

The Small Blue House

by Gita M. Smith

There was a man who lived in a small, blue house on a coast overlooking the sea. Though the house was very small, the blue was so beautiful that people came from distant towns for a look. It was of such a hue that each person who looked at it was reminded of some joyful childhood memory and went away happier.

The man painted his little house every two years to prevent its destruction by salt winds blowing off the sea. First, he bought four cans of paint: two specific and different shades of blue, one of a rich green and one of white. Patiently, on his small porch, in a giant can, he mixed and remixed and added more of this or that until he arrived at his spectacular blue that was like no other. He loved the smell of oily, exterior paint and the bite of turpentine in which he soaked his brushes.

He did this on the Summer Solstice and painted the entire house on that one glorious day of unending light.

Years passed, and even though he was alone, he was quite happy, cultivating the sea oats that hid and also fed the beach mice. He catalogued birds, watched the tourists down below his house on the beach, and when he felt like eating fish, he stood on the pier at high tide with the others and wet his line. He was regarded as an oddity by some of the locals: a man his age, living alone up there, what was he up to? Were children safe near him? Was he a convict who'd served his time? Still and all, he was likable enough, and so they always moved their minnow buckets and opened up a space for him on the leeward side of the pier. He hoped for sea bass, but he was content with perch and mullet.

One day, a woman came by to see his blue house. She was medium in every way except for her hair — a cascade of darkest brown rappelling down her back, wave after wave. It shimmered in the light breeze that lifted the wisps around her face, a face that was transfixed. She stood, legs slightly apart and arms relaxed at her sides, her chest moving up and down in shallow sobs. Tears

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followed, and then she bent at the waist and, keening, clutched her sides. The man opened his door and took a tentative step toward the woman whose hair had fallen forward about her face in a protective canopy. At that moment he knew what the Greek Furies must have looked like.

She accepted his offer of Kleenex and a glass of water and sat on his porch until calm, again. "I am so embarrassed," she said. "I don't know what happened to me."

The man knew, but saying "It happens all the time" would have trivialized her singular experience. Instead he smiled and sang a verse from Lyle Lovett's song, "This Old Porch."

Come evening, she was still there, and they shared a pot of blue crabs and a bottle of gentle white wine. She wanted to know everything about him, but he spoke only in the present tense. She was unabashed and spoke of her past and all the paths that had led her to his door. She stayed the night and then the next and the next. The man drew her a bath and, although she was reluctant at first, she allowed him to wash her hair. Touching it in a wet state, running his hands through it in a soapy state, wringing the water out when he was finished—he was ecstatic. He had never touched a woman in this way: it seemed more intimate than sex. He thought, "She has allowed me to care for her crown, for the apex of her beauty. "

He was not sure about the future, not sure whether he wanted her in his life next year and thereafter. The house was very small.

One would have to go outdoors to give the other privacy, which seemed like no big thing at first but might become an inconvenience, later.

She was not sure about the future for different reasons. She was a wanderer, not one to stay in any place for long. She had yet to see the wide world and taste its spices and the salty skin of men coming in from the fields or the scented faces of men freshly shaven. But she stayed at the small blue house where the air was clean and gulls screamed greetings, enjoying the temporary respite from decision making.

The man continued his daily life just as before, noting bird species and caring for the vegetation along the dunes, striding along a path worn a hundred years before by the horse shoes and boots of the first settlers. He felt an extraordinary urge to just keep walking, to never go back to the small blue house, to walk into town some miles distant and take all his money out of the bank, stuff it in his pockets and walk away.

He realized the truth of his situation. The woman had gypsy in her and a wanderlust. She and he were not meant for each other. It hurt him that he was not enough for her; he should be enough. He could not imagine waking up to a bare pillow without her hair to wind his fingers through. He was bereaved. One afternoon, after his walk along the coastline, he found her on the porch with wine and a wedge of cheese. That hair was now coiled around her head in braids, and she had fastened the ends with a tortoiseshell clasp. His eye danced over the many shades of brown before him. He wondered if he could mix paint to match that hair -- end his blue period.

They looked at each other for a while and then, without speaking, she went indoors and returned with a packed knapsack and sturdy walking shoes "I fell in love with the idea of love," she said.

"We could pretend a little longer?" he said. "I want a lock," he said. "I'll get a scissors."

He led her out to the yard by his tomato stakes and wheelbarrow and took her braids down. "Just for a moment," he said. "Just so I can snip a little where it won't show."

She agreed to this and shook out her hair. He reached into it as an explorer might reach into a jungle and part the foliage. He reached through again in another place. And again.

"It's IMPOSSIBLE," he said, in a voice she hadn't heard before. "I can't decide. And since I can't fucking DECIDE, I'm taking it ALL. You can regrow it, can't you *honey*?"

He pulled a machete out of the wheelbarrow and, with her head yanked back and her long strands gathered into his fist, chopped at her hair until he was holding it all. Three pounds or more. But, hey,

his aim had been terrific. There wasn't a nick on her. True, her remaining hair looked like shit, but that's the price you pay.

The woman was running, back to the porch, back to her knapsack, frantically passing her hands all over her head for cuts. When she found none, she spat in his direction.

"What the hell?" she screamed, "what's the matter with you? What did I ever do to you?"

The man pointed to a spot on the ground, the spot where she had stood the first time she looked at his small blue house.

"You trespassed."

