

THE PROJECTIONIST

A cruel stroke of fate had caused Orvis Portowitz to be stooped, short of stature, and made to walk as if harnessed to some invisible plow. He was also relentlessly homely, desperately poor, unhappily single, and therefore a lonely man. In contrast to his runt's torso, however, Orvis had the strength of two; a fact learned by his discomfited classmates when bullying him in the schoolyards of south-side Chicago. Had he not been possessed of a naturally sweet disposition, Orvis would have been a man to be feared. He had extraordinarily long arms, very large hands and feet, and was similarly endowed with a sexual engine of formidable size. Had the women who long snubbed Orvis for his appearance known of this amazing apparatus, things might have been different for him as well as for themselves. Thus it was, that while most women were unfailingly courteous whenever meeting chanced, such as when shopping at Sabatino's Fresh Fruits and Vegetables, they otherwise routinely avoided Orvis. He understood the rejection well enough every time he caught his reflection in the mirror, but he never understood the cruelty of children who called him "Parrot Nose" and sometimes chased him with stones.

Orvis held the position of projectionist at the Clover Hills Orpheum. The job paid poorly, even by the post-war standards of Clover Hills, Minnesota, but with so many men unemployed, he felt lucky to have it. It had been his job ever since almost anyone could remember, and for many of the young people of Clover Hills, that meant for all their

lives. The projection room was Orvis's stage, and he its lone performer. His every move was as precise as that of any Kabuki actor, with no wasted motion or frivolity. Should the film break, he was ready to splice it instantly, although he was never quick enough to quell the catcalls when they came. His task after the movie was over and the theater gone dark was no less important. Orvis had to take down the film cast, extinguish the bulb, clean the projector and then tend to the toilets. And sometimes, because he had no one to share his lonely life with, Orvis slept there, alone with his dreams of the voluptuous succubus, the widow Sabatino, who was the proprietor of Sabatino's Fresh Fruits and Vegetables.

In the widow Sabatino, Orvis saw grace and hope. Where others saw a Sicilian hag, Orvis saw honesty and warmth. Where others saw age, he saw a woman still in the fructuous, autumnal bloom of life, needing only to be plucked and tasted like a dew-dappled plum fresh from the tree. Where others saw indifference, Orvis saw a difference, and it sustained him. With the widow Sabatino, his life's carefully structured priorities had come under attack, and the bland pace of his life made less predictable than before. Upon every encounter, Orvis went out of his way to be solicitous, to ask how she felt on the unpleasant damp days when he guessed her arthritis bothered her, and he hoped the interest he showed in her was returned in kind. That the widow Sabatino was from the old country would undoubtedly hold her to old customs, thus requiring for Orvis a more traditional and formal approach if he were to make his intentions known. In fact, Orvis considered himself more old country than not, having been born in 1893 and raised among newly-landed immigrants in Chicago.

The first opportunity for Orvis to make his intentions more overtly known came following a thunderstorm that had savaged Clover Hills overnight. Scattered rain squalls continued to sweep through the city, clearing the streets of only those few hardy individuals needing to be out. Among them was Orvis, who delighted in rough weather. He was taking his daily early-morning walk from the home of a friend where he had taken a single room with kitchen privileges, to the widow Sabatino's shop to select a table-ready melon for his breakfast. As was his custom when weather threatened, Orvis carried an umbrella black as a raven's breast.

Every morning, except in winter – and sometimes even then, the widow Sabatino set out a modest display of fresh fruits and vegetables in wooden crates and bushel baskets on the sidewalk in front of her shop. As regular as the courthouse clock chiming the hour, her first customer was always the silently-admiring Orvis. Today's ritual was no different from any other. After furling the umbrella and tucking it under his arm, Orvis took the most likely looking Crenshaw from its basket and held it in his large hands. As if taking a sacrament, he brought the melon to his great beak of a nose, closed his eyes, and thumped it with a calloused knuckle as a test for ripeness. With a deep snuffle, he drew in the languid, almost sexual aroma emanating from beneath its deeply-ridged and buttercup-yellow rind, as if savoring in advance the sun-ripened flavor of its dense flesh on his tongue.

With a satisfied smile, Orvis carried the melon into the shop, where he found the widow Sabatino standing nearly hidden behind an ancient cash register as big as a safe. A roll of butcher's paper on a spindle rested on the countertop, and a ball of twine hung from an overhead hook. Orderly rows of shelves along the back wall held boxes of

spaghetti noodles, rice, seasonings and various other goods the widow sold from her shop. The “other” included fresh homemade Italian bread she somehow found time to bake in her upstairs apartment, where she lived with her only companion, a small bright-eyed dog of uncertain origin named Caesar.

Orvis nodded and smilingly bade the widow Sabatino a good day. He was quickly rewarded with an open, full-lipped smile that transcended the usual merchant-customer relationship. The smile lifted the widow’s cheeks, exposing teeth as white as pearl buttons under a faint moustache that Orvis had begun to find wildly erotic. Whether out of sympathy, or whether out of some psychosexual attraction to his unusual appearance, Orvis had come to believe the woman also found *him* to be physically desirable. Perhaps it had not come overnight, but over time, while watching him caress her eggplants, casabas, pears, oranges and apples. In particular, Orvis admired her Crenshaw melons. Only the day before, the two shared a melon right there in the shop.

They had held the melon between them on fingertips and locking eyes over the top of the golden globe. Their lips were separated only by the melon’s girth, until at last slicing the fruit in half with a butcher’s knife and spilling its seedy roe on the countertop. As if co-conspirators, they spooned the still-warm and lightly-salted flesh into their mouths with silver spoons embossed with symbols of the 1939 Worlds Fair. Orvis thought the spoon-symbols resembled the sexual apparatus of a man and woman, but he made no mention of it less she think him uncouth and base.

“*Buona mattina,*” the widow said upon greeting Orvis. “How are you on this cold and dismal wet day?”

“Good morning to you also,” Orvis replied. The odd idea flashed through his head, that perhaps he should have brought a small gift for the widow. Perhaps freshly-cut garden flowers from the local nursery, but he feared the gesture might be overly bold and premature. It also struck Orvis that he had no idea what the widow’s first name was. Fortunately, it was she herself who made the first approach.

“Mr. Portowitz,” she began. “It is a quiet and dismal morning for those of us who are alone in the world. If you have no pressing business in the city, and are so disposed as to accept a bold offer from a simple woman, a pot of coffee is still on the heat in my kitchen. Also, only this morning I have baked a fresh batch of Italian fig cookies. Would you care to join me in this simple pleasure?”

Orvis could scarce believe his ears, and thought he felt the room sway under his feet. The earthy smell of ripe fruits and vegetables in their bins and baskets suffused within his hawk-beak nose caused him to nearly swoon. “Oh my yes,” Orvis stammered. “Tha...that would be *most* welcome.”

“And for me as well,” the widow replied. After reversing the open sign in the front window, she led the way upstairs to her second story apartment dwelling. There, the coffee was indeed still hot, and the fig cookies awaited on a floral-print china platter placed atop an unfinished pine table of rustic design and fabrication.

“How cozy,” Orvis said, simply. He was astonished to behold the widow’s modest quarters, and the obvious simplicity of her life. There was nothing of a modern nature to suggest it was 1948, instead of 1848. The oven was of a time when food was cooked over heat provided by burning faggots – and when coal-oil lamps and candles

were used for light. So far as Orvis could tell, the only concession to contemporary life was the flush toilet hidden behind a partly-ajar bathroom door.

Yet despite the basic nature of the widow's surroundings, the place offered an extraordinarily comfortable refuge. The chairs were deep and accommodating, as was an inviting leather couch located beneath three stained glass cathedral windows that overlooked the rain-swept street below. An ornately-framed studio photograph in sepia hanging on a far wall depicted a carefully posed gathering of what Orvis presumed to be the widow's Sicilian ancestors, all of whom seemed to be assessing his intentions. A scowling mustachioed man who resembled the widow held a shotgun.

Orvis dropped his gaze to a side table. Upon its highly-waxed surface rested the gold-framed portrait of a smiling young man in a military uniform he didn't recognize as being American. The officer wore a tight, high-collared jacket, a floppy-billed cap and jodhpurs. Although the field upon which the officer stood was covered in mud, his knee-high boots shone as if he were on parade. The young officer stood proudly in front of an open cockpit biplane of World War One vintage – an aircraft so fragile looking with its wires and struts, that Orvis marveled at the courageous men who flew them.

“Who is the man in the photo?” Orvis asked.

The widow Sabatino came to stand next to Orvis. “That is my late husband, Paolo. He was killed over the Italian-Austrian front in nineteen sixteen, flying the very machine you see behind him. A Balilla, I shall never forget the name.”

“I am deeply sorry,” Orvis mumbled.

“Please, do not be,” the widow replied softly.

“Still, I am,” Orvis apologized.

The widow adjusted the picture with an almost imperceptible nudge of her finger. “He was twenty-three, and I only nineteen. We had been married but ten weeks. The war stole my beloved from me before we could make a family together, to become acquainted with each other, to even understand our tastes.”

“Such a sad story,” Orvis said.

The widow nodded, as if to accept Orvis’ observation. “I can still count the kisses we shared, as well as the times we made love, from the first to the last. Agh! But enough about me! Please, sit, sit, sit!”

Orvis accepted the invitation and took a comfortable chair near the wood-burning stove where the heat might take the chill away from the storm that even now was gaining in intensity and pelting the windows with hail. He closed his eyes, now comfortably warm and content to listen while the storm raged outside. His reverie was broken when the widow appeared at his side with six fig cookies on a plate and a steaming mug of coffee sweetened at his request.

“Thank you,” Orvis said as he balanced the plate on his knees. The storm fell momentarily still – a sudden absence of sound so profound he felt as though he would suffocate under its crushing weight. The world he so recently stepped out of seemed to no longer exist. In the gloom he could scarcely make out the photograph of the doomed aviator Paolo smiling in front of his airship. Orvis set aside his cookie plate and coffee mug and listened with closed eyes as the widow loaded fresh kindling into her kitchen stove. The sound of pine knots snapping against the distant sweep of the storm comforted him. His large ears twitched at the gentle sound of the widow’s padded step

and the rustle of her long black peasant's dress, and then her hands closing over his shoulders, warm, strong, yet extremely feminine in an indefinable way.

"May I call you Orvis?" the question came next to his ear on a puff of exhaled air.

"Please...yes, do." Orvis' heart hammered in his ears like Thor's own sledge on heaven's anvil.

"I am Sophia." The widow's voice came as a whisper, yet husky, with a catch in it. "Forgive me, but may I ask how old you are?"

Orvis closed his eyes more tightly than before – so tight tears were squeezed from them, and they ran down his cheeks. "Fifty-five," he managed to croak.

"You are the same age as my Paolo would have been had he survived the horrors of that war."

Orvis felt the widow's arms encircling him – and then the astonishing weight of her breasts as she pressed them against his head.

"Today, you shall become my Paolo," Sophia said, and bent to press her lips against Orvis' tear-streaked cheek.

The prickle of Sophia's moustache caused Orvis to stiffen where he least expected it, but he took from his arousal not embarrassment, but encouragement. When she took his hands in hers he allowed himself to be pulled to his feet and led to her bedroom, where a hand-dipped wax candle guttered in its copper holder on the nightstand. He watched with caged breath while she carefully removed her dress as if it were a great black husk before hanging it in an ornately-carved and mirrored walnut wardrobe. The dress was followed by an undergarment of white cotton, which also was hung in the

wardrobe. The flickering candle cast pantomime shadows across the roughly-plastered wall behind the bed, over which hung Christ on His cross.

To Orvis, Sophia appeared nothing less than a goddess carved from Camembert – ripe, fragrant, and yet to be tasted. Still, his passion was tempered with anxiety. He had never attempted sex before, never really been given the opportunity, although the idea had obsessed him from puberty. He was a virgin, untested save for his own hand, untried as to the nature and style of sex, and profoundly ignorant as to the needs and ways of women. Now he found himself fully aroused. After clumsily undressing and leaving his trousers inside out. Orvis tenderly nuzzled his face between Sophia’s heaving breasts before easing her onto her back and entering her.

“Tell me if I am hurting you,” he asked, his voice a ragged whisper.

“It is fine, to go further,” Sophia gasped.

Orvis had no idea what he was doing. His limited knowledge of female anatomy came from stolen glances of naked women in the nudist magazine, *Sunshine & Health*. When he heard Sophia chuckle, he feared he’d done something wrong. “What is it?” he croaked. Was he even in the right orifice?

“Nothing,” Sophia replied. “Please, to continue.” Her chuckle turned to a low, drawn-out moan.

Orvis obeyed, huffing and puffing like a single-stroke steam engine, until bringing them both to a groaning, heart-thumping climax that was accompanied by the dog Caesar howling for attention from the doorway. Even after they had finished and were comfortably nestled under the bedcovers, Orvis remained unconvinced and was certain he had committed some shameful blunder.

“What did I do to cause such amusement?” he asked at last.

“It was nothing,” Sophia replied, unable to stifle a giggle.

Orvis was afraid of breaking the mood. “Perhaps the dog?” he added hopefully.

“No, not Caesar,” Sophia said, laughing behind her plump hand.

“Then you make fun of my clumsy attempt to satisfy you.”

“I am completely satisfied,” Sophia replied with a broad smile.

Orvis was dubious. “There is something. Tell me now, or I shall never be able to face any woman again, let alone you.”

“Very well, Orvis. You remind me of someone very dear.”

Orvis felt a pang of jealousy. “There is another, perhaps a local man?”

Sophia laughed again and shook her head. “It was my beloved Paolo,” she replied.

“He was known as ‘*Il Salame*.’”