

Finland

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So many things about Finland were blue. The berries, the hire car, the sea, the thick card of my book's cover, the sky. I even used a blue pen to tattoo their memories onto the pages of my notebook (the notebook, though, was orange). Writing after breakfast, I realised that the blueberries I had sprinkled on our yoghurt bowls that morning had stained my fingers. They'd left reddish-blue blots over my fingertips; small blooms of mottled, mulberry burns. At home, blueberries are fat, waxen balls that widen around the middle. But the blueberries in Finland were small, their skin as thin and sheer as cranberries'. They were shiny and slippery, perfectly circular little beads full of a sharp, purple blood. My wet fingertips pressed fingerprints into the page, and it wasn't clear what was ink and what was blueberry juice.

It was an August morning in Helsinki, and the sun was piercing. It threw health into the streets like a deluge of rain, clearing the cityscape so used to the dark and flooding it instead with a brilliant, blue light. It professed a faith in summer's redemption as strong as that which some see in the Virgin blue of Mary, who watches over the city in the jade steeples of Uspenski, the Orthodox cathedral dedicated to her assumption. Yet I knew, from the Lakeland, that this Finnish blue was a shapeshifter – it might, at night, turn black and bottomless. I'd watched it do just that when we swam, naked, in a lake near Savonlinna. The lake was only ours for twenty-four hours, but not a single other person ever shared our big blue bath, not as a nearby bather nor as a dot on the horizon. If it weren't for seventeen other happy reviews on Airbnb, the romantic inside me might imagine the lake only ever appeared for us, and that the forest drank it back up when our little Skoda drove away.

In a rowing boat out on the lake, it was the water that let us know that night was coming, not the sky. As the sun slowly fell and the sky slipped on a dusky grey dress, the lake acted twice as fast. It drew thick, black shutters underneath its surface, closing off the sparkling transparent blue that had all day left an open view down to the lake's deep bed, its seagrass carpet. The moon appeared, reflected, where previously the sun's rays had filtered through. My toes, dangling over the boat's edge, no longer distorted

underwater into rippled versions of themselves, but disappeared and reappeared, volunteers in a vanishing act each time a dark swell lapped at them. When we reached the shore, we pulled our rowing boat up onto the sand, and leaving our clothes by the fire we walked back out into the dark water. Someone once told me that if you magnify black ink enough, zoom in far closer than the human eye can do alone, the pigment actually turns out to be blue. I don't know if it's true, but when I stared at the lake's black liquid, it too, slowly turned blue. We waded out until the water's chilly hug reached our waists, then sank down, swimming into the deep blue dark. Up close, the night-water wasn't as opaque as it had seemed from the boat. My arms glowed through the surface in front of me, tinged slightly yellow-green by the darkness. We swam until the water felt warm and the fire that we'd left kindling on the shore had fanned itself up into flames, its fiery hands waving at us to come back, to sit by its side. My milky, citrus limbs trod water beneath me as I looked out into the centre of the lake. In Finnish, the word 'peninkulma' is used to describe a Scandinavian mile, a distance of ten kilometres. But this definition is a modern standardisation – its meaning used to be based on its archaic etymology, 'peni' for 'dog', and 'kuuluma', which roughly translates into English as 'to be heard'. Years ago, it meant the distance over which a dog's bark could be heard in still air. Looking out over the lake, where I could no longer distinguish between the sky and the water, or see its forested edge, I wondered how many *peninkulmas* lay between us and the other side.

Back onshore, we filled a bucket from the lake's shallows and ladled the water onto the sauna's hot coals. As it hit them, it hissed upwards into a hot mist. Lying down on the warm pine, the cold lake-drops left on our naked bodies evaporated in the heat of their lake's own, coal-made steam. As summer returns to winter, in Finnish summer cabins, the sauna's steaming little heart is what keeps away the cobwebs, turning freezing water into a warming, airborne bath. Built away from the cabin itself, on decking right down by the water's edge, our sauna was like a wooden waiting room, a liminal world where wet air accustomed our bodies to the transition between water and sky, the lake and the land. Through the glass doorway, the lake looked black, not blue, once more. Beads of sweat started to drop into the freshwater puddle left by my wet hair, and the remnants of the lake's inky hues slowly faded from my feet, as pinks and reds warmed themselves back into the mottled blue skin.

In the bright sunlight of Helsinki, I wondered what it would be like to be at the cabin in June, when the nights in Finland are white, not black. Would the

lake turn white at night too? I'd thought August's sixteen-hour sunlight, its eleven o'clock sunsets, were bright with life enough for anyone, but for Finns who know June, August is autumnal. Tove Jansson writes about the month in *The Summer Book*, her novel set on an island in the Gulf of Finland, where she used to go as a child every Finnish summer:

Every year, the bright Scandinavian summer nights fade without anyone's noticing [...] It is still summer, but the summer is no longer alive. It has come to a standstill; nothing withers, and fall is not ready to begin. There are no stars yet, just darkness.

I thought back to our sauna, that liminal mist that we'd lain in, unaware. Unaware that the season was liminal too, that we had caught our cabin in the darkness between white nights and the stars.

On the Helsinki balcony that morning, thinking about the lake's black and blue world, I'd written a poem from thoughts that rippled through my mind in patterns that prose would not follow. One night on a limitless lake and one poem – ashamed, I thought of how Jansson had written an entire book, set a story over a long, white summer, on an island so small it took only four and a half minutes to walk around its edge. Jansson's limitless vision of her island reminded me of a conversation I had had with Pertti, a sixty-eight-year-old Finn whose house we stayed in on the Nauvo archipelago. He spoke about why he had decided to leave Helsinki, and move to the islands where the land is slowly lost to the sea. 'The islands are exhaustive, see,' he said. 'The forests, the sea, my garden, boating, foraging... it's endless. Helsinki... Well, Helsinki exhausted me.' That evening, Pertti cooked a fresh salmon for us, a huge fish with flesh so orange it could have been alive. He served it with bitter herbs he had picked in the woods, where blueberries grow like weeds. I had never known salmon could taste so strong. Pertti chuckled over our astounded reactions. 'Yes!' he said, 'yes, that is what salmon tastes like!' He laughed with his whole body, dropping a chunk of the glowing flesh he was helping himself to more of. Pertti talked late into the night with us and the other guests, his hands resting on a belly full of salmon and wine, and blueberries which had gone to his eyes, where they glistened wet and dark with laughter. Later, in bed, in lines of blue ink, I wrote the salmon's orange flesh into the pages underneath my notebook's orange cover. When we woke in the morning, we ate breakfast on the wooden terrace and the sun sparkled so brightly off the sea it filtered my whole view through a diamond of white.

My vision fractured into diamonds too on the balcony in Helsinki, as the sunlight caught the face of my watch and glanced up into my eyes. I took

a break from the poem to look out at the block of flats opposite, whose white and grey squares met the blue sky as sharply as if they had been cut onto a green screen set to blue. It hadn't been enough for Pertti, but even in Helsinki I had found traces of his islands' exhaustive nature. Looping one afternoon around the city park, we found a café that sat on the rocks high above a lake, where paddle boarders wobbled the water's body below. Its wooden boarding was painted the same light blue as Pertti's house and our Lakeland cabin. On the top floor, a white balcony cupped the full-length windows, supporting the awning with regular white poles. The intersecting white and blue lines divided the top floor up like a series of wooden Finnish flags, unintentional expressions of pride watching over their waterfront. Down beneath the terrace, the rocks held onto the last of the sun's lingering fingers. Long tufts of elephant grass sprung up like furry ears between their grey, bouldering heads, liver-spotted with moss and lichen. Sitting there, with the café behind us, and another vast expanse of sparkling blue in front, we could have been about to slip into the sauna, or sit down to a salmon dinner.

My now empty yoghurt bowl had interested two hungry ants, who sucked at the milky blue swathes left around the edge. Their antennae danced disjointedly above them, out of time with the music I played through my speakers – the soft song of Audrey Hepburn singing 'Moon River'. My poem was an inky mess; scratchings out and scribbles that fell from page to page. I wrote it out neatly on a new, clean sheet.