The Blue Book

Christopher Bowden

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Extract

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Prologue

Hugh Mullion walked back home from the station that evening for the last time. He and his partner, Kate Roberts, were moving from this part of south London in the morning. As he made his way down the parade flanked by Bin Ends and the betting shop, Hugh paused to look in the window of Peter's Antiques. A copper warming pan on the wall gleamed quietly in the light of a small table lamp. The dappled rocking horse in the corner appeared to rock gently back and forth, as if pushed by an invisible hand. The horse's eyes betrayed a hint of sadness. Hugh sighed and thought of the hours he had spent there and at Toad Books next door. The bookshop was in darkness now, the boxes in which he used to rummage put away for another day. You never knew what you were going to find. Perhaps if he had known what he would find under the polythene, and where it would lead, that wet autumn Saturday of the previous year, he would have been more circumspect. But there was no putting the clock back. Hugh thought yet again of those events as he carried on down the parade and turned the corner into Dogberry Road.

Part One

1

Toad Books – second-hand and antiquarian books bought and sold; collections purchased – occupied the premises of a former draper and haberdasher. A few local residents could still remember the shop as it used to be: the peeling brown paint, the yellowing bolts of cloth, the grubby doilies in the window. At the time of the transformation a dozen or so years ago, Toad Books had been one of three such bookshops in the area. Now it was the sole survivor.

Hugh stumbled over the threshold and extricated the sleeve of his coat from the door handle. His dark brown hair was damp from the rain. He greeted Marjorie, the long-suffering assistant of the proprietor, Anthony Buffo, and went over to the grey parrot skulking on the top of an open cage, which rested on an upturned dustbin.

"Good morning, Charlie," said Hugh.

"Bugger off," said Charlie, inspecting the apple core he held in his foot.

"Charlie's not in the best of humour this morning."

"He's always unsettled when Mr Buffo's been away," said Marjorie. "New York again. Only got back this morning. You know how attached to each other they are." She toyed with one of the textured daisies decorating her dark blue crew neck sweater. "And on top of that there was the Vivaldi on the radio. It was much too frenetic for Charlie. He's more of a Cole Porter bird. He likes to sing along. It came on completely without warning. I don't know why they play *Primavera* at this time of year, I really don't. It's all wrong. They should stick to…*Autumn*…for the next few months."

"Well, on that basis you'd have to wait a year to hear the whole of *The Four Seasons*," said Hugh. He laid a book on the pine table that served as Marjorie's desk. "I found this outside but it's only Volume II. Do you have Volume I secreted somewhere?"

Marjorie picked up the book and brought the spine into focus. "*The Portrait of a Lady*," she read, a trifle ponderously. "Henry James. You could try Fiction or Literature or Classics. That accounts for most of that sort of thing. Unless, of course, it's very small, in which case it'll be with the Pocket Books in the bookcase under the window by Charlie. Or illustrated, in which case it'll be over there next to the Folio Society. Or a Modern First Edition. They're in the cabinet behind me."

"I'll see if I can root it out."

As Hugh drifted towards J on the Literature shelves, a man with a pointed nose, a gloomy expression and a

brown raincoat came into the bookshop. "I don't suppose you've got it," he said to Marjorie. "It's quite old. Destroyed in the Blitz, I shouldn't wonder. A lot of books were. It's about newts and salamanders. I'll look at Natural History, if I may. Not much chance, though. That parrot's made rather a mess. Seeds and suchlike on the carpet. I daresay it'll attract mice. I'd keep a cat if I were you."

"We hoover up after Charlie every day," said Anthony Buffo, coming downstairs with a large box marked 'Baked Beans'. He placed the box on the floor beside several others and mopped his moist and shining brow with a crumpled silk handkerchief. A bead of perspiration still glistened above his small black moustache. His faintly olive skin suggested a touch of the Mediterranean lurking somewhere in the background.

Anthony went over to Charlie's cage, produced a champagne cork from the pocket of his trousers, and offered it to the delighted bird.

"Charlie's looking forward to the book fair tomorrow," he said to Hugh, who was now immersed in Classics, balancing with one foot on the bottom rung of a small stepladder. "He never misses a fair and the customers love him. A fellow of infinite jest and a great lover of cardboard boxes. He'll destroy anything if you let him."

"I deplore frivolity in a bird," said the man with the pointed nose as he made his way to the door. "I take a serious view of life. Pets should be kept in their place. Nothing on newts or salamanders, as I expected. Looks like the rain's set in."

*

Hugh was coming away from Classics as Anthony reappeared with a box of Rupert annuals.

"I haven't managed to find Volume I of this," he said, handing Anthony the dark blue book he had shown Marjorie.

"No, you won't. It was just an odd volume in the bottom of a box of books I got at the auction. That's why I put it outside. Do you still want it?"

"I might as well for 50p. The other one may turn up. And I'll have this Trollope for Kate, if I may."

"Certainly. Marjorie will do the biz."

Marjorie took two pens from the tobacco jar on the table. With the black one she wrote in a large ledger the titles of the two books and the sums involved. With the red one she added the total underneath. "That's £3.25, please, Mr Mullet."

"It's Mullion, but please call me Hugh," he said through gritted teeth. They went through this performance every time.

On his way out of the bookshop Hugh brushed past a few late geraniums in the large terracotta pot that guarded the doorway. The sun was shining brightly in a clear blue sky.

2

The police were just leaving as Kate came home from the Centre for Natural Medicine, a converted piano factory where she practised as a homeopath. Slim, but not slight, she was carrying a black remedy case and a sturdy bag containing her Materia Medica and Kent's Repertory, the tools of her trade. As Kate approached the late Victorian terraced house that was number 40 Dogberry Road she saw Hugh loitering palely by the maroon front door. He was alone.

"Oh, not again," said Kate. "What was it this time? Did you forget the code?"

"Not as such. I pressed the right numbers but one didn't take. Then there was a horrible noise. When the alarm company rang I couldn't remember the password. I knew it was Iris or Isis or Osiris or something like that."

"It's Ibis. Just like it was last time and the time before. We'll get another rude letter. This road's impossible."

Kate closed the wooden gate behind her. "I had to park right at the other end by the pub."

"The King's Head?"

"It changed its name to O'Malley's two years ago, Hugh. That's when they painted it emerald green. And that removal van doesn't help. It's taking up enough room for three cars." Kate was pointing at the bright yellow pantechnicon of Messrs Tumbril and Robinson, familiar in South Coast towns for over half a century but rarely seen in this part of the world.

"I don't suppose it'll be there much longer," said Hugh. "They've made good progress with their tea chests."

As he spoke, two men were struggling with a king size bed. "Down a bit at your end, Dave. Tilt it and round. That's it."

"I don't know what Gordon West wants with a bed that size," said Hugh. "It's just him, I gather."

"Gordon West?"

"He's the one moving in to number 42. He introduced himself when he came out to see what the noise was a few minutes ago."

"He can only be an improvement on those Gurnings and their screaming brat."

"Eleanor was rather nice when she was quiet," said Hugh. "I wouldn't mind…"

"Could you take this bag?" said Kate. "The books weigh a ton. The sooner I get a laptop the better."

"Christ! They *are* heavy. Coffee?"

*

Hugh held two striped mugs in one hand and a packet of biscuits in the other. He put them all on the kitchen table. "So how was the world of complementary medicine this morning?" he asked, dunking a bourbon into his coffee. "A constant succession of diseases, maladies and distressing ailments?" Beneath the veneer of gentle mockery Hugh wasn't quite sure whether he believed in all this alternative stuff or not.

"You may laugh. A lot of people take homeopathy seriously, which is just as well for me. Even Dickens and Thackeray took the plunge. That ought to appeal to you. And what about the Royal Family?"

"I'm a firm believer in the Monarchy myself," said Hugh, reaching for a second bourbon. "A pillar of the Constitution and a great tourist attraction."

"Right. No more biscuits," said Kate. Ignoring Hugh's protests, she confiscated the packet and put it in the drawer of the kitchen table. "Wanda at reception completely screwed up the appointments so I was running miles behind. And then Clare and Linda popped in for a chat afterwards."

"Remind me which of the dark arts they practise."

Kate did not rise to the bait. "Clare does shiatsu, Linda does acupuncture. At least they like my hair."

"So do I. It just takes a bit of getting used to. Henna, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Hand me that bag. I want to see if there's a remedy for technophobia and an inability to deal with the modern world. The twenty-first century isn't really your thing, is it?"

"I thought you weren't supposed to treat your own family."

"Not quite family."

"Well, as good as. 'We've been together now for…' What is it? Five years? Six?"

"Four, actually. This repertory's falling apart."

"Your homeopathy things always do. Why are so many printed in India on such lousy paper? I got you a book, by the way. Another Trollope." Hugh removed the book from the modest pile on the dresser next to a large ceramic pumpkin. "*The Vicar of Bullhampton*."

"Thanks," said Kate, glancing at the mawkish picture on the front cover and at the blurb on the back. "I don't know this one. What else did you get?" Without waiting for an answer she stretched over and picked up the remaining book. "*The Portrait of a Lady*. Since when did you read Henry James?"

"I don't. Or haven't, anyway. I just liked the feel of it. Rather smart with its gilt lettering and decoration against the blue, don't you think?"

"This is Volume II. Where's the other one?"

"I don't know. They only had this one," Hugh said plaintively.

"Honestly. What's the use of that?" Kate opened the book. "It starts at Chapter twenty-eight," she said, decoding the roman numerals. " 'On the morrow'," she read, " 'in the evening, Lord Warburton went again to see his friends at their hotel, and at this establishment he learned that they had gone to the opera.' I suppose it might make sense if you'd read the previous twenty-

seven chapters. I wonder what happened to Dorothy Russell?"

"Who is Dorothy Russell?"

"A previous owner, I should think. Here, look."

Hugh read on the flyleaf a small neat inscription in blue-black ink:

Dorothy Russell
St Helen's
May 1944.

"Merseyside during the Second World War," he said. "Heaven knows how it ended up in a bookshop in south London. This edition was published in 1921 so it had a life well before Dorothy. Twenty-three years. Only six less than you, Kate."

Hugh flicked through the pages of the book. "Hello. What's this?" He removed a small piece of paper, tissue-thin, and unfolded it. There was something written on it. 'D. Fear death by water.' How odd. I wonder what it means."

"Same writing as the inscription," said Kate. " 'Fear death by water.' 'Fear death by water'," she repeated more slowly. "That rings a bell."

"Probably a warning to some unfortunate wartime pilot."

"Looks like he never got it then. Hang on. Just a minute. I've had a thought." Kate got up from the table and ran upstairs to the spare bedroom, which doubled as a study and dumping ground for things that had no

homes elsewhere. She opened the glass-fronted bookcase that Hugh had got cheap from Peter's Antiques in the parade, ran her eye along the second shelf and removed a book. She opened it and flipped the pages backwards and forwards, briefly distracted by familiar lines and the memory of half-forgotten voices. She found what she wanted and went back to the kitchen.

"Here we are. Look. It's from *The Waste Land*. Blah, blah, blah: '…I do not find the Hanged Man. Fear death by water.' How strange. I wonder what it means. I don't think there were too many Phoenician sailors on Merseyside, drowned or otherwise."

"But Madame Sosostris could have done with a good remedy for her cold."

"You are learning. There's hope for you yet. Where's the cookery book I left on the work surface? We need to do some shopping."

"I put it away."

"Well, you'd better get it out again. Have you forgotten that Sue's coming to lunch tomorrow? No answer required. And I nearly tripped over your squash racket in the hall on my way upstairs."

"Had you thought of looking where you were going? OK. OK. I'll move it."

As Kate compiled a list, Hugh looked out of the kitchen window and saw the yellowed leaves of hostas ravaged by slugs and snails. He sighed.

3

Hugh was nominally in charge of the trolley in Waitfare that afternoon. But the trolley had wonky wheels and a mind of its own. If he pushed to the left it went to the right. If he pushed to the right it went to the left. His crabwise progress down the aisles was laborious and slow. He ground to a halt by the biscuits as Kate strode ahead with the list. He glanced half-heartedly at the packets on display. He was bored, not so much with shopping as with life in general.

The job was fine, in its way: Deputy Director of Conservation Policy at the Commission for the Built Heritage and Historic Landscapes in England. The Heritage Commission, for short. The Commission offered advice on the historic environment to anyone who was prepared to listen, and looked after vast tracts of countryside and lots of old buildings for people to go and see. They did, in droves. He liked the work and people seemed to think he did it well. But he had been

at the Commission for over ten years, a third of his life. Perhaps it was time he had a change of scene, moved on to pastures new.

And his relationship with Kate? That was fine too, in its way. Quite affectionate, really. More than affectionate. He had no particular complaints, even if she did treat him like a child on occasion. Hadn't she been called 'Bossy Roberts' at school? Things were ticking over well enough but where they were leading he was not sure. How long were he and Kate going to carry on as they were, unmarried and childless in a small house in south London? Hugh had never quite plucked up the courage to broach the subject. Anyway, Kate seemed more focused on building up her homeopathy practice at the moment.

Meanwhile, Hugh pursued his own interests: gardening, books, more books…pictures and antiques, too – when he could afford them. Kate viewed his habits with amused tolerance and gave him a long leash. And there was nothing like some cultivated retail therapy to divert the mind and provide short-term relief. But he needed something more, something to get his teeth into, something to provide a challenge.

He grabbed two packets of fig rolls and resumed his crooked course.

4

After lunch the next day Hugh gathered up the plates and forks while Kate filled the kettle.

"I liked your lemon tart," said Sue.

"Tarte au citron, if you don't mind, Ms Beckett," said Hugh. "Waitfare's finest. It was a job to remove all the packaging without breaking it in half."

Kate had met Sue a couple of years before when they had joined the local gym on the same day. They were the same age. Where Kate was relaxed about her next birthday Sue viewed the prospect of being thirty and unattached with despair and mounting desperation. She envied Kate her apparently settled relationship with Hugh, even if Kate did complain about him from time to time on the treadmill and the exercise mat. Nothing serious. Just something about the rising tide of books and living in the past half the time.

"What's that whining noise?" said Sue.

"That pleasing and mellifluous sound," said Hugh,

"is Ken, our neighbourhood flautist and plumber, serenading his koi carp. You can just see him through the gap in the fence, sitting on a chair by the pond."

Sue made out a thickset man holding a flute in his large hands with surprising delicacy. "Bit chilly for sitting outside. Is this a habit of his?"

"Ken's been doing it all the time we've known him, which is since we moved here three years ago. Rather nice on a summer evening with a glass of something."

"How come I've not heard it before?"

"He only does it when his wife's out."

"Let's move next door and have our coffee in there," said Hugh. "I'll put on some Miles Davis."

"What's this about your new neighbour?" asked Sue, curling up on the settee. "Is he young and tall with a nice bum?"

"I can't vouch for the last," said Hugh, "but I'd say middle-aged and middle-sized was nearer the mark. He's moved to London from Eastbourne after taking early retirement. Got a big bed, though."

"Thank you, Hugh," said Kate, bringing the mugs into the sitting room.

"I don't seem to have much luck," said Sue. "Why are the nice men always boring? Present company excepted, of course. I saw a poster for Latin American dancing classes on the door of the health food shop. I suppose I might meet someone there."

"A handsome hidalgo with raven hair and a faint

suggestion of garlic. Or a rugged gaucho intent on entwining you with his bolas."

"Ooh, yes!" said Sue, lowering her mug.

"Not on the desk," said Kate. "Hugh won't like it."

"Actually, it's a davenport," said Hugh. "Walnut. It was my mother's."

"Half the drawers won't open," said Kate.

"They're dummy drawers. They're not supposed to."

"Very practical, I must say."

"You'd rather have something in MDF called Malmo or Snorkfart bought in a flatpack."

"At least I could put it together, which is more than I can say for some people."

"Yes, well, I'll just put my coffee on the floor," said Sue. "What's this book on the des…davenport?"

"Another of Hugh's purchases. The wrong half of *The Portrait of a Lady*. Seems to have found its way down from Merseyside. Aren't you from round there?"

"A bit further east," said Sue, opening the book. "Oldham."

"Home of the tubular bandage," said Hugh. "William Cobbett was its MP."

"A little before my time. Oh, St Helen's," said Sue, looking at the inscription on the flyleaf. "I had a friend who used to live there. Wrote to me from time to time. She didn't spell it with an apostrophe, though. Margaret, her name was. She became a vet and got bitten by a snake. The last I heard she'd moved to Formby with a man in soft furnishings. I expect she has millions of kids."

*

"Why are you staring out of the window?" said Kate that evening. "It's pitch dark."

"Just thinking about the book," said Hugh, slowly drawing the curtains. "The Henry James. I wonder who Dorothy Russell was?"

"I don't suppose we'll ever know. What so special about her? It's common enough to find people's names written in second-hand books."

"But not strange notes as well. The occasional post card perhaps, chocolate wrappers used as bookmarks, that sort of thing. This is different."

" 'Fear death by water.' "

"I can't get it out of my mind," said Hugh. "Clever of you to spot it was from *The Waste Land*."

"I was a big fan of Eliot at one time. Sat up with him to all hours in my poky student digs."

"Tom and Kate. Has a certain ring to it."

"Nitwit. Are you going to peel the potatoes or shall I?"

"Do you think it was a warning or threat of some sort?"

"I don't know but I do know we're going to starve at this rate."

"I wonder if Dorothy Russell is still alive."

"Does it matter?" said Kate.

It does to me, thought Hugh. I'm going to find out.

5

Telephone, Marjorie," shouted Anthony Buffo from a room upstairs at Toad Books.

The clink of spoon against mug could be heard from the small kitchen behind the panelled green door to the left at the back of the shop. Marjorie emerged with a cup of something steaming and lunged at the instrument on the desk. She picked up the handset but the ringing continued. "Charlie," she said. "You're a bad bird. Making me run like that." She put the cup down on a stained hexagonal mat.

"Who was it?" asked a disembodied voice.

"Only Charlie up to his tricks," said Marjorie, sitting down on her swivel chair and catching her breath. "That boy was in again, wanting to sell some books. He says some of them are old."

"Depends what they are. I'll look at them without commitment. But tell him no book club or ex-library."

*

" 'Pa pa pa pa pa Pa – pa – ge – na.' "

"Charlie's in fine voice this morning," said Hugh, clutching a plastic bottle of milk and some custard creams from the Mini-market next door. "I hope he doesn't know Papageno is a bird catcher."

"I don't think so," said Anthony. "We listened to a tape of *The Magic Flute* on the way to the book fair last Sunday. We had a pretty good day. Came back with a couple of empty boxes. What can I do you for?"

"That book I bought last week. The Henry James you said you got at the auction. I wondered if you could shed any more light on it."

"What sort of light? It's nothing special."

"Like where it came from. Originally."

"As I said before, it was in a box with a whole load of other stuff. I found the box under a pile of corrugated paper while I was having a clear-out upstairs the week before last. I must have bought them ages ago."

"What about the other books in the box?"

"Mostly theatre books and some film annuals."

"Do you still have them?"

"They're over there on the floor by Cinema, TV, Radio and Theatre. Have a look."

Hugh knelt down and set to. He worked his way through several books on the Old Vic and Sadlers Wells, miscellaneous works of theatre criticism, and biographies of actors well known and less well known. Every one had on the flyleaf the name Dorothy Johnson, neatly written in pencil in the top right-hand corner.

"Quite a haul," said Hugh. "The name is different

but the writing is exactly the same. Dorothy Russell must have got married at some stage and changed her name to Johnson."

"Who is Dorothy Russell?"

"The name inside *The Portrait of a Lady*. Dated 1944."

"In that case, someone probably got rid of these when she kicked the bucket. If she was that interested in theatre, and was still in the land of the living, she'd have hung on to them."

"How long ago did you pick them up?"

"I'm not sure. Why do you want to know?"

"It could help me find out who sold the books at the auction."

"Half a mo. I may still have the invoice from Gavel and Gavel. It was in the box with the books." Anthony ran upstairs two steps at a time. Charlie demolished a grape. Marjorie muttered something about the Queen of the Night.

"You're in luck," said Anthony, breathlessly, a few minutes later. "It was in the bin. I got the books three years ago. They were dirt cheap. Rather a crime really. You could always give Gavels a ring to see if they know anything. Try Derek Fox. He's been their books man for years. Take the invoice. Let me know how you get on." Anthony walked slowly back upstairs.

"Anthony's uncharacteristically cheerful," said Hugh.

"Can't think why," said Marjorie. "I don't know how he makes ends meet. And there are those trips to America. This place is practically deserted during the week. All very well for His Lordship. He's out and about

picking up even more books while I'm stuck here with only Charlie to talk to."

"He does book fairs and issues the occasional catalogue."

"And advertises in those magazines. Guess who has to take the parcels to the post office and get them all weighed. Even so."

"As you say, even so. Perhaps he has private means."

On his way back to number 40 Dogberry Road Hugh passed number 36, home of the artist Lucy Potter. Whenever he or Kate saw her, she said she was about to move to the wilds of Scotland to find herself and free her spirit – but she never actually did. The gentle crunch of gravel signalled the presence of the artist herself, on her way back from the wheelie bin to her dusky pink front door. Her short black hair was enlivened by an unexpected streak of magenta. Lucy greeted Hugh warmly and invited him in to look at her work in progress. He had bought a picture at her Christmas exhibition the previous year.

He followed Lucy up to her studio on the first floor. The corrugated paper taped to the floor, smooth side up, gave it a strangely spongy feel. A small collection of jam jars held an array of brushes, some bolt upright, others leaning lazily away from the perpendicular. Tubes and sticks of oil and acrylic paints were laid neatly in ice cream tubs. Knives, scissors, and other sharp implements occupied a series of cane baskets on a table at right angles to the front wall. The table formed an L with another table by one of the windows. This was

empty but for a pile of sketch books, an anglepoise lamp and a roll of kitchen towels. A vase of rust-coloured chrysanthemums sat on the top of a large plan chest.

"How are things going?" asked Hugh

"A bit up and down. I've got a commission from Quarrendens to do some paintings for their offices in the City. Otherwise, teaching my ladies is keeping the wolf from the door."

"Your picture has been much admired. Why don't you do some more like that?"

"I've moved on. People get used to a certain style but I can't keep doing the same old thing. I need to change, develop. Otherwise, I feel I'm stuck in a rut. I'm working on a series of small pictures loosely based on my sketches of street scenes in Turkey. The first few are on the wall behind you."

Hugh turned. "What lovely colours and shapes," he said. "Curious sense of suspense…menace, almost…in that one, as if something awful were about to happen. They should do well. I do hope so."

"I don't know," said Lucy forlornly. "It's all so unpredictable. I'm beginning to get fed up with London. Perhaps I really will move to Scotland this time."

"Don't do that. We'd miss you."

Kate was lying on the settee when Hugh got home. He said, "I'm a bit worried about Lucy. This hand-to-mouth existence is getting her down. I wish there was something we could do." Kate did not reply. She was fast asleep.