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Opening Extract from...

The House with Blue Shutters

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SUMMER HOLIDAYS

'What shall I give them for pudding?' asked Aisling.

'Pudding?' said Jonathan.

'I must say, it's absolutely typical of your brother to arrive on Thursday, with the bloody PG barbecue, so I thought either the chocolate parfait with chilled pistachio custard, or just the strawberry crème brûlée, which always comes out, but then I think we gave him that at Easter, didn't we, not that he'd remember so I don't suppose it matters really, but I was thinking with the PGs, we'll be late, so I thought just melon and the good *jambon* and then a chicken tarragon, so the pistachio would look a bit more like trying. Do you think this Claudia's a vegetarian? I could do a *gratin de courgettes* in case, but in this heat?'

'Why don't you do the strawberry thingy? I'll get a bottle of Monbazillac down.'

'Good idea, darling,' said Aisling.

The Harveys smiled at one another. They had been five

years at Murblanc, and variations on this conversation had passed between them several times a week. Aisling had a blue leather book from Smythson's of Bond Street, in which she wrote down the details of who had come and what she cooked, so as to be sure of not serving the same combinations of dishes and guests. The book had been a Christmas present from Jonathan and was always casually on display on the kitchen dresser. In a series of orange plastic-backed exercise books with ruled squares Aisling kept a similar record of the food she made, in July and August, for the paying guests. She lived in fear of a wandering boarder discovering one of these volumes on a prowl about her huge stone-flagged kitchen, since she had got into the habit of adding comments on the visitors in the margins. She flicked through now, to remind herself of what the Lawses had eaten nearly two weeks ago for their welcome dinner. The entry for last Friday week said 'Welcome dinner. Laws Family. Chilled sorrel soup with parmesan toasts. Slice foie gras with apple chutney. Guinea fowl. Cheese, salad. *Tarte aux framboises*. Mrs L fat. Perm. Children horrid.' Somehow, Aisling was unable to break this secret practice of judgement, which was inconvenient, really, as it necessitated her hiding the current book behind the cream china flour bin or in the larder with the cat food, and usually being unable to find it, causing her to wake sometimes in the early hours of the morning, beset by chimerae of repeated recipes.

The paying guests were a disappointment to Aisling. She had worked hard on La Maison Bleue, a square stone barn with powdery turquoise shutters at the dormer windows, which the Harveys had transformed during their first winter

into a four-bedroomed cottage with a terrace and a small walled garden. Murblanc lay at the bottom of the hill opposite the village of Castroux, beneath Aucordier's farm. The guesthouse, in turn, was below the main building, beyond the swimming pool. The Harveys and their own guests dined on the terrace above the house itself, overlooking the valley, while the PG perspective was brought up short by the square line of the chateau wood, yet the presence of the visitors, in the form of obese, shrieking toddlers or the television turned up loud to Sky Sports, was a permanently irritating reminder of what Aisling believed herself to have left behind, a mosquito-itch of small but significant failures. She had spent more than she ought on furnishing La Maison Bleue, determined that it should not display the usual tasteless collection of half-broken surplus furniture with which many English filled their shabby gîtes. Each room was painted a different soft-faded pastel, inspired, as Aisling informed potential renters in her brochure, by the famous frescoes in the church at Landi, the two bathrooms were large and modern, there was a dishwasher and a microwave and, against Aisling's aesthetic judgement, the 'digi-box', so beloved of ex-pats, which everyone pretended they installed merely to keep up with the cricket, but which gave access to all English television channels.

Aisling had been delighted when the inspector from *Charme Français* had pronounced La Maison Bleue fit for inclusion in the guide, particularly as the woman, a weary-seeming divorcee who lived in one of the grander parts of Provence, had arrived during a particularly raw weekend in March, when the countryside was stripped and ragged, and Aisling's *crema catalana* had, according to the blue leather book, come out stodgy and

too full of aniseed. Oliver had commented most unhelpfully that it tasted like cough mixture, and both the boys had refused to show off their French. Mrs Highland was indifferent to Aisling's food, claiming that she preferred a salad and a huge lump of cheese, and had grimly shone a torch under the beds and inspected the lavatory cisterns. She and Jonathan had had a long and apparently satisfactory discussion about drains, oblivious to Aisling's increasingly frantic attempts to divert her onto the delights of Castroux market or the view from the pool terrace. Nevertheless, Aisling felt that the credit for the entry, 'Stunning location, highly comfortable, large swimming pool. Sleeps ten', was hers, rather than the plumbing's, though it was a pity Mrs Highland hadn't had room to say anything about the frescoes.

Mrs Highland's lack of interest in Aisling's attempts at elegance was reflected in a similar obliviousness on the part of the readers of *Charme Français*. They came, numerously, to loll by the pool drinking beer and to stuff the fridge with cases of nasty white wine bought en route at Calais, they microwaved pizzas for their children, and watched the television, and altogether, they claimed, had a wonderfully relaxing holiday, but they did not visit the monastic museum at Landi, or the grottoes at Saux, or take any of the walks Aisling had so painstakingly marked in pink highlighter pen on a large-scale map. Occasionally, Aisling would meet one of the wives at the Saturday morning market in the village, surly sunburned husband trailing behind with an absurd rustic basket, and Aisling would smile gaily to conceal her cringing at their bulging shorts, and suggest that they try the goat's cheese that dear little Monsieur le Filastre made himself and brought

wrapped in fig leaves and brown string, or the walnut bread for which Castroux was known. Inevitably, the straw basket was filled with scented soaps attached to wooden paddles, impractically small bottles of flavoured olive oil, and tins of cassoulet. Aisling imagined them, these gastronomic souvenirs, lingering dusty and reproachful in the back of English kitchen cupboards until the obese toddlers grew up and threw them out when they shunted their parents to a nursing home.

Aisling herself did not wear shorts, or wilting patterned skirts, or foolish straw hats. Her hair was neatly and expensively shaped into a collar-bone-length bob once a month in Toulouse. In the mornings, particularly if she was busy with the garden or the ducks, she happily drove into Landi in jeans and a grubby sweater, with a fleece thrown over, when she was not working she wore linen tunics in white or navy, with fitted trousers, leather flats, and lipstick. Shorts, she felt, were one of the many elements in which the PGs were not quite up to the mark. She was perfectly aware of this snobbery, professing on occasion to hate herself for it, although she did not, admitting in franker moments that she was merely being honest, but it coloured her relationship with her visitors, rendering it at once bumptiously didactic and guiltily genial. Jonathan was better, repeating the same remarks about motorways and routes with the husbands at the welcome drink, cheerfully shifting suitcases and changing lightbulbs, even occasionally watching a match with a bottle of beer (the Harveys did not have Sky Sports), and otherwise apparently unaware of the boarders' existence. Aisling asked too many energetically pleasant questions of the wives, insisted that Richard and Oliver play in the pool with the children, and

caught herself agreeing with enthusiastic insincerity as to the lost and unmourned advantages of Sainsbury's and Tesco.

She had imagined, she thought, resentfully rubbing in a *pâte brisée* for the individual blueberry and ricotta tarts she would store in the big freezer in the barn until Thursday, that La Maison Bleue would attract different sorts of people. People who were artistic, who would spend long evenings chatting over wine about opera or the latest prize-winning novel, who would admire Aisling's cooking instead of poking at it suspiciously, who would speak French with her boys. There had been a winter rental, a gloomy young couple with a goatee and stringy dreadlocks who claimed, respectively, to be a painter, the goatee, and a writer, the dreadlocks, but they had stayed three weeks and barely emerged from the house except to drag car-loads of shopping from the Landi hypermarket indoors. The fumes of what Aisling was sure was hashish lingered about the doorway. Madame Lesprats had shown the sheets to Aisling, with great disgust, when they departed. The couple had apparently made love during the woman's period, and Aisling's carefully chosen old linens, bought especially at the annual *brocante* in Lille, were a mottled, liverish abstract of stains. Madame Lesprats had refused to have anything to do with what she referred to as *leur saloperies*, and Aisling had boiled the sheets herself and eventually cut them up, sadly, for dusters.

Oliver and Richard trailed into the kitchen, slapping wet footmarks on the limestone. 'Mrs Laws,' said Oliver, then hunched into a fit of unattractive sniggers. 'Mrs Laws,' took up Richard, then collapsed exaggeratedly onto his brother's back. 'Mrs Laws,' they howled, 'has grey pubes! We saw them,

Mum! Sticking out of her bikini! It's sick!'

They shuffled off. Aisling looked at the clock, went to the fridge, and poured herself a glass of white wine.

That evening, Claudia Wesson lay in the guest bathroom at Murblanc, rubbing bubbles off her new Tiffany engagement ring. Alex would so absolutely have gone to Tiffany. Claudia had accepted Alexander Harvey's proposal the day after she knew for certain that she was pregnant with Sébastien's child. She repeated this information to herself, in the third person, as she reached into the pocket of her discarded pyjamas and extracted a cigarette. Alex hated her smoking. She lay back in the water, but the sharp nicotine mingled foully with the steam and she lurched forward, flipped up the loo seat and vomited, discreetly flushing at the same time in case any of the Harveys should hear. Crouched, shuddering, her knees in the water and her breasts squashed against the taps, she rested her chin on the rim and thought that she would have to give up now, anyway. Alex tapped on the door, 'Aisling says supper in half an hour, darling.'

Claudia closed her eyes. She wanted the evening to be gone; she wanted darkness and cold air on her skin, to be alone and numbing herself with cognac. She had begged Alex to take her to France when she had received Sébastien's letter, a few days after she had fled from that terrible, humiliating, drunken scene in Paris. She had worked out cleanly in her mind the announcement of the pregnancy, had gone through her diary to fix precisely where she would muddle the dates. It was a mercy at least, she thought, that Alex was dark like Sébastien, with brown eyes, and a greater blessing that, exuberantly and

magnanimously in love, he had declared to her a few weeks before that he wouldn't care if she threw away her pills. She was quite safe.

There was just this evening to be got through. 'I will bear it,' she thought, constructing the words as though she were a character in a book, a penurious Victorian heroine about to hold fast against a drawing room of terrible aunts. There was just the dinner, and the announcement, to which she could respond demurely and blushingly to the questions about churches and dresses that would surely follow after the congratulations. He would understand when she told him, not feel it too much when she would explain that she preferred something simple and low-key, under the circumstances. There was a strain of meanness in Alex upon which she relied to console him for her projected rejection of a showy wedding. He tended to look too closely at bills, even for presents or restaurant meals, had a troubled laugh for the price of her face cream. This strain had offended her in the past, as when, on holiday in Greece, she had gone into rather forced raptures about a hotel room in Santorini, very bare and plain, with rich blue shutters and a view of the sea. She said that she had always dreamed of such a room, that it was inspiring in its austerity. 'Yes,' Alex had said, 'and it costs nothing.' Now, thought Claudia, this penny-pinching could be pushed into necessary practicality, into the tedious business of selling their two flats and organizing a mutual life. She had already employed it, persuading him into a month at his brother's house by showing that two extra weeks of unpaid leave would not be a great loss, since they would save the price of two weeks in a hotel if they stayed with Jonathan and Aisling for nothing.

Murblanc certainly was fetching, a long, low house, creamy-stoned as the name suggested, with a hump of third storey slouching on one side. Jonathan had taken her over it proudly as soon as they arrived, the kitchen, the dining room with the big beamed fireplace, his study (though, apart from a stack of computer games, Claudia thought, it looked unused), the drawing room on the first floor, the three bathrooms, five bedrooms, attic sitting room for Aisling, who had always wanted a room of her own, high up. Jonathan had gone on rather, about the bathrooms, particularly the lavatories which seemed to involve some personal triumph with a recalcitrant builder and the location of the *fosse*, and Claudia had thought about Sébastien because she thought of nothing else.

This bath was huge, standing alone in front of a large window with floor-length linen curtains, striped in primrose and ivory. The room gave on to the front of the house, where Claudia could see a track, turning lilac in the sunset, leading up to a line of slender, pointed trees surrounding a plain square farmhouse high on the hill. She must mention the lovely view to Aisling. She would be safe here, if she could not, not think of Sébastien. She touched her ring again, screwing it around her finger so that it wrenched at her skin, white and puffy from the cooling water. Lucky after all, really. She would be Mrs Harvey, and there was nothing better to hope for.