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About 2500 words

A CERTAIN SHADE OF BLUE

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In the fall of 1952, Eisenhower was running for president, John Lewis formed the Modern Jazz Quartet and I entered NYU as a freshman. It was long before the sexual revolution, one year would pass before the publication of Playboy and four years later Ferlinghetti would be acquitted from obscenity charges for the publication of Ginsburg's "The Owl".

One month shy of eighteen, I compensated for my lack of life experience by reading with such voracity my initial grades suffered. Writers like Hess, Maugham, Hemingway, and Salinger became my mentors, my heroes.

It was late September when I first met Suong. While I don't recall the exact date I do remember the day. She was a small woman, child-like in proportions, only her face showed her age. She may have been in her late twenties and had that unique beauty which sometimes results from mixed

marriage. She had large, dark slightly slanted eyes. The kind of eyes that even in silence would always have something to say. When she smiled, small lines formed around their corners, lending her a Zen-like air, an unusual calmness emanated from them.

On campus, some called her "La Gioconda". During the first weeks of the month, when some students still had some money, they would search for her at David's café, two blocks west of Washington Square. Sipping tea and smoking, she would observe the old men playing chess. The rumor was that she was a very good player, but refused to play. Sometimes she would react to a certain move by slightly moving her head in exasperation and giving a sigh. The player, so unfortunate to notice such reaction, could then safely assume he was going to lose.

When she was bored of the game she would sit quietly and just light another cigarette. Nobody could ever tell if she was in the mood for a customer. One afternoon I remember witnessing how, when approached by a very well dressed good-looking man, she turned him down with a very gentle but conclusive no. Her selection criteria were as mysterious as her origin. No one knew where she was from. She had a slight accent which could have been German. Years later at a class reunion, I did ask some alumni if

they recalled seeing her, and one '56 grad did, so she may have arrived in '51 or so.

It was a New York fall day, damp and cloudy, when I first decided to approach her. "Would she reject me?" I asked myself, more anxious than aroused. In a sense she was far from my ideal as a woman, preferring a heftier figure with generous breasts. When I approached her, I was so nervous, I stood paralyzed in front of her in a stupor not knowing how to ask or what to say. She looked at me for some time waiting for me to speak. Finally I broke the silence with an inane pronouncement totally unrelated to the moment,

"It's a perfect day for bananafish," I blurted. She smiled, stood up, and taking my hand said with some tenderness,

"No it's not, and you're not Seymour... come love, will show you."

She took me to the small hotel around the corner. The old man behind the counter handed her a key silently while he studied me with an ugly smile with a missing tooth. As we climbed the stairs she asked my name, and I responded with some unexpected reluctance with a fake one.

The room was sparse, except for one small flowerpot on the windowsill with an exotic flowering cactus, and a deep

blue kimono like robe resting at the foot of the bed, there was wasn't much. The street noise filtered through the slightly open window. When she changed, she looked almost like a young girl playing grown-up; the long sleeves too long for her arms covered her small hands. But when the lights went out, in the darkness, interrupted by the rhythmic flashing of a neon light, she was all woman, a wonderful sensual woman.

Perhaps because she was tired, and a light drizzle filled the night, she decided to stay. I was glad, thinking perhaps she liked me, even though deep down I knew I had been the only one receiving any kind of pleasure, in spite of my energetic but puerile efforts.

I was resting my back against the pillow, sipping a warm, cheap scotch from a coffee mug; she had retrieved the bottle from behind the heating register. I did not dare confess I disliked scotch. She was sitting on the dilapidated armchair. I could see her profile illuminated by the blue and red from the neon sign, her attention focused on the symmetric rings of smoke she would form with her perfect lips.

As she sat with her legs folded under her looking out the window, she would caress with her free hand a small foot that protruded from the folds of the blue robe. I was

enthralled by the perfection of her foot. I wanted to hold it, touch it, kiss it; instead, I took a deep breath and gulped the remains of the scotch.

We talked, or I should say she talked, with no preconceived order, slowly meandering from subject to subject, part memories, part social observations, surprisingly astute in their accuracy, I thought. The tone of her voice was low, almost mannish, contradicting her delicate figure. She talked of her childhood, her grandmother's house in Bavaria, the pony she had, her Vietnamese father, who spoke German with a terrible accent, how he would occasionally mutter endearing words to her in French.

Being young and naive, I was surprised a woman of her kind would have a past like everyone else. I told her so. I could not understand her choices. She did not respond. She approached the bed, seating herself next to me, and kissed me softly on the top of my head. She stood there, silent, looking at me with amused eyes, her hand folded under the sleeves of her robe. Mona Lisa blue, dark blue, dark blue... my eyes closing, falling asleep before I could tell her she had been my first, but she probably knew.

When I woke up the next morning she was gone; the blue robe tossed on the armchair, the ashtray full of cigarette

butts, and the faint smell of her perfume were the only remnants of her presence.

For the next weeks, preparing for the final tests for the semester consumed all my time. When I returned from Christmas break, In History class, I met a lovely young woman from Ohio with wonderful breasts and mile-long legs, and we started dating. Suong was almost forgotten. Whenever I saw my new girlfriend's feet, a tad too large and unattractive, flashes of Suong's delicate feet would hit me for a fleeting second. The memory would stir in me an irrational feeling of yearning and sadness, and then I would go back to the moment.

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The years went by. It was the early sixties and I was now a young data processing professional, trained by my company to work with a new computing machine IBM had just developed. When my consulting company got a contract from the French to train their intelligence officers working in Saigon, I jumped and volunteered for the job, wildly exaggerating my domain of the French language, which I had taken in High School with dismal results.

After weeks of anxious waiting I was selected. I was happy, full of confidence and the weeks before the departure date flew by quickly. I devoured Norman Lewis' "A

Dragon Apparent" a wonderful travel book on Vietnam published in the 50's. Then the woman I was dating at the time gave me as a parting present Graham Green's "The Quiet American". I was transported, moved by Alden Pyle's foolishness and Thomas Fowler's hard choice, and I fell in love with Phuong. I would spend my evenings fantasizing I would meet my Phuong in Saigon, that we would be dancing to Aznavour songs and she would have perfect small feet.

At last the day arrived. I had spent two weeks in Nice visiting an old aunt who had married late in life to a retired navy officer. Two great weeks were full of great food and wine. I learned to enjoy bouillabaisse, petit farcis, and even to distinguish a Gevrey-Chambertain from ordinary Burgundy wines and more importantly, a chance to improve my dismal French.

The train from Nice to Marseille was full of French families returning from their summer vacations. The Greek cargo ship I had chosen to reach Vietnam had a small number of passenger cabins and would make many stops along the journey, including Alexandria and Goa, two ports I had always dreamed of visiting.

The passengers were invited to dine at the Captain's table at eight. Having misplaced my cufflinks, I arrived a few minutes late and grabbed the only empty chair while

apologizing, perhaps too profusely. The Captain, slightly impatient with me, gently interrupted me and began to make introductions, which gave me the opportunity to study for the first time my dining companions.

Then I saw her, it was Suong, her long hair, contained in a perfect coiffed bun, showing the first streak of gray, which in a strange way made her more attractive, perfectly framed the beauty of her eyes. She was wearing a blue "ao dai", the Vietnamese traditional dress. It was that certain shade of blue I remembered all these years. She did not recognize me, but sensed I knew her. With a questioning look, she tried to decipher me. To reassure her I warmly smiled, then slowly turned and forced myself to focus on the French couple on my left.

Dinner was served; the generous portions of Greek dishes and large glasses full of retsina wine lubricated the free flow of conversations, some in English, some in French. Slowly I learned the destination of my dinner companions. The Frenchman was going to work at the French consulate in Dalat, his wife voicing concerns about the housing that would be provided for them. The British couple, which appeared to be seasoned travelers, would use Saigon as a base to explore Laos and Cambodia.

The French officer, traveling alone and dressed in civilian clothing, was evasive on his destination. That and the fact he had mentioned his years in Algeria made me think he was an Intelligence officer. Suong's husband, much older than her, was a Presbyterian Minister from Tennessee. The church had chosen him to manage a mission orphanage built in one of the poorest neighborhoods of Saigon, in spite of the opposition of some Vietnamese bureaucrats.

After dinner and much ouzo, Suong asked me if I would escort her to the deck to have her ritual smoke, a vice deplored by her husband. I followed her as she took the steps leading to the deck and saw once more her lovely feet, this time encased in blue sandals. A wave of longing and desire engulfed me, and filled me with unexpected sadness. Images of my college years rapidly flashed and abruptly ended as we reached the deck.

It was a perfect evening; the sea was calm, a soft breeze caressed us. And then, there was the sky, a Mediterranean sky, and a full sky, with a myriad of stars hanging from the face of the night filling me with wonder. Smothered by the beauty of the moment, I took a deep breath, gulping the sea breeze, Suong's perfume, and her cigarette smoke. I was high, feeling for the first time the

gentle waving of the boat. I grabbed the handrail; the cold touch of the steel was soothing.

She turned her head and fixed her glance on me, kept silent for a long time and at last she asked,

"I don't recognize you, but you seem to know me."

"Yes, some time ago in New York, I went to NYU."

"Ah... And were you...?"

"Yes, just once... It was meaningful, my first time."

"I see."

She turned her attention to the sea, and lit another cigarette. I tried to look out too, but could not help giving furtive glances at her. Such a lovely face clouded with an expression of concern, or perhaps sadness. At last I broke the silence and with some reservation asked:

"Does he know?"

"No, do you think he would understand?" she said, not looking at me.

"I don't know, but I would think a man of cloth is ideally suited to understand and forgive? More so if he loves you."

With some anger she turned around and said:

"Why him, why forgive... What is there to forgive?"

"I..." I was lost and did not know how to respond.

"And you? Do you understand?"

"No I don't." I blurted out with a tone of unjustifiable indignation.

She stared at me, then turned her back and walked away. I realized then I had been an idiot. I saw for an instant the blue reflection of her dress on a glass door. I wanted to run after her and ask for her forgiveness but could not bring myself to move. I was paralyzed with shame.

With a sense of defeat I went back to my cabin. I had a bad taste in my mouth that even the toothpaste could not get rid off. I was tired but it took a long time to go to sleep.

I didn't know what time it was when the knock on my door woke me up. My heart started beating hard; foolishly thinking for a second it might be Suong. It was just a sailor; the captain had directed all passengers to the dining room. On the way I noticed the boat had stopped. A searchlight was slowly highlighting the angry waves.

The captain, looking tired, announced someone had fallen overboard and they were searching for the body. The wife of Reverend Luis Barton was missing.

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I am an old man now. I never married; my only companion is a non-descript small mongrel. I take him for his daily walk through Washington Square. NYU campus

expanded, and David's café is now a Starbucks. A new generation of old men still meets there to play chess, and even though I became a good chess player, I cannot bring myself to play. There is not one single day I don't think of Suong. I sit on a park bench waiting, not knowing for what, but knowing it must be blue. That certain shade of blue a woman I only met twice in my life wore. The blue she painted my heart.

THE END