embrace your blueness. What else is there to do? You dye your hair indigo to highlight its blueness and you take to wearing ultramarine eyeshadow and cobalt jewellery and long blue shirts over blue jeans. You even buy blue paint to redecorate the hallway in the apartment—Ocean Trapeze—but you never get around to it.

You suspect your teenage kids may be anorexic or taking drugs so you take them on a package holiday to Portugal. You think it would be a good idea to spend some quality time with them and the flights are cheap. On the overcrowded bus to the airport you watch out the window as blue buildings and blue billboards and blue trees flash by.

At the beach your daughter wears one of the six bikinis that she bought online. Her stomach is blue. Your daughter has thin thighs and small breasts. She eats very little and NEVER white bread or pasta. Your son too is turning blue. At dinner one evening he is wearing shorts and expensive runners that he queued all night to buy. Above the runners his shins are blue. Your son doesn't like the beach. He spends his days playing video games in the bar.

At night, in the hotel room, it is too hot, even with the windows open. You throw off the duvet and examine your body in the moonlight. You are putting on weight. At the buffet that morning you stacked up your plate with ham and cheese and dates and a croissant and scrambled eggs and a muffin and salmon and oranges and kiwis and slices of chorizo and a miniature pot of honey. The flesh of your upper arms has a texture like compacted jelly and your stomach is distended. You fall asleep and dream that you are stuck in a blue elevator.

When you get back from Portugal your ex-husband and his new wife pick the kids up at the airport. It is their turn to have them for a week. Your ex-husband is bluer than you remember, and his new wife is Spanish. The kids walk away from you without looking back, dragging their wheelie cases behind them. In the apartment you open a bottle of wine. Lying in bed in your knickers and an old T-shirt you watch blue images flickering across the TV screen. Blue ice caps and blue ocean, blue cities and blue countryside. Blue politicians and blue scientists. Blue rich people and blue poor people. Once upon a time—you think—people got into boats and set sail on the

ocean for a new world. Tears fill your eyes and you are embarrassed, even though you are on your own.

You have three more days of annual leave so you decide to clean the apartment. You start with the oven, spraying it with a chemical foam and wiping it out with reams of kitchen roll, before moving on to the rest of the kitchen, then the lounge and hallway. The radio is on and you listen to a programme about painful medical procedures before switching to a station that plays music from when you were a teenager.

The next day you clean out the kids' bedrooms. You fill two plastic sacks with rubbish and one with items to bring to the recycling centre, mostly books. You know they will kill you for doing this, but you do it anyway. On the third day you wake up depressed and lie on the couch in your pyjamas, surfing the internet and watching TV. In the late afternoon you pour a glass of wine and send a text to the man you used to work with. You find his number on LinkedIn. The text reads:

HEY. LONG TIME NO HEAR. JUST BACK FROM EUROPE AND REMEMBERING THAT TIME WE WENT TO PARIS. X

You hear nothing, and the next day you go back to work. Four days later you get this:

DO YOU WANT TO MEET UP?

You feel a bit sick but you text back:

OKAY. BUT ONLY TO TALK. 😊

You meet the man you used to work with in a Starbucks on the same street as the Nepalese restaurant. You drink cappuccinos and then go back to his apartment. The curtains are drawn and you can smell old pizza. The photograph of his daughter is no

longer on the mantelpiece. You have sex but this time it is not straightforward. The man has turned blue and struggles to maintain an erection. You surprise yourself by kissing him, at first like you are eating a bunch of grapes and then like you are eating a mango. You orgasm in gulps with his fingers inside you. Afterwards you lie with your head on his blue chest. Tears fill your eyes and you are embarrassed, even though you are not on your own. You fall asleep thinking about a city break, maybe this time to Vienna or Lisbon or Budapest.

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