

This House Burns Blue

by **Gabby Vachon**

My mother wears so much blue, it's fucking ridiculous.

Her whole house is decorated in blue, so much so that she has a room called "the red room" because it lacks the hegemony of blue of its neighboring kitchen and laundry room.

People—like her sisters, her personal trainer, and the cashiers at the local grocery store—often remark upon the blue, even poke fun at it. But their criticism never bothers her.

She just smiles her famous tight smile and lets out a light suburban-mom laugh.

I don't know for sure why she's so attached to the color blue, but I have a few theories:

1. Blue may remind her of her childhood, as her parents were ardent Quebec separatists. If you don't know much about Quebec politics, here's a very basic overview of the Sovereignty movement, or at least my version of it, keeping in mind I am a pure-bread French Canadian who grew up in Montreal: French Canadian people made up most of Quebec, a large Canadian province; English people made up most of the rest of Canada. The Quebec provincial government was pissed at Canada's federal government for a multitude of reasons (some rational, some lunatic) and decided to make the Quebec people vote twice, in 1980 and 1995, about separating the province of Quebec from Canada, making Quebec its own country. The vote failed both times, but the periods between 1970 and 1995 were wrought with aggressive discourse, xenophobia, and even terrorism.

My mom was born into a house with a big blue Fleur de Lys flag (the official Quebec flag) planted on its lawn. She had been cradled in this flag; it was her first toy, her first friend, her first truth. My grandparents made phone calls for the Separation party, hosted events, and were even investigated in relation to terrorist acts on federal representatives. The big blue flag, separated into four corners, represented a people she could call her own, through childhood all the way through young adulthood. She was proud Separatist.

Then she moved to Toronto to study. She met my dad, an anti-Separatist to the core of his being. She learned English. She got a good job. She read more than what was available in her childhood home and French Catholic convent high school. And slowly but surely, she changed her mind.

This house that was once unified by Separatism had fragmented. She fought brutal political wars with her parents and siblings, with whom she remained, despite the political divide, very close. These fights hinged on identity, on the very idea of belonging, on the very notion that the family had come from the same blue roots and beliefs, yet couldn't agree to the same nation state.

The Canadian political climate calmed after 1995, the year I was born, and my parents moved back to Quebec. They settled in a nice English neighborhood. They raised a nice bilingual family. They held nice Christmases with my mother's family, tiptoeing around the glass shards of a once unified familial political belief.

I know she would deny it if confronted, but there is still a fragmentation inside my mother's heart. There were nights of endless fights that don't escape nightmares even for fifty-year-old women with blue yoga mats and blue Mercedes SUVs.

A river runs through my mother's heart when politicians mention a third referendum, and that river, though thin and filled with old rotten sticks and stones, runs blue.

2. Blue may remind her of my teenage years. When I was sixteen-years-old, I was admitted to a children's psychiatric hospital. I was bulimic, depressed, a nervous wreck, and saw myself at the edge of something. I wasn't sure what that something was, but it felt violent. It's as much as you'd expect from any sixteen-year-old, really, but I was empty, and lonely, and suicidal, so the hospital, after I'd called an emergency hotline and met with their team a few times, decided I should be admitted for a week's worth of treatment. They called my mother into a small blue room filled with many chairs. She sat in the one furthest from me, closest to the doctor. The psychiatrist then explained how my mother, because I was a minor, would have to go downstairs, sign me over to the hospital's custody, and pack a few of my things from home, like homework, pajamas, and toothbrush.

My mother paused for a short time, though it seemed like forever, until she said: "What if I don't sign her over? What happens then?" I couldn't believe her reaction at first, but with thought, I could. My mother came from a generation that found disgrace in therapy, shame in weakness, and secrecy in suicide. There was no "sixteen-year-old girl who lives in a nice house with a nice family who goes to a nice school with her nice friends and gets nice grades" who was also suicidal. Whatever the problem, it wasn't something a little bit of pulling oneself up by the bootstraps couldn't fix. She believed that these doctors, with their sharp teeth and parent-shaming, would seek to destroy her blue-blood beliefs.

I saw my mother not as angry, but as scared. Scared of the small blue room that separated us, mother and daughter, blood and flesh, alive and, well, less alive. There were too many chairs. I could see it in her eyes, that she thought there were too many chairs. There were too many chairs for too many therapists and counselors and psychiatrists with their Pfizer checks and pernicious hands. She didn't want to believe this team of strangers could do a better job repairing me than she could, the one who had birthed me in a room not unlike this one.

The doctor answered her, looking at me directly: “Well, we are keeping her, whether you sign her off or not. We will take custody, but it is up to you how peacefully it is done.” And that was that. I stayed a week. My mother came during visiting hours and brought me awkward hugs and bowls of fruit.

That wasn’t my last time in a mental hospital, not by a long shot, and my mom has gotten better at handling the devastation each time. But I know in retrospect that it was in that moment when my mother understood she couldn’t contain my sanity in a clean Tupperware container. There was always going to be too much blue inside my heart for her to warm with her burnt banana bread or long heat-curlled eyelashes. I was born a red-blooded girl, but numbed to a pale blue shade as I grew older; and though my mother wears her blue proudly, she also knows the color to be bigger than what any mother can fix.

3. Blue may remind her of the eyes of those she loves.

We are truly the whitest family on the block. We have light blond hair and alabaster skin, and, yes, blue eyes (except my dad, but we really have a hard time believing he’s actually physically related to us).

All my cousins have eyes like sapphire engagement rings, so bright and faceted you could neglect the possibility of divorce with one hefty check at Kay jewelers. My aunts have eyes like Pillsbury chocolate chip cookie dough packaging, warm and sweet and definitely in danger of sugar rush and/or salmonella, depending on their mood.

My brother has eyes like an airy blue sky, free of trouble.

My grandparents have eyes like the Caribbean Sea, clear and distinct and free of pollution.

I have eyes like an angry lake, dark and moody.

And my mother, my mother has eyes so vibrant blue you can see the embrace of her safety.

You can't slip on the blue carpeting in my house.

You can't spill juice on the blue tablecloth.

You can't hurt your back sleeping on the expensive blue mattress in the guest room.

You can try to escape it, certainly, but my mother possesses blue so potent you can see yourself in its reflection. You see yourself, and your family, and the cracks in your skins, and your smile lines, and your stress wrinkles, and your veins.

Those blue veins that unite us all: separatist, mentally ill.

Those bulging lines in our arms that trace our heritage from France to this home in the suburbs where my mother paints the walls in our honor.

For our sake, she wears her blue parka when it's cold and her blue Speedo one-piece when it's hot.

For our sake, she is monochromatic.

And maybe also for her sake.

After all, a dark blue Mercedes SUV is so much easier to clean.



Gabby Vachon is a writer and artist from Montreal, Canada. She has been published or has work forthcoming in *Tiny Tim*, *Ink in Thirds*, and *The Corvus Review*, among other publications. She is an editor for *Soliloquies Anthology*. Her favorite food is the skin around her cuticles, and she is happily and forever married to her true love Justin. Follow her on twitter @gabbyvwrites.