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Chasing Blue

A Novel

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1.

A powerful wind. A savage wind. A gale-force wind. It makes even thicker branches shake.

Huge waves break, foaming at their crest. Walking into the wind becomes quite a challenge.

A pair of pigeon wings is lying on the pavement. I bend down, tempted to pick it up. The wings are attached to a bone that has been gnawed, ripped out by the powerful wind, the savage wind, the gale-force wind. They are almost intact, as if the pigeon just happened to lose them, set them down or tossed them away theatrically before stoically going around the corner for a cigarette. Its pin-sized eyes stare at a wall only they can see, the body attuned to its emotions, to the state of the world in its pigeon head. What for? What do I need wings for?

A naked woman is running down the lawn, covering her front with a black t-shirt, followed by a man who's dashed out of a dilapidated building. The scene is unfolding close to a school we have been calling ours since we registered D there; the spot with the homeless people is ours too, we will have to adopt them along with the school and the four-lane road

nearby. I walk around a snail the size of a shoe. The oversized snail by the tree trunk is slithering through rubbish and wet clothing. The brightly coloured snail is made of plaster, it dawns on me a few seconds later.

In my hand in my pocket, I'm holding a ginkgo leaf, firm and leathery. The ginkgo, which in these parts is home to just seven kinds of insects, compared to the oak tree's fifty. The ginkgo that has been here since the time of the dinosaurs.

A young man is sitting on a bench, with his trousers down at his knees and brown patches on his white boxers. He is screaming with what little remains of his strength. People are waiting for the tram a few metres away from the stop, letting the tram drown out the sound and bad smell.

The sand blowing from building sites stings my eyes. The wind thickens it and makes it more unbearable. As does bad weather. Good weather too, since people still believe summer to be the best part of the year, eagerly anticipating weeks of melting tarmac, shimmering air, sweat-drenched nights, windows opened wide into the evenings as they grow less and less dark and gloomy, hoping for something to move. The voices of toddlers who still have the strength to cry at night.

As I tread on the trampled fresh leaves and tree branches, I suddenly notice the wind has subsided. The storm has passed, the wind has stopped, it is damp and chilly, blissful for a while.

Back at home I open the windows, tearing through the trapped air. I want to rest, not relax, rest in peace while staying alive because I am no longer able to relax, sleep or read.

I often end up falling asleep at the least appropriate time. Sometimes I dream the wind is so strong that it leaves me unable to take a breath.

2.

As soon as the rosy-fingered morning star emerged at dawn, the devout Alcinous rose from his bed, but so did the divine Odysseus, the destroyer of towns.

Homer, Odyssey

Slowly, clumsily, Molnár rises from a chair. An elderly woman puts something into his tote bag. His dinner? Tomorrow's lunch, for Molnár to heat up at home. She must be the owner. A guardian of her regulars, her local alcoholics. You never see a woman here unless brought by one of them.

Molnár takes his first step and by the time he's worked his way to the fifth in a jolty curve, I begin to fear that the dinner is more likely to turn into breakfast or that it will be abandoned along the way, on the nearest low wall or a bench. Molnár's arms sway gently with the breeze as he surrenders to its playful flow, not enough to hold his balance.

I stop at the crossroads, miss one green light, then leave him to the mercy of his alcohol-fuelled dance. By the time I pass him on my way back with my shopping, he has managed to conquer a considerable part of his stage and stands, smiling, by the window of a second-hand bookshop where I often see him. In fact, this is the only place I ever see him, in addition to the pub and the park, and sometimes on a bench by children's playground.

Now he has reached the corner of his block and is cheerfully saying hello to someone.

It is not me.

His is a strenuous undertaking. He is forced to grab hold of a traffic sign so as not to fall over and remains hanging from it for a while just flapping about, a feat of choreography,

he hasn't lost his tote, his baggy jeans flap in the wind, a triumphant song wafting in the air. Faded, greasy hair down to his shoulders with ears sticking out as from a helmet, a self-trimmed fringe. Long hair all the way to the grave. How old, actually, is he? Seventy-five?

The first time I saw him around here, shortly after we moved to this neighbourhood, he was standing in the road in front of a block of flats wearing a striped brushed cotton robe and house slippers. I wanted to approach him, but what if something happened just then, like an ambulance arriving that he'd called earlier? Something that might have explained the state he was in, although he didn't really seem to be in need of help.

He seemed to be in the right place on the road in his robe, or rather, the presence of everything else could have been called to question.

3.

A breeze. A gentle wind. Leaves quiver gently, smoke hints at the wind direction. Slight waves, generating no foam.

I like plastic flamingos. It may seem bizarre, but I find the cult of garden gnomes, prevalent in the US in the 1950s, fun. Had it emerged a few years earlier, Humbert Humbert might have enjoyed seeing them in Charlotte Haze's garden. A pair of them, as they used to be sold at the time. The plastic flamingos, now available in solar, Christmas and Halloween versions. There must be more plastic flamingos around these days than living ones: the pink plastic flamingo is the official symbol of Madison, Wisconsin, the icon of trash.

When it comes to plastic flamingos I would probably opt for the original kitsch version, which now seems quite understated.

However, the flamingos in our zoo weren't pink, there was no pink mass of thousands of flamingos contrasting with the blue surface of water and the sky. The colour of their wings was contrasting, black on the inside, as were their two-coloured beaks, as if they just happened to discover they had dipped them into tar in their enclosure.

Sorry, guys, you're not taking off again, we've clipped your wings.

Except that the beaks of flamingos in the wild are the same. They use them to daub their feathers with oil. They do this all together, at the same time. Apparently, when they are looking for a mate, they synchronize their movements to show they are attuned to one another but that wasn't on display at the zoo either.

Though flamingos are generally monogamous, they are also known to practice polygamy, not just in the form of polygyny but also polyandry. Sometimes they live in

a threesome or even a foursome. We know how polygynous creatures live from the example of humans and poultry. One of the female flamingos is the dominant one and the other accepts this until such time as both females lay an egg, when they start fighting to eliminate each other. In the case of polyandry, we might imagine a couple which lets a second male, someone both partners respect – let's call him Mr Flamingo – join their family unit. Mr Flamingo takes on all the chores relating to food and childcare, including keeping the egg warm. Mr Flamingo becomes a servant, and this doesn't change even should the family expand to four.

However, life as a foursome can take a variety of forms.

If the dominant male flamingo has two female partners, he doesn't share them with the second male who remains the domestic servant taking care of all of them, otherwise the cohabitation of two couples would be pointless. Who knows whether there are also flamingos living in constellations of four that comprise a single female and three males and whether, in this scenario, the original couple has two servants and if those two males fight for the privilege to hatch the chick, or whether the hierarchy of dominance is observed by the two additional males. What respective roles are assigned to the last male in the pecking order and the one before him? I couldn't find any information on that. Perhaps it has never been observed.

But perhaps none of this is true; in fact, I'm not sure I haven't made it all up as I forget where I first came across this piece of information.

But why would I invent such a thing?

What if we accepted a third person, a male, into our family? We'd probably find some use for him, perhaps B and I would have more children. Mr Flamingo would provide a third income, act as the third parent and organiser of family holidays, an additional companion,

freeing up time for B and me. Would we be exploiting Mr Flamingo? Would he feel exploited, even if he were not? Or perhaps Mr Flamingo might be a work-focused person, cohabiting with another couple as a fully-fledged family member: that is a scenario I can envisage. He might also be migratory, arriving on a seasonal basis.

Let's imagine what it would be like to cook dinner with Mr Flamingo. It would be a cross between an advert for ready-made food and an episode of *Friends*, which means that I can't actually imagine it. B and I always do the cooking separately. Like a punishment.

What about sex? Would we lead a polyamorous life or would he be a sexual partner solely for me? Or maybe solely my husband's sexual partner? What would his relationship to our daughter be? And hers to him? Would she regard him as her uncle, a carer, an older brother? Would he pose a threat to her at a certain age?

Maybe not all women and men are designed to form dominant pairs and those who never get to that stage are condemned to remain lonely, to swap and alternate partners in perpetuity. Perhaps Mr Flamingo might be someone who is just not ready to commit and start his own family even though he might be quite happy to share one with others.

4.

The city where I live is not Europe's windiest; that is Tarifa, which happens to be the southernmost point of the Iberian Peninsula. The Levant wind has an adverse effect on mental health, similar to the Mistral on the Côte d'Azur. It makes people irritable and predisposes them to suicide. Tarifa is a city of surfers, kite surfers and suicides, a city of palm trees that resemble mops in the wind.

The wind in the city where I live is nameless; one might say my city, too, is nameless as no one further than five hundred kilometres away is aware of it, and it is missing altogether from larger-scale maps. It is an invisible city in invisible eastern Europe. A capital city in the shadow of the capital of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy that no longer exists, a city in the shadow of the capital of Czechoslovakia, a country which, however surprising this may seem to people further than five hundred kilometres away, no longer exists either. It is a wind on the shores of the Pannonian Sea.

Cars leap aggressively onto pavements, assaulting passers-by. Here you can take nothing for granted. I opt for the pavement on the far side of the road and admire everyone who manages to automatically defy the danger, subconsciously dodging people walking in the opposite direction, who twist their torsos as if dancing as they walk through a crowd or down a narrow corridor.

A chestnut tree in full bloom fell into the courtyard of a school. Our school, the one our daughter goes to. The tree trunk was uprooted. It was late afternoon and everyone had gone home. The news reminded me of another school in this city where a child was killed by the branch of a tree, an occurrence yet to acquire the potential of giving my life a new direction. A fallen tree that I can't walk around or step over.

An unspecified enemy is even more dangerous. Then there are also imaginary enemies. Some we invent willy-nilly. We just can't help it.

In the mountains there are gales blowing. But the wind that concerns me is the one blowing in the city, in places with a high concentration of people assaulted by something invisible, something that powerfully affects us and physically constricts us. Injury and death may occur in the rather improbable event of a tree, brick, roof or anything else falling on a specific moving car.

In the courtyard of the house where I live the wind has ripped the ivy off the wall of an old vinegar factory. A pair of turtledoves had their nest in it for years. Chopped up, in a pile ready to be taken away, the ivy resembled the thick canopy of a tree. It used to cover the wall just below our window. That was the reason we decided to move to this particular block, although I knew that Molnár lived nearby and I had no idea what to expect of him.

But the ivy fell down, exposing the bricks hidden beneath it. From the moment the wall was revealed, I've felt the urge to get out of there. To move to the other side. Home faded away yet again. The turtledoves had to build their nest elsewhere and ever since that moment I've been looking for a new home, a new city, a new country on the far side of the wall, one with a view and without any fences. Ever since that moment?

Yes, I've been keeping an eye on the wind ever since. I'm unable to explain this to B or to D. They don't feel threatened and are happy here. Unlike me, they are not expecting something to happen, something that will jolt us out of our existence here, because something does invariably happen, whether we're expecting it or not.

And besides, B lives in the Miocene, on the shores of the Pannonian Sea, which had once been an enormous saline body of water larger than the Caspian Sea. If it still existed,

our city would be situated on its shores, as would Vienna and Graz, while Belgrade, Budapest and Zagreb would be beneath its surface. In B's world, in his work, we live in a seaside town.

That is where B has cast his anchor, along with his work, family and friends. He's been pursuing his project on the shore of an extinct sea and there's nothing else that he needs. He is not concerned with mundane matters, as he thinks in terms of hundreds of thousands, or millions, of years. In his world the Danube is the Paleodanube. Roughly speaking. I'm sure he would correct me and launch into a discussion on the subject.

Why should B move? It is continents and seas that move, merging and splitting. Disappearing. We don't need to. Our family is firmly anchored.

Sometimes I yield and calm down in our family cell. Like the moment the wind abates. Or when all three of us are out walking in the street, or on our bikes on a summer's evening and the sky has pink-feathered wings but I know that the wind is with us all the time, without losing any of its strength. And we need it, we welcome its rubbing against our feet. Don't leave. Don't go away. Don't lift anchor. Enjoy the feast. Don't sail away. Accept these gifts.

In moments like these everything seems to be in harmony, in its rightful place, the dynamics flawless.

5.

At the time he said to himself that he would do it to humiliate Josephine. If she loved him it would make her suffer, and if she did not love him it would not matter to him where he was.

“And perhaps she is right,” he said to himself with a smile. “Perhaps I am the missing link, and the Zoo is the best place for me.”

He took his pen and a sheet of paper and sat down to write a letter, though he knew that if he achieved his object he would be bound to suffer. For some little while he thought over all the agonies of being in a cage and held up to the derision of the gaping populace.

And then he reflected that it was harder for some of the animals than it would be for himself. The tigers were prouder than he was, they loved their liberty more than he did his, they had no amusements or resources, and the climate did not suit them.

In his case there were no such added difficulties. He told himself that he was humble of heart, and that he resigned his liberty of his own free will. Even if books were not allowed him, he could at all events watch the spectators with as much interest as that with which they watched him.

David Garnett, A Man In The Zoo

I have observed him in our street as well as elsewhere in our area. Even when I'm at the zoo I sometimes wonder if I might catch sight of him. It did happen once: D. had already been born and Molnár was sitting in the monkey pavillion above the orangutans and two hours later, when we came back after walking around the upper parts of the zoo, we stopped there on purpose. He was still there. Wearing the same rapturous expression as five-year-olds who, unlike Molnár, can't stick with monkeys for this long.

I wondered if he might start making monkey noises.

He didn't recognize me, or else pretended not to see me. A neighbour who doesn't say hello. I'm a neighbour who is see-through, perhaps completely invisible, not aware of being perfectly camouflaged.

I'm phyllium. I'm a uroplatus. I'm a pallic scops owl.

Otherwise, he was quite chatty, happy to approach people, he would answer questions children asked their parents, join in their conversations and explain that he used to work here in the old days, before the revolution, before the internet, before the proliferation of social media, before artificial intelligence, before this new pavilion had been built with the lovely area for the animals to roam outside.

Molnár had worked at the zoo before there were any reality shows in which people volunteer to participate, before social media where people make a display of themselves. Then there were only cities in which they lived crammed as if in cages, in modern housing estates that Havel, after the revolution, dubbed rabbit hutches.

When I'm at the zoo, apart from looking for Molnár and watching the animals, I observe human couples with their young. A mother with a leopard tattooed on her shoulder who moves like a stork. A cub of a human wanting to borrow a ball from a chimpanzee in the cage. A grandma with her grandchildren, surprised to discover that chimpanzees can drink out of a bottle.

In our larger prison, a bigger-sized cage, we are like raccoons. In captivity they seem to be forever cleaning their food, repeatedly throwing bits of food into a vessel containing water and taking them out again, although in fact they are bored and are simulating hunting in a stream. It is a sign of frustration and understimulation and has little to do with hygiene.

When I was young, in the 1990s, military service was still compulsory in my country and a young poet, who never became an old poet, took some LSD at the barracks. I forget what it was he did under the influence, all I know is that he ended up in a mental hospital. After being discharged he told me that it didn't make much difference either way, as he felt he was more in prison when he was out.

I don't know where he is now although sometimes I imagine him as Ivan Blatný, voluntarily imprisoned in a British institution in a cosy town with brick façades. At the end of his life, he will leave behind a vast body of poetry. As years go by, more and more English words will creep into his Czech. And suddenly, *out of the blue*, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, he will write a letter to Václav Havel, thanking him for freedom in his country.

6.

The blue hour lasts twenty to thirty minutes.

This was the first time we found ourselves at the zoo late in the afternoon, after sunset but before closing time. D and I were strolling in the opposite direction to the general traffic. All the mammals were grooming each other, starting with a couple of lions, through macaques and gibbons all the way to lemurs. In the monkey pavilion we saw chimpanzees gently grooming each other's fur, ridding each other of parasites, their tenderness almost too reminiscent of human tenderness, of tenderness among people inhabiting a larger cage. Soon it will be my turn to soothe D to sleep in this way, checking her for ticks.

Grooming each other's fur must be very pleasant, a bit like running one's fingers through someone else's hair. Being in the monkey pavilion, indeed at the zoo in general, at this time of day and witnessing this intimate behaviour, haptic and physical by definition, only highlighted the inadequacy of this establishment, the bizarre fact that living beings are kept imprisoned and put on display to be observed by other living beings, given that humans regard it as bad form to observe each other's moments of intimacy, and while they may observe the sharing of intimacies in a safe environment, practised anonymously and secretly in closed communities, people in general don't tend to gather round a couple kissing in the street.

I saw such a couple the other day. After climbing the stairs to a church, I came across a man and a woman embracing, both beyond the first flush of youth, perhaps on a secret rendezvous. They noted my presence me and continued, the expectations being obvious: I was the one expected to steer clear of their intimate moment.

Another time I saw a couple having sex in the semi-darkness of a sauna. To the accompaniment of a lute player strumming at the entrance to the relaxation pool and the subdued hubbub of the bar, a young woman was sitting with her back against the edge of the pool while a young man was standing opposite her. He tried to move slowly and inconspicuously as she tilted her head backwards, her body mimicking his movements and everyone around them knew what was going on. Some retreated a little, grumbling that this was really going too far, others laughed in embarrassment, while the couple may well have been fully aware of being visible. The whispering and rejection on the part of those around was meant to be part of the act. Meanwhile, others let them finish, curious to see how it would end.

Apart from its basic function, grooming of another animal of the same species is really an expression of intimacy, which sometimes precedes mating and sometimes serves as a means of choosing a partner or protecting the community. Less dominant gorillas groom more dominant ones while female gorillas use grooming to court a male, a shared male, to retain his affection. For example, no one grooms baboons within a group who are unpopular. Grooming promotes relaxation and the forging of relationships, helps extend life spans, resolve disputes and reinforce the hierarchy. Observation of macaques has shown that grooming of the dominant male by other members of the group is more about caressing than looking for insects, dirt and the remains of plants in their fur.

The chimpanzees whom D and I observed in the zoo also seemed to be caressing each other. Dusk had not yet fallen but in the presence of so many animals the cadences and intensity of sounds began to change, the atmosphere becoming more relaxed and movements more languorous, despite the fact that our zoo is ringed by a motorway, blocks of flats and a slowly dilapidating high-rise building, which ensures that you may forget you are in the midst of the rabbit hutches of a housing estate. My gaze wandered from balconies and prefab

blocks to the cages and aviaries, the playgrounds and the fenced-off water features, and in spite of it all I was tempted to stay, spend the night here, to pitch a tent under the tree whose branches extended over the giraffe pen, instead of going out to face the traffic. As if I was being deprived of something, of a chance that something might actually put me in the mood for sleep.

Against my better instincts, I will lead my daughter into the night with all its flashing and beeping, pulsating and ringing, vibrating and honking. A real night is the one that descends here, amidst the greenery and the animals of the zoo, a night that is darker and more still, a night for which grooming has laid the groundwork. The first thing I'd see in the morning would be a giraffe wrapping its pink and black tongue around leaves and tearing off a twig.

I would be relieved not to find myself in the wilderness.

No one will hunt for us here, and we won't have to hunt for anyone either: the animals we eat will be killed by someone else on our behalf, someone whom we don't know and don't have to reward by picking out the ticks and other insects from his fur, someone who will not exchange food for sex but for money. I will be able to hug my child before going to sleep without any physical obligations to another member of my clan, we can live happily without dominant males or females, observing the traces of clan behaviour from a safe distance.

On the way home I will look forward to the moment we cross the last road, pass under the trolley bus wires and over the tram tracks. Then we'll be in the lee of the wind, out of the worst. All that will be left will be annoying personal electronic devices, the hum of appliances in our flats and those of our neighbours, and the parked cars.

At the gate of the zoo D asked me if the animals were here all the time. If they ever left the cages. If they could ever go home. Or take a day trip. Or go hunting. Or play with other animals. Like in the fairytales.

“Where is their home?”

I resorted to a theory I don't really believe in: animals born in captivity suffer less. Unconvinced, D sat down on the ground, in front of the meerkat cage close to the exit. The meerkats whom children love so much because of their anthropomorphic features, particularly the fact that they stand upright like human beings, use their front paws like hands and also because they feel velvety, have faces like children and the dark colouring around the eyes makes them look larger, reminiscent of Disney characters with disproportionately large eyes.

Outside the meerkat cage D gripped the railing and threw a tantrum.

The zoo was closing. I managed to tear her away from the railing and give her a hug, but she was jerking about so violently that I had to let go of her to make sure she didn't hurt yourself, and she ran back to the meerkat cage, grabbed the railing and went on screaming. That's when I gave up, walked to the nearest vending machine, dropped a coin in and imagined a secret escape lift appearing like in Willy Wonka's chocolate factory, but all that emerged was a translucent little ball with a plastic animal inside.

I walked back slowly, my pulse beating faster, my heart pumping adrenaline into my entire body, my blood pressure rising and along with it my red blood cell count, the time required for the clotting of blood was decreasing; my mouth went dry, having basically stopped producing saliva, my digestive and excretory functions came to a halt as did the peristaltic movements and the secreting of digestive juices, my liver released its reserves of carbohydrates, which in turn injected fresh sugar into my bloodstream. I will need the sugar

to flee or to fight. My breathing accelerated and deepened, my body hairs stood on an end, combat perspiration and faster cooling turned on.

“Wanna see what’s inside?”

D got up, came over to me, took the little ball and as we were passing through the gate, managed to prise it open. The blotchy red face smiled.

“A rhinoceros.”

7.

Windless conditions. The sea is an undisturbed mirror; smoke rises straight up into the sky.

There are mornings in August when the city is deserted, the streets are quiet and the wind is imperceptible. I am out walking the dog, and even although this is the centre of the city, not a single car passes by and I can hear our footsteps and feel our movements echo among the houses. In a few moments the first car might slice up this temporary state of exceptional wholeness as it turns into our street from the main drag. It is sunny, the temperature is set as for an incubator, and in this moment of perfect conditions there is a sudden loud flapping of wings, amplified by the walls of the buildings, an abrupt take-off. My ears, sharpened by adrenaline, follow the gentle fading away of the sound until it dies down in the lee of somewhere new and safe. Goosebumps begin to subside. Plumage, now smoothed down, settles back into place.

My first contact with Molnár since we became neighbours took place in a supermarket. It was one of those mornings when I simply know (this happens without me trying or making an effort) that I don't need anything. There was apparently no one else in the shop as he stood in front of me at the till, buying cigarettes, just cigarettes. The cashier pointed out loudly that he was ten cents short, and it was immediately clear that no more would be forthcoming, that the cage door had just slammed shut, since Molnár had neither a wallet nor a shopping bag, arriving only with some small change in his hand and fist in pocket. Quickly and without a word, I supplied the missing coin. He left in silence. A double humiliation and release. Pigeon-fanciers call it a vertical take-off. To a point when the bird is almost invisible in the sky.

Back then it didn't even occur to me that he might not have recognized me.

Out in the street Molnár was exuberantly chatty, to the point of accosting people who lived in the area, although he also went through phases when he would pass absently by with the rest of us being apparently see-through.

I often caught myself worrying what people might think of him. He looked as if he were all alone in the city, as if everyone else had left. He never stopped to talk to me and I never saw him chatting to any other mothers either. Sometimes he would sit on a bench in a children's playground and might have seemed suspicious to parents. There were plenty of other places for him to sit in the park and sometimes he did. A lost and somewhat seedy-looking pensioner in Ray-Ban shades. An oddball without purchase on material reality. A suspicious character from whom one might learn something other than from the majority, at the risk of it making no sense. After the initial astonishment one would notice the smokescreen of absurd associations. These helped Molnár justify his presence in reality, an uncooperative reality, his act of protest, the determination not to be present, at least not in the way the rest of us are.

An intelligent mind can be a burden in cases like these, cases of exclusion of any kind.

There are, after all, many people like this. Many are pensioners who look like Molnár, others are much more conservative in appearance, and therefore even more suspicious.

Most people judge others primarily by their state of hygiene – greasy hair, dirty shoes and clothes, general wear and tear, smell, teeth.

By these standards Molnár was undoubtedly borderline, his appearance perhaps slightly tempered by an old book he often carried around.

I can't help myself and eavesdrop on his conversations in passing. Sometimes I can't slow down sufficiently, but I can't stop to listen either.

Like the time Molnár was talking to another elderly gentleman who, like him, could have given the impression of being homeless: "The title of this book is really interesting, you may have heard about it."

What book? What title? Why does he speak so slowly?

8.

In Tanzania in the 1960s Jane Goodall observed a chimpanzee use a blade of grass to drive ants out of an anthill. Later she discovered several tools they used for a variety of purposes, such as obtaining food, for pleasure, or to keep in shape. Or for sexual stimulation, which varied according to gender. Chimpanzees also responded to children's toys differently, with young males showing a preference for toys on wheels while young females played with every kind of toy.

While out on a walk with D, I met an old friend.

“They were all over each other,” our daughter reported to her father although I didn’t remember touching the man or him touching me even once or, for that matter, how he smelled, but since I believed her, I tried to flesh out my memory of the encounter retrospectively and recall whether or not he gave me a hug, how I reacted, what my expression and movements were like, but I had no control over my memory and all I remembered were the bare facts and his baseball cap, since I’d never seen him wear one before.

There was a time when he took on the role of Mr Flamingo, the second male, in our family unit.

If we were bonobos, we would without a moment’s hesitation have sex right there in the coffee queue, a quickie with a male in a baseball cap, a standard part of communication that may take a variety of forms: oral, analand, in females, mutual stimulation of the genitals. The bonobo might use tools the way *Homo sapiens* or common chimpanzees do, for

gratification or gathering food or building nests, since monkeys nest in these like birds, a different one each night.

After a while his girlfriend arrived at the café. He introduced us and my daughter later wondered why such a young and beautiful woman, she may even have used the word *girl*, *had to* be with such an old man, as our former family Flamingo was indeed twice her age and not even the baseball cap helped.

I find birds more attractive than mammals, especially primates or the chimpanzees' aggressive behaviour within a group and I have no desire to gaze into this Darwinist mirror. The only primates I enjoy are the bonobo chimpanzees. They are not strictly vegan, they don't mind a squirrel from time to time, they are smaller and more upright than the common chimpanzee, they live in a matriarchy and instead of aggression they copulate across the gender divide. Except on the female's fertile days, and when in rut they are at it constantly, on every occasion, because there is never a shortage of tension to be released, not just by mutual grooming but, in case of the bonobo, by actual sexual gratification or at least mutual masturbation, every thirty minutes, for a few seconds, with the females reaching orgasm.

Apart from that, relations within the tribe, as in the case of other primates including humans, are changeable and unstable, both in general and within communities, the bonobo forming various factions, groups, relationships and utilitarian groupings that last for short periods; they use tools like humans and crows, they communicate by means of sounds which we don't understand as well as gestures which we are slightly better at reading. As opposed to *Homo sapiens* and the common chimpanzee, the bonobo are not known to commit bloodthirsty acts such as murdering their enemy's offspring. The dominant mothers form a stronger bond with their sons who stick around, while the daughters leave the community to assert themselves in another cohort and avoid inbreeding.

Mothers even help their sons to find a partner and assist them in conceiving their offspring. I'm trying to imagine how a young Homo sapiens would take to his mother dispensing advice while he was having sex with his partner: "Why don't you try from the other side? Don't stop now. Hold her a little higher. Can't you see that she isn't enjoying it in this position?"

When a group of bonobos discover an abundant new tree, before stripping it bare they start mating on it in every conceivable way, though only to prevent members of the tribe from killing one another because even on trees with branches groaning under the weight of juicy fruit, some of the fruits are juicier, riper, bigger and more beautiful, causing rivalry and stress among the monkeys. Which needs to be eliminated.

At first, our friend and former Mr Flamingo used to visit our city often if irregularly, but gradually he would spend almost all his time here. In those days we had open house, with many friends staying the night, B and I had only recently moved in together, having previously lived in shared flats and clubbing together to pay the rent. Mr Flamingo didn't contribute but did live with us, and since we were used to sharing with others, this didn't strike us as unusual at the time. Gradually he started to keep the odd thing in our house, such as a toothbrush or a towel, which I would put in the wash from time to time; later he brought a sleeping bag. He didn't have a key to our place. He never crossed this boundary.

When he wasn't at our house, he'd leave behind miniature figures, of ceramic or glass, of variously mutated animals. He called them *Little Mutants* and he was their creator, for our former Flamingo used to be, and still is, a designer by profession.

When Flamingo wasn't at home, staring at me were these cute little two-headed puppies, all sorts of hoofed animals sporting impressive crowns of horns instead of a pair,

cats with fan-like tails like peacocks, all cute and cool and perverted in an aesthetically pleasing way, attractive at first sight but horrifying at second, especially to children.

They stood around on the kitchen shelves, windowsills, in the bathroom and on the bedside tables. They lived with us like mythical creatures, prehistoric animals, waiting for their maker and their act of destruction.

Since we are not bonobo chimpanzees or flamingos, I was the first to leave. B followed suit, moving in with me. Mr Flamingo didn't stay in our old flat but neither did he move into our new one. When we met again years later, we hugged and told each other that it had been a long time.

9.

Out of the blue.

Way back, when I was at university, Molnár taught a course on the colour blue and the ancient Greeks' inability to see it.

That was how we met.

He didn't lecture only on the inability of ancient Greeks to see the colour blue, but also on the biblical blindness to the colour blue as well as the inability of the Jews, Bretons, Basques, Egyptians and the Irish to see this colour. I didn't fully appreciate it at the time, just taking in the basic information, its paradoxical nature and weight. It wasn't until later that I would return to it.

The hypothesis of the Greeks' inability to see the colour blue originates in the nineteenth century and is based on the fact that the concept of blueness or the colour blue is not mentioned explicitly anywhere in the Iliad or the Odyssey. For Homer, the sky is only ever yellow and red and the sea, reflecting the blush of dawn, is only ever purple. What was incredible about Molnár was that he distinguished even more nuances in the shades of colour than I do, although men often can't even recognize purple. They can't tell grey from charcoal, or greyish pink from salmon pink or coral red without necessarily being colour-blind; it is just a sensitivity that is not usually well-developed in men. When Molnár, by contrast, spoke of blue, he would mention azure, derived from ultramarine pigments; crushed lapis lazuli which Egyptian women used to paint their eyelids; he would talk of indigo blue and the wanderings of indigo and he distinguished several shades of turquoise while I could see only one, as well as cerulean blue, marine blue, royal blue, cobalt blue and sky blue, and he also

distinguished the blue of the violet from that of chicory and veronica, once considered a herbal cure-all.

Molnár would also say, mainly in the context of his lectures on colour, that we see some things that don't exist while not seeing some that do. We see mirages, yet we do not perceive certain wavelengths. The colour blue has the shortest wavelength and according to some theories there are nations in which the ability to distinguish short wavelengths did not emerge until later stages of development. Molnár would wax lyrical in particular when speaking of indigo. As if he had touched something liminal, ungraspable, something on the far side that we cannot see although we know that it exists but we are biologically limited by our distorting senses, by our inadequacy. And then there was the always fascinating ultraviolet. On the boundary of blue. On the boundary of the unseen. Of the never seen.

One might say that Molnár was the person from whom I have picked up certain longings, such as for ultraviolet and its graspability, as well as some fears, such as the fear of Russians. I do have my own fears, too, but I might forget who bequeathed them to me. For example, a fear of wind. Of gales. Of tornadoes.

Or the longing not to be seen through for a while longer, even though that does have its uses. I can take out my laptop wherever I am and work undisturbed. Safe in the knowledge that no one is aware of me, no one will interrupt me, no one apart from bearded kids in sweatpants who order brain juice instead of coffee.

Molnár had never studied the theory and symbolism of colours in a systematic way, as an art historian, it was just one of his marginal interests. He called his subject *Out of the blue*.

And yes, everyone who knew him was surprised.

I studied theatre at university but after graduation the curtain gradually went down on the theatre chapter in my life. Molnár's class at our school was an attempt to find him a place, involve him in the proceedings after he was kicked out of the zoo following the revolution.

He rather relished the absurdity of the situation.

Never before could anyone imagine that colours were a subject he would be able to teach for two full semesters, but he did manage it, precisely because of the colour blue, as it turned out. The colour blue was how it all started.