

The Typewriter

The afternoon of her sixteenth birthday—June 3, 1958— was overcast and humid, with the smell of rain on the breeze. Josephine left Woodrow Wilson High School ten minutes late after stopping to talk to her English teacher about her paper on *The Great Gatsby*. She started home, walking six blocks out of her way to pass the house of Anderson Greene, who had recently moved to the neighborhood. A woman—his mother?—sat on the step of the neat twin, one of several on the block recently bought by colored families. Smiling, she lifted a hand toward Jo, who waved back and, suddenly nervous, hurried by. She was nearly twenty minutes late when she stepped onto the raised front patio of her family’s home on Washington Lane.

The Capoletti lived in a small, square brick house on a street of small, square brick houses in a southern Philadelphia suburb—“Colonials,” the models were called, though no one could really say why. These sturdy, unimaginative boxes had welcomed the white working class as they streamed steadily out of the city in the years after World War II. The neighbors were decent, hardworking, quietly prosperous. Slowly but surely rising.

The Capoletti house was differentiated not by any architectural detail, but by an elaborate circular garden in the front yard that boasted stunning year-round blooms; even in winter, something lovely reached for the sky. With an almost magical green thumb, Jo’s father Vittorio coaxed fruit trees along trellises and pruned rosebushes to perfection. Now the rhododendrons and azaleas were just giving way to fluffy pink and blue hydrangeas, and the apple trees were in

flower. On the front patio, succulents poked through holes in terra cotta pots and the papery white leaves of money plants rattled gently in the breeze, a bit of Italy on a bland American street.

The heavy front door was locked, as it always was when her mother, Anna, was home alone. Jo rang the doorbell, steeling herself for questions.

“You’re late!” Anna held the door open for Jo and then closed and re-locked it behind them. In her slippers and flowered housecoat, she stood more than a full head below her daughter. “What happened, hon?”

The living room drapes were drawn tight and the warm air was heavy with mouthwatering aromas; Jo could smell fried peppers and buttery vanilla. The familiar voices of Anna’s favorite soap opera rumbled on unattended. Its absorbing plot line—twin sisters, one in a coma—had been abandoned when Jo failed to arrive on time.

“I thought you were hurt, God forbid, or sick! And it’s starting to rain!” exclaimed Anna. Then she remembered, and wrapped her plump arms tightly around her daughter just below Jo’s armpits, aiming a kiss up at her cheek. “Happy Birthday, honey! My Josephine! Sweet sixteen!”

Anna came from generations of women who worried. She cradled her worry like an old leather pocketbook, tucked tight beneath her arm and pressed to her heart. Her worry was the reason Josephine didn’t have a bike, had never been sledding, and had a curfew of nine o’clock unless

she was babysitting. Anna's fierce worry for her daughters flavored the air of the little house with doom and seasoned it with nerves. To Jo it seemed that her mother's life's work was waiting: for the other shoe to drop, for the phone to ring, for a car to pull up. Waiting to find out someone was safe, thank God. The world was a treacherous place that only the vigilant survived.

Josephine knew how fiercely and deeply her mother loved her. Because of—and in spite of—this desperate love, she had not only survived, but thrived.

And today was the first day of her real life, Josephine told herself as she climbed the carpeted stairs to her room. Her life as a writer. Because today, for her birthday, she was getting a typewriter.

Typewriter in the trunk of the Dodge Dart, Vittorio drove home, rain lashing his windshield, the pain in his shoulder as fierce as his anger. In his mind he replayed a conversation with the day's last client: "It's not right, and you will fix it!" said the woman, a *medigan* from one of the wealthy Main Line towns. It was a tricky job with a complicated pattern, and there wasn't an upholsterer in town who could do it better. But the customer was always right. He bit his tongue, promised to redo. He was a man of few words, but inside he had seethed and cursed in two languages.

And then there was his daughter, Josephine, who turned sixteen today. She had always been such a good girl, but lately she had gotten ideas. She wanted things for her future, and she would

leave, he knew she would. He had worked so hard to give her everything...her own room, pretty dresses, new shoes. In a drawer in the living room he kept special Italian chocolates, her favorite, to share with her in the evenings. Just the two of them, watching *Lawrence Welk* and *Dragnet* after Anna went upstairs to bed.

But it wasn't enough. Now Josephine was talking about college, like her friends from the big stone houses, friends with cars and second homes down the shore. She wanted to be a writer, she said. *Merda!* A useless profession, and for a girl? An unmarried girl should be home, with her parents.

He turned onto Washington Lane and passed a colored woman hurrying through the rain, pushing a child in a coach. She was the mother of that boy Josephine knew. He had seen the son talking to Jo when he picked her up from the library last week. A family like that, right here in his own neighborhood! Vittorio made a fist, pounded the steering wheel and cursed again. After all he'd worked for, the neighborhood was changing. And on top of it all, his daughter wanted a goddamn typewriter.

* * *

The typewriter would sit on Jo's dark walnut desk (polished just today, with a burst of Pledge and Anna's diligence) next to a bookshelf crammed with classics, bestsellers and magazines. In

this private nook, Jo could finally pound out all the things she had to say. Like Virginia Woolf, she had a room of her own, and in just a few hours, that room would have a typewriter!

She changed out of her school clothes and lay across her bed. Her thoughts turned, as they often did, to Anderson Greene.

Anderson had graduated a year ago and taken a job as a stock boy at the Sav-a-lot on Chester Pike. He was working hard to save for community college. In high school he was a star athlete, and in the talent show he once played jazz guitar, looking so handsome that Jo was star-struck for weeks. Last week, she had seen him sitting in back of the Sav-a-lot, on his break, reading *Brave New World*, which she had also read, and loved. She saw this as a sign.

When Josephine stopped at the Sav-a-lot after school, Anderson made a point of coming over to say hello. She could tell by the way he looked at her that he liked her, and she liked looking back, at his full lips and smooth brown skin. Last time they met, he asked where she lived, although she thought he already knew—she had seen him walk by her house. His family was moving a few streets away, he said. Maybe he would see her in the neighborhood.

But Josephine knew that they could never really be friends—let alone more. Vittorio made that clear when he spoke about the colored neighbors, his jaw clenched. Jo knew that as an immigrant with little schooling, Vittorio felt like an outsider, close to the bottom of the barrel. He needed someone to stand on in there, and that someone was colored people. She knew he was wrong, and she knew he would not change.

Still, she could *think* about Anderson as much as she wanted...his smooth, strong face, his soft brown eyes. It was a sweet place to be while she waited for her typewriter.

A typewriter was a strange gift for a girl, Anna thought as she iced Jo's birthday cake with swirls of pink buttercream. But if that was what Jo wanted, that is what she would have.

When she was busy in the kitchen like this, Anna didn't have time to worry. The steady comforts of food and laundry reminded her of her own mother, loving and calm. Anna's father had been a bitter man, prone to yelling and hitting, and when Vittorio proposed when Anna was fifteen, she didn't have to think it over. He was her way out. With two dresses and a pair of shoes, she moved with him to a tiny apartment in South Philly, where, every night, she washed out her underwear in the bathroom sink and scrubbed the kitchen floor. Within months, she was pregnant with her oldest, Eleanor.

Vittorio was not perfect, this she knew. He came from Italy as a child of four, on a slow boat with strangers—his parents had gone on ahead. Was that what made him so distrustful, those long weeks of abandonment? He spoke little, was often angry. There were times when he frightened her. Only Josephine knew how to make him smile—she was *la mela del suo occhio*, the apple of his eye.

Vittorio had worked tirelessly, first at the Navy Yard, later as an apprentice upholsterer, putting money away to open his own shop. And then he had bought her this house. A brand new house in the suburbs! A wall of mirrors in the living room, the latest appliances in the kitchen, a smooth linoleum floor. No more of the city for her, no stinking market, no streets lined with trash, no unbearably hot summer nights. Here she had air conditioning and a television and a Hoover vacuum, a weekly allowance for groceries. And Vittorio's garden! Like something in a magazine, the envy of the neighborhood.

Anna was a respectable woman, with the house to prove it. She looked outside at the rain, then at the clock. Not late enough to start worrying. Vittorio was probably still picking up the typewriter.

The typewriter was wrapped clumsily with newspaper and tied with kitchen string. Josephine was already seated at the table when her father came in from the garage and placed it on the counter. To Anna he handed a bouquet of wet apple blossoms, just picked from his garden.

Josephine felt a flush of anticipation and kissed his cheek, still damp from the rain. Without responding, he began to fill his plate from the steaming dishes Anna was arranging in front of him. With his family, he recited, "Bless-us-oh-Lord-and-these-thy-gifts-which-we-are-about-to-receive-from-thy-bounty-through-Christ-our-Lord-Amen," and began to inhale large forkfuls of macaroni and chicken. He remained silent while Anna and Josephine talked about the evening's plans: Eleanor and her husband would be joining them for dessert.

“It’s delicious, Momma! Thank you!” After two helpings of everything, the spiced velvet of Anna’s gravy still warm on her tongue, Josephine helped her mother clear the table while Vittorio mopped up the last of his dinner with a heel of bread. The kitchen tidy, Anna placed pretty pink birthday cake in the middle of the table, and mother and daughter sat back down and waited.

After a moment, Anna said, “And how about our daughter’s birthday gift! Sixteen!” And Vittorio, with a strange smile, got up, lifted the bulky package and set it down in front of Jo.

Josephine was so excited that she didn’t think it odd that the typewriter wasn’t in a box. After all, the shiny display model in Weinberg’s department store wasn’t in a box. As she pulled the paper away, she wondered what color hers would be. Silver? Black? Or white?

But what was inside the paper wasn’t shiny. It was dull and scratched, a dilapidated model thirty or forty years old. Its sides were dented, its keys rusty and bent. Some letters were missing altogether, their empty metal spikes standing angrily at attention.

Josephine stared at the ugly, broken thing her father had wrapped up for her sixteenth birthday. Anna stared too. Finally Josephine forced her lips to move.

“Daddy! What is this? Is this a joke?” Josephine looked around the kitchen for another package, but there was none. Her heart galloped; her face grew hot with confusion.

Anna, her own face frozen, did not speak. The kitchen clock ticked and the exhaust fan hummed.

At last Vittorio looked up with a guttural laugh.

“You want a typewriter, eh? You want it for college? To be a writer?”

He laughed again, more like a bark.

“There, there’s your typewriter. See how far you get.” He shoved back his chair and left the room.

Josephine’s eyes filled and re-filled with tears that ran silently down her cheeks. Anna went to her daughter’s side and opened her mouth to speak. But then the doorbell rang.

From the front of the house came the voice of Anderson Greene, young and heartbreakingly polite. “Is Josephine home? I was hoping to wish her a happy birthday.”

Her father’s voice, sharp and loud: “She’s not home! Not for you!” The door was slammed with frightening force, and in the silence that followed, the air seemed to shudder with a life of its own.

Josephine stood. She pushed in her chair. She left the kitchen and climbed the stairs without a glance at her father. She closed and locked her door. She sat at her empty desk, put her hot, heavy head in her hands, and sobbed.

She did not answer Anna's repeated knock, and would not come back downstairs even when her sister arrived. To her mother's deep sadness, Jo never tasted her sixteenth birthday cake.

They never spoke of the typewriter again. Late on the evening of Jo's birthday, Anna wrapped it in a trash bag and buried it deep in the aluminum can on the side of the house, covering it with the day's garbage. She threw Vittorio's bouquet of garden flowers on top, pushed the lid tightly down over the whole mess, and, as was her way, she left it there.

As was his way, Vittorio offered no explanation, no apology. If he regretted losing the love of his favorite daughter—for after that night, and for the rest of his life, she was different—he did not, or could not, say.

His prediction came true: by her seventeenth birthday, Jo was indeed gone, though not to college. She graduated early from high school, top of her class, and moved in with a friend. She took a job in a typing pool, where a shiny silver typewriter stood on her desk.

On her lunch hour, after work, in every spare moment, she wrote. She wrote about care and cruelty, pride and prejudice, roots and redemption. She wrote about family.

The End