

## Room for a view

## The curiosity of the blue

It was in an elevator that I saw the bluest blue of my life, or rather of my life until then, a life that had been almost devoid of blue and heavy on red and black. I kept to a far corner of the elevator, as I kept to the far corner of everything in those days; I kept myself to corners and tunnels and quiet dark rooms that were closed save for a door left accidentally open. From this corner, the corner of my world going up and down and nowhere, I saw the blue.

He was a quiet sort, the man in the elevator with me. He wore horn-rimmed coke-bottle glasses, and his skin was oily over the old cheese cloth of acne scars, scars one could see and then infer others, further down. Beside him was a large tank. It looked like an old milk can, only with a much smaller lid. A vapour, like cool, heavy steam, came out from under the lid, pouring languidly down the sides of the tank before settling at the base like heavy linen.

This quiet sort of fellow (perhaps he also knew about hiding in corners) looked at me. Or, rather, he looked at me looking. I looked at the tank beside him, and beside me. I looked at the vapour, and I was curious. He seemed to sense my curiosity, and now I know that he felt it too, the curiosity of the blue.

His curiosity, in the end, was greater than mine.

"Here," he said. He pulled the lid off the tank and then put on a heavy glove, a glove the colour of old overalls, and with this glove he reached down and took off a second lid under the first. He tilted the tank toward me, and I looked inside. I looked inside at the bluest blue I had seen in my life. It was the pure blue of electricity, giving off an iridescent light. The light in the elevator was yellow and dusty, but the blue seemed to glow without it. The inside of the tank had its own light. The blue was so clean, so clean and electric, I wanted to

touch it. But the glove told me I should not touch it. The vapour told me I should not touch it. The blue made me think of impossible lakes in a cold and distant world; the lakes of Pluto, the streams of Neptune, small pools glowing curiously blue under a black and starless sky, blue glowing upward from the inky black of frozen ground. What would it be, to sip from such lakes? What manner of life would one see, peering down?

We looked, together, into the tank, and our faces were reflected on the surface of the blue. They shimmered for a moment and then became one, his glasses on my face.

"It's oxygen. Liquid oxygen. Very cold," he said. I looked into the tank at that liquified giver of life, at how its secret blue, its curious blue, condensed under pressure, was revealed. I felt this pressure, the pressure of being in its presence, and he must have felt it, too, the professor with the thick glasses and oily skin. The pressure of the blue ultimately did him in. Exactly two weeks later he killed himself.

I can picture him now, in his lab, in his white coat stained with sweat and chemicals, the stains of living smeared on the same canvas as the stains of the inert. I can picture him looking into the most beautiful, the most natural and unnatural blue on earth. His skin is still oily, his glasses still thick. It is after 5 o'clock, and everyone has gone home, everyone but him, and he stares into the blue, a swirling blue that reflects in the prisms of water under his eyes, the tears that he pushes back under his

glasses but slide out again. He stares into the blue, and wonders what it would be, to drink the blue, to drink something so clean and electric.

So he drinks. He picks up the icy steel ladle clumped with white frost and ice, his hand in the old denim-blue glove, and he drinks the blue, he drinks the electric, he drinks the clean. The blue washes into him; it washes him. It cracks his teeth like delicate porcelain, it shatters them like crystal. His tongue blisters and burns, becomes thick and dead white. A tight cone of white smoke comes out of his mouth. Still he drinks; still the blue washes into him. It freezes his blood as it races away from his heart. Freezes his blood as it trundles back toward his heart. His blood stops where it is, now directionless. Washed clean, the blood that doesn't freeze carries with it small, blue, frozen crystals, pure electric blue alien crystals, into his brain.

These tiny crystals freeze and spread in his brain, lighting it up for a moment with the pure blue. The electric and beautiful blue lights up his brain like a deep, clear pool on a distant world. The crystals are like seeds blossoming into curious blue flowers, their petals blue on the outside but, inside, black. His face lights up with an understanding of the blue, with the satisfaction of his curiosity. The blue fades, his mind fades, away from the curiosity of the blue and toward the black.

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