

CATHLEEN CALBERT

A BLUE AFTERNOON

A ROW OF TURQUOISE DINGHIES, held by thick ropes to the dock, bobbed in the water. Seagulls circled endlessly. Children's voices rose and fell. A neighbor's lawnmower became a buzz of blue sound, a distant fly. She lay naked under the sheets, listening, but the sounds kept drifting away. Wondering if she'd become a ghost without knowing it, she tied a kimono around her waist and walked soundlessly through the house she was renting for too much money.

Why was she alone on Block Island? What seemed like a good idea had grown mysterious, incomprehensible. Something about time apart, her own space, a chance to think things over while Becks was at camp. Time. Space. Each wave of light through the curtains wiped out something else. Kyle's left hand, then his right. She waited for the breeze to take away all of him. But more than this was getting swept out to sea. Jay's early death. Her widowhood. She lay on the couch, the kimono parting so that a bikini-line scar shone pale blue in the light. She lay there so long that she lost things she hadn't meant to lose, including Becks' precious fingertips.

She knew what to do: draw a bath, dramatically dropping in three red roses, petal by petal, from the dozen Kyle had sent, then submerge herself. She padded into the crumbling bathroom and turned on the faucet in the tub. The pressure was low and filling the bath would take awhile, so she wandered into the kitchenette of the house for

which she was paying too much money. In a cobalt bowl, three pears posed. Pale green against the blue. Perfectly painterly. She pressed her fingers against one: soft enough to eat. She stood at the sink, letting the juice run off her chin. She wished the bowl were green and the pears blue because she felt that she could eat up all the blue in the world. She devoured the other two, then held the core of the third to the light. Near the seeds, the white was turning blue. When she saw this, her head started to ring. *Da-de-dah. Da-de-dah.* Poking her head in the living room, she saw fingers flickering through a window. The curtain blew and fell, blew and fell, waving in a hand that looked like a sea anemone.

Block Island rocked away as though the whole place were floating out to sea. She could feel it in her veins. Blueberries in a dish. Cool blue. Painkiller blue.

“Hi,” said the hand’s owner, a woman with thick black hair pulled into pigtails. Her face was red, as was the top of her chest, the bright color stopping abruptly at the point dictated by the cut of her bathing suit, where the skin turned a sudden, luminous white.

“Didn’t you hear the bell? Remember me? Lorraine. I’m thirty-two.” Lorraine pointed down the street.

“Of course, I remember. Do you want to come in?” She stepped back from the doorway, wishing that she’d left a pear. Now she had nothing to offer a guest and was afraid that Lorraine would see how much blue had settled into everything.

“No, no,” Lorraine said, waving aside the blue haze, the cores in the sink. “It’s such a gorgeous day. Why don’t you get dressed and come out with me? There’s a fair downtown. My kids have gone already. Face-painting. Fortune-telling. There are going to be fireworks at ten, if everybody can last that long.”

She hung onto the woman’s words. There were so many, and they came out so fluidly. Her own tongue felt heavy and half-asleep.

“You’re burned,” she murmured, looking at the bright pink skin.

“To a crisp. Isn’t it ridiculous?” Lorraine looked down at her shoulders. “I’ve got a hat now,” Lorraine said and put on a straw sombrero,

red balls hanging around the rim. "Ridiculous, right? But what are you going to do?"

She regarded the hat soberly. "Two minutes?"

"Sí, señora," Lorraine said and plopped down on one of the stained deck chairs.

CLOSING HERSELF BACK IN, she fought the impulse to ask Lorraine if she could go in her kimono, to plead with Lorraine to take her as she was, to beg Lorraine not to make her go inside again. But she couldn't say these things. If she did, Lorraine would know she was crazy. Block Island rocked away as though the whole place were floating out to sea. She could feel it in her veins. Blueberries in a dish. Cool blue. Painkiller blue. She went into the bedroom, pulling on cut-offs and a loose T-shirt, one of Kyle's. She slipped on flip-flops and grabbed her pocketbook, then walked straight through the living room and opened the door abruptly, startling Lorraine, who was singing the words *One Ton Tomato* to herself.

"Ready already?"

She nodded, closing the door behind her. Water would fill the rented house, for which she had paid too much money, swirling in blue eddies, emptying everything. Gratefully, she followed Lorraine down the narrow street to the beach.