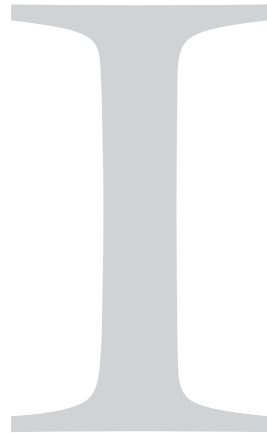


Vershinin: *“I often think, what if you were to begin life over again, knowing what you’re doing! If one life, which has already been lived, were only a rough sketch so to speak, and the second were the final copy! Then, I think every one of us would try before anything else not to repeat himself, anyway he would create a different setting for his life; would have a house like this with plenty of light and masses of flowers . . .”*

Anton Chekhov, *The Three Sisters*, act 1



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The Orange Tree
By Mildred Walker
University of Nebraska Press

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I

When Paulo came with Tiresa's morning coffee, he found her out on the balcony of their apartment. "Here you are! It's good to see you out, but don't stay too long."

"I feel well, Paulo. Really well. And I had to get out."

"This is a glorious October day. Enjoy." He kissed her and was off.

She would enjoy, and the whole Fall and Winter and Spring again, she told herself. To lie here on the chaise and listen to the traffic on the Avenue below and catch a glimpse of the tops of the little white sails on the Charles River was living again and blotted out the two weeks in the hospital. Her coffee might have been a vintage wine, it had such a flavor.

Now the sun had reached farther into the balcony. She spread her hands to it. The small oranges on the little tree that stood in the sun were golden in the sun. She had given the tree to Paolo when it was barely a foot high, the year they came back from Sicily, because Paolo missed the orange groves and the orange trees he had known as a boy in Sicily. The tree had grown at least four feet.

A flash of yellow came past and stopped next to their apartment. Tiresa pulled herself out of the chaise in time to see a young girl emerge from the yellow V-W with a bag of groceries. She was in jeans and a bright blue shirt, and her blond hair hung in a braid down her back. The girl's face was hidden by the

leafy top of celery protruding from the brown paper bag she carried, but she must be the young girl who had moved into the next apartment on their floor. “She and her husband are newly-weds,” Paulo had told her. “It will be fine to have young people next door,” Paulo had said. Paulo, lover of youth, was delighted, of course. “She’s quite lovely looking, you might enjoy her Tiresa. Fifer’s their name.”

“How is the husband?” she had asked. Paulo’s lips pursed. “Rather typical; young American business man, determined to be a success. We must have them over some time when you feel up to it.”

She decided to ask them over that evening. Maybe then Paulo would realize that she really was well.

“Bessie, I’m going to invite the new young couple next door for cocktails tonight,” she told the woman who came in at nine every morning to do for them.

Bessie placed Tiresa’s breakfast tray on the little table beside her. “If you’ll pardon my saying so, Mrs. Romano, I think you’re making a big mistake just because you feel a little better. We’ve done a lot of worrying about you.”

“But I’m feeling well again, Bessie. I’m going back to teaching next week. These are young people, so I think we ought to have a little heartier canapés than usual, something broiled . . .”

2

Ron was home. Olive could hear the television when she came to their door, but the minute she called to him, the door flew open.

“Hi, gorgeous.” Ron took her bag and kissed her.

“Hi, handsome.” It was their ritual greeting.

“Why didn’t you wait till I got home so you could take the car?”

“I wanted the walk. It isn’t that far. How long have you been home?”

“Just long enough to get a beer and think how empty the apartment is without you in it.”

“Now you know how it is all day.” But sometimes she liked having it to herself during the day, she thought. “You were sitting here in the dark practically, Ron. Why didn’t you turn on a light?”

“Didn’t think about it. I was watching the tube.” He settled back on the couch.

She switched on the lamp near the front window and moved it so the light would shine out on the balcony. But it wouldn’t reach eleven stories to the street; how secret it was living up here in their own world—how far away from everyone else.

“I met the old Roman as I came in tonight,” Ron told her at dinner. He said we must come in for a drink; they hadn’t asked us before because his wife’s been sick, but now she’s better.”

“I hope they do ask us.” It was weird not knowing people who lived right next door. At first she hadn’t minded; she and Ron were busy with their own lives, but the days were longish, and if she didn’t get a job . . . She had applied at the museum today. “Try again in the Spring,” the woman said. That was what they all said. And there was her roommate, Gumshoe, over in Paris, just walking in and landing a job on *Time*.

After dinner they moved over to the couch for their coffee. This, too, had become a ritual. They had been given six after-dinner coffee cups for a wedding present and Olive insisted on using them. “Takes four of ’em to get a decent cup of coffee you know,” Ron had grumbled, but he thought it was cute of Ollie to serve them, and the over-size mug at breakfast with “His” inscribed on it made up for the tiny cups at dinner.

Olive carried out the coffee tray and came back to sit in the circle of Ron’s arm. She kicked off her sandals and rested her bare feet on the coffee table and prepared to watch T-V with him, but her gaze wandered to the apartment. Nice; it really was. A unit of green modular couch faced the orange butterfly chair across from the coffee table. The black bean-bag chair she had had in college was great against the white carpet. But it was the painting of the purple iris that really gave the room panache. She and Ron had bought it on their wedding trip, at a show on the common in some Connecticut town. The canvas stood five feet tall and it had been all they could do to get it on top of the V-W. Ron hadn’t been sure about it at first.

“You do like the iris now, don’t you Ron?”

He had grown so used to it that he hardly saw it any more, but he was emphatic. “I think it’s terrific; sort of sexy,” he added on the spur of the moment.

“I don’t see that. What’s sexy about it?”

Ron shrugged. “Just gives me a feeling. I’m quick at the sexy feelings, haven’t you noticed?”

“Oh yes, I’ve noticed.” She gave him a quick grin and then

her face sobered. “But isn’t it funny, Ron, how many things we do feel alike about?”

“Mhmm. Like pizza and Bloody Marys and Liv Ullman.”

Olive bunted him with her shoulder. “I don’t mean just the things like that. You know what I mean.” She bunted him once more.

“Quit it!” He tightened his arm around her. “I knew the minute I met you on that blind date that you were what I wanted; that’s for sure.”

“I know what you mean. I felt the same way about you.”

“And when I think that we might have broken up. God, I was wiped out. I didn’t know what to think when I got your letter.” He had told her this before in almost the same words, but they fell freshly in her ears.

“I don’t know what got into me,” Olive admitted as she had before. “It scares me to think I might have lost you. But it’s good in a way, because now I know I couldn’t live without you.”

“Same here.” The lips that had been so apt to speak their lines found each other. The sudden jangle of the telephone seemed to come from some other planet. “Let it ring,” Ron murmured. “It’ll be your family or mine an’ they’ll call again.”

“I can’t ever let a phone ring. You don’t know what it might be.” Olive was already halfway to the bright yellow phone hanging on the wall of the kitchen.

“That was Mrs. Romano,” she announced when she came back, “and she did invite us in for a drink tomorrow evening. I liked her voice—it’s real throaty.”

“He looks like an interesting old duck,” Ron said.

She would wear her hair up tomorrow night, Olive planned as she washed the dishes. Mrs. Romano would be so middle-aged she didn’t want to seem too young. He was, too, of course, but there was something dashing about him. It was being Italian, probably. He had a flashing smile that began in his dark eyes, reached his mouth, and spread over his whole face. “You must be

our new neighbor, he had said that morning when she got into the elevator with him.

“Ron, do you realize that the Romanos will be the first married couple we’ve met since we’re married? And we’ve been married two and a half months and four days; I counted it up today. Ron!”

“I’ll be darned,” Ron said. His eyes were on the screen in front of him.

3

The Fifers came promptly at six.

“Welcome to Casa Romano,” Paulo said as he opened the door. “Come in. Mrs. Fifer, I want you to meet Mrs. Romano.”

“Oh, call me Olive, please, and my husband is Ronald.” That tiresome way the young had of calling everyone by his first name, Tiresa thought. But the girl did have a certain charm. She was still in jeans, but she wore an over-size purple and green blouse and a long gold chain and dangling earrings that gave her a festive air. All that shining blond hair was brushed to one side and held by a gold barrette. The young man was in a proper business suit and Tiresa could understand Paulo’s description of him.

“Dr. Romano told me about meeting you and your husband when I was in the hospital, but unfortunately I have been a little under the weather ever since I came home,” Tiresa explained.

“I kept hoping I’d meet you in the elevator,” the girl said.

As Ronald shook her hand in an over-hearty grip, he said, “Mrs. Romano, I should confess we’ve been calling you the mystery woman because we never saw you.”

How assured he was for one so young. “I’m really quite flattered to be the mystery woman,” she told him. “Now if I can just keep up the illusion! Yet all human beings are mysterious enough. Even husbands and wives are often a mystery to each other,” she couldn’t resist saying, but she doubted whether these two ever had that feeling.

“We’re delighted to have young people as our neighbors,” Paulo told them.

“You’re not afraid we’ll play Rock and Roll and dance all night?”

“We’ll risk it. The building is altogether too quiet; besides, it has excellent insulation. What may I give you to drink?”

“Ollie will have a little white wine; I’d like a bourbon,” Ronald said. “Can I help?” He followed Paulo out into the kitchen.

Why didn’t he let his wife speak for herself? Tiresa wondered.

When Paulo came back, he said, “I want to propose a toast to *la Sposina* and her husband. That’s the Sicilian word for little bride,” he explained. “How long have you two been married?”

“Over two months,” Olive said.

Paulo lifted his glass to them. “Long life and joy to you both.”

“And may your marriage remain an ever-recurring miracle to you each,” Tiresa added, and then wondered if she and Paulo didn’t seem a little old-fashioned to them. “You must have married right out of college,” she added hurriedly. Annoying the way the young could make you feel so self-conscious.

“Yes, I just graduated in June. Ronnie graduated the year before.”

“Ollie was a brain in college and she had all these grand ideas,” Ronald said. “She wanted to do graduate work, and then she wanted to go off to Paris with her roommate and get a job. But I persuaded her that I needed her more than Paris did.” He beamed as though it had been a proud achievement.

“Paris is very important,” Tiresa said.

“Particularly when you’re in your twenties,” Paulo added. “If it’s any help, Olive, when we first looked at it, this apartment building made me think of apartments in Paris.

“Paulo, that’s absurd. This building is enormous, is not made of gray stone that catches a magic light, and these balconies have steel netting around them instead of lovely iron filigree.”

“But the feeling, Tiresa! The feeling is quite like Paris.”

“Avenue Foch, I suppose. Without the chestnut trees, of course!”

He shrugged. “But even the Avenue Foch does not face the Charles River and the Boston skyline. The view from our balconies is more brilliant.”

It was irrelevant, but she wanted to show that little girl that you could disagree with your husband now and then, so she said, “But not as brilliant as the view of Mount Etna and the Tyrrhenian Sea from Casa Marguerita’s balcony.”

“Well no, but that is Sicily; no view can top that, and that is a view that we carry in our hearts always.” He turned back to the Fifers. “Tiresa is talking about a villa in Sicily where we once lived. Your name is Olive; I like that.”

“I don’t. Everyone always says Popeye’s’ girl-friend,” Olive said.

“But I’m not acquainted with Popeye or his girl-friend. The name of Olive makes me think of Sicily and the olive groves.”

“We keep that little orange tree over there by the balcony to remind us of the trees in Sicily,” Tiresa explained. “You see, Sicily is Paulo’s birthplace and also his heart’s home.”

“Have you folks lived in this apartment building long?” Ron asked with an air of getting back to sensible matters.

“Twelve years,” Paulo said. “How did you happen to hear of it?”

“A guy—a man at our office told me about it. I’m with Twentieth Century Insurance.” Ron’s voice gave weight to the connection. He would be ponderous in middle age, Tiresa decided.

“Ah, you’re an insurance man. I had rather guessed you were in a bank,” Paulo said.

Ronald had taken a second drink and was telling Paulo about his work. “I guess Twentieth Century selects a new man very carefully, and I didn’t think I’d get the job, but luck was with me . . .” Tiresa was amused by his pseudo modesty but she wanted them to go now. Good, the girl was standing up.

“Well, we have had your young couple,” Tiresa said at dinner.

“Yes. Did you find them interesting?”

“She’s a charming girl. I don’t see her as a brain exactly, but she had the good sense to interrupt her husband’s expansive talk about his job. I thought he might go on and on.”

“They’re both very young, of course, although he tells me he’s twenty-four. There’s a quality I like about her. I can’t define it. What would you say it is, Tiresa?”

“Youth.”

“Yes, but it is more than that; it’s a kind of eagerness—a liveliness even when she’s quiet. He’s more a type, as I told you.”

“Oh, Paulo, you’re so completely predictable you give me a sense of stability. She’s a type too: the American College girl. Less sophisticated than some, but refreshingly.”

“She’s very natural. She hadn’t gotten dressed up to come, and I liked the way her hair framed her face so loosely and was caught up to one side.” He was smiling with pleasure as he pictured her.

“You and Ben Johnson!”

*Give me a look, give me a face
That makes simplicity a grace;
Robes loosely flowing, hair as free
Such sweet neglect more taketh me
Than all th’ adulteries of art*

she quoted at him.

“Exactly. But she has a certain style, too; that purple and green business she wore.”

“I could have done without the jeans.”

“All young girls wear jeans.”

“You’ve observed?”

Tiresa blew out the candles and went over to sit by the fire, watching him fix the coffee. How he enjoyed these little ceremonies of his. He poured some of the coffee essence he made himself into the heated copper pot he had brought from Sicily, and he added the boiling water, measuring it with his eyes, and he

brought her a cup. His making the coffee after dinner disoriented guests, but then so did her carving the entrée. “Those old Romanos,” they probably said, “of course, they’re Italian.”

“What a mistake for her not to go to Paris. She married too young,” Paulo said.

“Perhaps, but Paulo, let’s not get too interested in these young people. They seemed pleased to come tonight, but once they meet some people their own age, they may not have time for older people”

Paulo didn’t answer. His face that was always so transparent to her darkened at any reminder of their age, but the next instant brightened. “Curious that her name is Olive, isn’t it? It hardly fits her; she’s too blond and fair for that name.”

Suddenly, Tiresa was tired. They had been living so quietly that even having these children over was exhausting. She could feel her heart skipping. “I think I’ll go on to bed and read a little,” she said.

“Are you not feeling well tonight, Tiresa?” His voice was always a trifle hostile when he was worried.

“I’m feeling *very* well, but the idea of stretching out appeals to me.” She could feel Paulo watching her as she went across the room, and moved more briskly than she wanted.

In their room the light by the bed was on, the bed opened, and her gown and negligee laid out. It was a rite Paulo seldom forgot. He liked selecting exquisite gowns for her, and the monogrammed sheets they slept in. Little luxuries were important to Paulo; a proof, she thought, that he would never again live in the poverty of his first years in America.

She sometimes wished for his sake that she were more slender and lithe lying in those sheets, but she consoled herself with her private idea that Italian men, Sicilian especially, liked slightly maternal figures—or was it a sign of the children they had borne them? She began undressing to break her train of thought.