

A CERTAIN SHADE OF BLUE

By Joseph Gueron

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 before the publication of Playboy, and four years before Ferlinghetti would be acquitted from obscenity charges for the publication of Ginsburg's "The Owl". I would celebrate my eighteen birthday the following month, and compensated my lack of life experience by reading with such voracity it was impacting my initial grades. Writers like Hess, Maugham, Hemingway, and Salinger became my mentors, my heroes.

It was late September when I first met Nadia. While I don't recall the date exactly, 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 resulting sometimes from mixed race, with lovely large, dark, and slightly slanted eyes. The kind of eyes even in silence would have something to say. When she smiled, small lines formed around their corner, lending her a Zen-like air, emanating an unusual calmness. Some of my classmates called her “La Gioconda”. In the first weeks of the month when some students still had some money, they would search for her at David’s cafe, two blocks west from Washington Square. Sipping tea and smoking, she would observe some 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 a negative fashion and giving a sigh, the player would know he had made a fatal error. When she was bored of the game she would sit quietly, and just light

another cigarette. Nobody could ever know if she would accept a customer. One afternoon I remember witnessing how when approached by a good-looking man, well dressed, she refused 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, steelly and cloudy, when I first decided to approach her with some trepidation. 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, took my hand, and said with some tenderness,

“No it’s not, and you’re not Seymour... come love, no need to be nervous.”

She took me to the small hotel around the corner. The old man behind the counter handed her a key silently . 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 flower pot on the windowsill, with an exotic flowering cactus, and a deep blue kimono-like robe resting at the foot of the bed. 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 served from a bottle. She had retrieved it from behind the heating register. I did not dare to 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 her small foot protruding 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. 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, and occasionally would speak 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 the kimono . Mona Lisa blue, dark blue, dark blue...my eyes were closing, and I fell asleep before I could tell her she had been my first, but probably she knew.

The years went by. I was now a young data processing professional, trained by my company to work with a new computing machine IBM had just developed in the early sixties. When my consulting company got a contract from the French to train their intelligence officers working in Beirut, 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 . The weeks before departure flew quickly. The woman I was dating gave me as a parting present the Lawrence Durrell the “Alexandria Quartet. I was transported, moved by the exotic world of the Middle East before the second world war. I fell in love with Justine. I would fantasize I would meet a woman like her in Beirut.

At last the day arrived. I spent two weeks visiting an old aunt that had married late in life to a retired navy officer, and was living in

Nice. Two great weeks were full of great food and wine. I learned to enjoy bouillabaisse, and even to distinguish a Gevrey-Chambertin from ordinary Burgundy wines and more importantly a chance to improve my 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 Lebanon had a small number of passenger cabins, and would make many stops along the journey including Athens and Alexandria, 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 I 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 look for the first time at my dining companions. Then I saw Nadia, her long hair, contained in a perfect coiffed bun, showing the first streaks of gray, which in a way

made her more attractive, perfectly framing the beauty of her eyes. She was wearing a blue “ao dai”, the Vietnamese traditional dress. It was that certain shade of blue as the kimono I remembered all these years. She did not recognize me, but she 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 the 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 Istanbul, his wife greatly concerned about the housing that would be provided for them. The British couple, which appeared to be seasoned travelers, would use Beirut as a base to explore Jordan and Syria.

Nadia’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 Tripoli.

After dinner and much ouzo, Nadia asked me if I would escort her to the deck to have her ritual smoke, a vice deplored by her husband. I followed her and I saw again her lovely feet 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, a crescent moon emerging from a translucent cloud, 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, Nadia's perfume, and her cigarette smoke. I was high, in love, feeling for the first time the gentle sway of the boat. I grabbed the handrail, the cold touch of the steel cooling my feverish estate. She turned her

head and fixed her gaze 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, sometime ago, in New York, I went to NYU,” I responded

“Ah... And were you...?” she murmured.

“Yes, just once... It was my first time.” I said, somewhat embarrassed.

“I see.”, she said, with a sad smile.

She turned her attention to the sea, and lighted another cigarette.

I tried to look at the sea, but could not help giving furtive glances at her. Such a lovely face clouded with an expression of concern, perhaps sadness. At last I broke the silence and with some reservation I asked: “Does he know?”

“No, do you think he would understand?” she responded, not looking at me.

“I don’t know, but I would think a man of cloth would be suited to understand and forgive.” “More so if he loves you.” I said

With some anger she turned around and said:

“Why him, why forgive... What is there to forgive?”

I was lost and did not know how to respond.

“And you? Do you understand? She questioned me, almost spiteful

“No I don’t.” I blurted out, with a tone of indignation.

She stared at me, and then turned her back and walked away. I

realized then I had been an idiot in my self righteousness. 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 the time when the knock on my door woke me up.

My heart started beating hard; foolishly thinking for a second it

might be Nadia. 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 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.

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 to play chess. There is not one single day I don't think of Nadia. 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, the blue she painted my heart with.

