

1909 – The light of the house opposite (Il lume dell'altra casa)

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En Français – [La lumière d'en face](#)

Em Portugues – [A luz da outra casa](#)



Salvador Dalí (1904-1989) The voyeur, 1921

The light of the house opposite

It happened one evening, one Sunday, when he had just come in

from a long walk.

Tullio Buti had taken that bedroom two months or so earlier. The landlady, Mrs Nini, a charming old-fashioned little old lady, and her daughter, now a withered old maid, never saw him. He used to go out early each morning, and come home late in the evening. They knew he worked in a department of the Ministry that deals with Justice and Appeals, and that he was a lawyer. But nothing more.

The little bedroom, rather narrow and plainly furnished, showed no trace of his living in it. It seemed as if, intentionally deliberately, he wanted to remain a stranger, as in a hotel room. It is true he had arranged his underclothes in the chest of drawers, and hung up a suit or two in the cupboard. Apart from that, on the walls, on the other pieces of furniture, not a single thing. Not a coat-hanger, not a book, nor a photograph. Never a torn-up envelope left on the writing-table. Never an under-garment thrown down on a chair, a collar or tie, to show that he considered himself at home there.

The Ninis, mother and daughter, were afraid he would not stay. They had had such difficulty in letting that little bedroom. Several people had been to see it. Nobody had wanted to take it.

He had had no childhood. He had never been young. The savage scenes he had witnessed in his home from his tenderest years up, on account of the brutality and fierce tyranny of his father, had extinguished in him every spark of life.

His mother had died young of the atrociously cruel treatment meted out by her husband, and the family had broken up. One sister had gone into a convent, one brother had gone off to America. He too had run away from home, and after a roving life of unheard-of hardships had succeeded in raising himself to that position in the world.

Now he no longer suffered. He looked as if he were suffering; but even the feeling of pain had come to be blunted in him. He looked as if he were always deep in thought. But it was not so: he no longer even thought. It was as if his spirit had been left suspended in mid-air in a kind of bewildered gloom which simply made him aware, and very slightly at that, of a bitter taste in his mouth. As he walked in the evenings along the lonely roads, he would count the street-lamps. He did nothing else. Or he would watch his own shadow, or listen to the echo of his own footsteps, or sometimes he would stop in front of the gardens of the houses to look at the cypresses, aloof and gloomy like himself, blacker than the night.

That Sunday, tired of the long walk along the old Appian way, he had decided to return home for once. It was still too early for supper. He would stay in his little room till daylight faded and supper-time came.

For the Ninis, mother and daughter, this was a very pleasant surprise. Clotildina went so far as to clap her hands with delight. Which of the many attentions and services so carefully thought out, which of the many special kindnesses and amiabilities should they show him first? Mother and daughter confabulated. All at once Clotildina stamped her foot and clapped her hand to her forehead. Good heavens, the lamp, all this time! First of all they must take him the lamp, the best one, set aside on purpose, the china one with poppies painted on it and a ground-glass globe. She lit it and went and knocked gently at the lodger's door. She was shaking so much with emotion that the globe as it wobbled kept knocking against the chimney-glass, almost turning it smoky.

"Can I come in? The lamp."

"No, thank you," replied Buti from inside. "I am just going out."

The spinster pouted, her eyes on the ground, as if the lodger

could see her, and insisted:

“But, you know, I have got it here... So as not to keep you in the dark...”

But Buti repeated harshly, “No, thank you.”

He had seated himself on the little sofa behind the table and was straining his unseeing eyes through the gloom of the slowly darkening room, while from the window-panes the last glimmer of twilight was fading sadly away.

How long did he stay like this, motionless, wide-eyed, without thinking or noticing the darkness which already enfolded him?

All at once he saw.

In amazement, he glanced round. Yes. The little room had suddenly become full of light. It was filled with a soft, kindly light, as if a mysterious breeze had wafted it in.

What was it? How had it happened?

Ah, that was it... The light from the house opposite. A light that had just been lit in the house across the way. The breath of some life outside had come in to chase away the darkness, the emptiness, the desolation of his existence.

He stayed for a long time watching that brightness as if it were something prodigious. A lump of pain rose in his throat as he noticed how tenderly, how caressingly it rested there on his bed, on the wall, and here on his pale hands lying limp on the table. In the midst of that pain there rose up the memory of his ruined home, of his bullied childhood, of his mother. He felt as if the light of dawn, of a distant dawn, was shining through the night of his soul.

He got up, went to the window and furtively, from behind the window looked across into the house opposite, into that window from which the light was coming.

He saw a little family gathered round a supper table: three little boys and the father were already seated, and the mother was still standing up serving the food and trying... as he could guess from her movements... to curb the impatience of the two eldest who were brandishing their spoons and wriggling about in their chairs. The youngest was stretching his neck and twisting his little flaxen head: obviously they had tied his bib too tight round his neck, but as soon as his mother hastened to give him his soup, he would no longer feel the discomfort of that knot too tightly tied. Just look now, how ravenously he was beginning to eat! He was sticking the whole of his spoon into his mouth... and his father was laughing behind the cloud of steam that rose from his plate. Now the mother was sitting down too, there, right opposite... Instinctively Tullio Buti half turned away when he saw that she had looked up at the window as she sat down, but he recollected he could not be seen in the darkness and stayed there to take part in that family supper, forgetting his own completely.

From that day onwards, every evening when he left the office, instead of setting out on his usual solitary walk he turned homewards. Each evening he waited till the darkness of his little room grew bright as day with the soft light from the house opposite. He stayed there, behind the window, like a beggar, savouring with untold anguish that sweet and lovely intimacy of home, that solace of family life, which others enjoyed, which he, too, as a child had enjoyed on rare peaceful evenings, when his mother... his own mother... like this one...

And he would weep.

Yes. The light from the house opposite worked this miracle. The bewildered gloom, in which his spirit had been left suspended for so many years, melted before that kindly brightness.

In the meantime, Tullio Buti gave no thought to the strange ideas which his staying there in the dark must arouse in the minds of his land-lady and her daughter.

Twice more, Clotildina had offered him the lamp, but in vain. He might at least light the candle! But no, not even that. Could he be feeling ill? Clotildina had plucked up courage to ask him, through the door, in a voice full of tenderness, the second time she had come to bring the lamp. He had answered her:

“No: I am all right as I am.”

In the end... well, yes, goodness me, it was a most pardonable thing to do... Clotildina had peeped through the keyhole, and to her amazement she too had seen the lodger's room flooded with the light from the house opposite. Yes, the Masci's house... and she had seen him standing behind the window, staring intently over there into the Masci's house.

Clotildina had dashed off in amazement to tell her mother her great discovery:

“He's in love with Margaret! With Margaret Masci! In love!”

One evening, a few days later, while he was standing there watching, Tullio Buti saw something which surprised him in that room opposite, where the little family was having supper as usual... though without the father, that evening. He saw Mrs Nini, his landlady, and her daughter come into the room and saw them welcomed as old friends.

All at once Tullio Buti started back from the window, perturbed, breathing hard.

The young mother and the three little ones had looked up towards his window. Without a doubt, those two women had begun to talk about him.

And now? Now perhaps it was all over! The next evening, now

they knew that he was standing there so mysteriously in the dark in the little room opposite, the young mother or her husband would close the shutters. And so, from now on he would no longer have the light he lived by, the light that was his innocent joy and his only solace.

But it did not happen like that.

That same evening, when the light across the way had been put out, plunging him into darkness, he waited a while for the little family to go to bed and then stole cautiously to open the casement to let in the fresh air, and he saw that the window across the way was also open. A little while later... and there in the darkness it made him quiver as with terror... he saw the woman put her head out of the window, perhaps full of curiosity about what the Ninis, mother and daughter, had said about him.

Those two tall buildings, with their eyes, the windows, looking so closely into each other, allowed no glimpse of the bright strip of sky up above, nor the black strip of earth below closed at the entrance by a gateway. Those buildings never admitted a ray of sunlight, never a moon-beam.

Therefore, she, standing there, could only have put her head out of the window on his account, and without a doubt because she had seen him looking out of his own darkened window.

In the blackness of the night, they could barely see each other. But he had known for a long time that she was beautiful. He already knew how graceful all her movements were, how flashing her black eyes, how smiling her red lips...

More than any other feeling, however, that first time, he felt pain, overwhelmed as he was by the surprise which took his breath away in an almost intolerable shudder of anxiety. He had to make a violent effort to prevent himself from drawing back, and to wait for her to be the first to draw back.

That dream of peace, of love, the sweet and lovely intimacy of home which he had imagined that little family must enjoy, which he had enjoyed at second hand: all that was smashed to bits, if that woman could come sneaking to the window in the dark for an outsider.... Yes, the outsider was himself.

And yet.... Before she drew back, before she closed the window again, she whispered to him:

“Good evening.”

What fantastic tales had they told about him, those two women with whom he lodged, to kindle so burning a curiosity in this woman? What strange powerful attraction had his mysterious isolated life wrought in her, that from the first moment she could leave her little children in the next room over there, and come to him, almost as if to keep him company for a while?

They stood facing each other, and though both avoided the other's eyes, and pretended to themselves to have come to the window for no reason at all, both of them, he could have sworn, had quivered with the same unexplained sense of expectation, aghast at the spell which held them so close in the darkness.

When, late that night he shut the window again, he knew for certain that after she had put out the light the next evening, she would come to look out of the window again, for him. And so it happened.

From that day onwards, Tullio Buti no longer waited in his little room for the light to go up in the house opposite. Instead, he waited impatiently for it to be put out.

Passionate love, that he had never before felt, flared up in a terrible devouring flame in the heart of the man who had lived for so many years shut out from life, and it caught up and crushed and swept away the woman as in a whirlwind.

The day that Buti left his furnished bedroom in the Nini's house the news burst like a bombshell that the lady on the third floor of the house across the way, Mrs Masci, had deserted her husband and her three children.

The little room that had sheltered. Buti for nearly four months remained empty. For several weeks no light showed in the room opposite where the little family used to gather round the supper-table every evening.

Then the light was lit again over that sad supper-table. The father, stunned by the disaster, sat and watched the frightened faces of three little children who dared not look round at the door through which their mother used to come each evening carrying the steaming soup-tureen.

The light that went up again over the sad supper-table once more shone gently into the little room opposite, empty.

When a few months had passed, did Tullio Buti and his beloved remember it, in the midst of their cruel madness?

One evening, to their terror, the Ninis saw their strange lodger appear before them, his face distraught and convulsed.

What did he want? The little bedroom, the little bedroom, if it was still unlet! No, not for himself, not to stay there! To come there just for an hour, a short time only each evening, unknown to anyone! Ah, for pity's sake, pity for that poor mother who wanted to see again from a distance, without being seen, those children of hers! They would take every precaution. They would even disguise themselves. They would slip in each evening when there was nobody on the stairs. He would pay double the rent, three times the rent, for that short while only...

No. The Ninis would not grant their request. Only this: for so long as the little bedroom remained unlet they would allow them very occasionally... oh! But for Heaven's sake, on

condition that nobody saw them! Very occasionally...

The following evening, like two thieves, they came. They went into the little bedroom in the dark, their breath rattling in their throats, and they waited, they waited till the light from the house opposite came flooding in like daylight.

They would have to live on that light, from now on, at a distance.

There it was!

But Tullio Buti could not bear it at first. How icy cold it seemed now, how harsh, evil, and ghostly! She, however, with sobs gurgling in her throat, drank it in like a woman a-thirst. She flung herself against the window-panes, pressing her handkerchief hard against her mouth. Her little ones... her little ones... there they were... there... at table, all unaware...

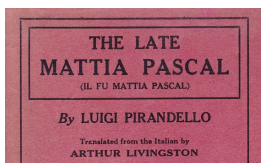
He ran to hold her up, and they both stayed motionless, clinging together, watching.

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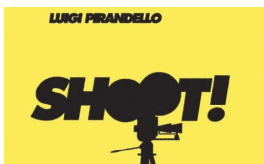
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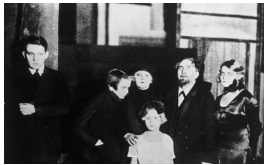
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