

The House Made of Sugar

A Longreads Exclusive: The newly translated short story from Silvina Ocampo's collection, *Thus Were Their Faces*.



Silvina Ocampo, 1973.

Silvina Ocampo | The House Made of Sugar: a short story from the collection **Thus Were Their Faces** | **NYRB Classics** | January 2015 | 13 minutes (3,235 words)

Our latest Longreads Exclusive is a newly translated short story from **Thus Were Their Faces**, a collection by **Silvina Ocampo**, as recommended by Longreads contributor **A. N. Devers**, who writes:

“Long before ‘Real Housewives of New Jersey’ castmember (and Danbury Federal Correctional Institution Inmate) Teresa Giudice infamously stated, ‘I don’t want to live in somebody else’s house. That’s gross,’ the late Argentinian writer Silvina Ocampo wrote “The House Made of Sugar,” a story about a woman named Cristina who is too superstitious to live in a house that had been previously occupied. Her husband deceives her and when they move into their dream home based upon his lie, strange and worrisome things start to happen that suggest Cristina’s fears were warranted. Newly translated into English by Daniel Balderston, with a preface by Borges, Ocampo’s stories are unsettling and off-kilter, revelatory and readable. Novelist Helen Oyeyemi writes in the collection’s **introduction**, ‘Love is as fearsome in an Ocampo story as it is in Wuthering Heights; emotion has a way of sealing us into a charmed circle that makes us incomprehensible to everyone who stands outside it.’”

* * *

Superstitions kept Cristina from living. A coin with a blurry face, a spot of ink, the moon seen through two panes of glass, the initials of her name carved by chance on the trunk of a cedar: all these would make her mad with fear. The day we met she was wearing a green dress; she kept wearing it until it fell apart, since she said it brought her good luck and that as soon as she wore another, a blue one that fit her better, we would no longer see each other. I tried to combat these absurd manias. I made her see that she had a broken mirror in her room, yet she insisted on keeping it, no matter how I insisted that it was better to throw broken mirrors into water on a moonlit night to get rid of bad luck. She was never afraid if the lamps in the house went out all of a sudden; despite the fact that it was definitely an omen of death, she would light any number of candles without thinking twice. She always left her hat on the bed, a mistake nobody else made. Her fears were more personal. She inflicted real privations on herself; for instance, she could not eat strawberries in the summer, or hear certain pieces of music, or adorn her house with goldfish, although she liked them a lot. There were certain streets we couldn’t cross, certain people we couldn’t see, certain movie theaters we couldn’t go to. Early in our relationship, these superstitions seemed charming to me, but later they

began to annoy and even seriously worry me. When we got engaged we had to look for a brand-new apartment because, according to her, the fate of the previous occupants would influence her life. (She at no point mentioned my life, as if the danger threatened only hers and our lives were not joined by love.) We visited all of the neighborhoods in the city; we went to even the most distant suburbs in search of an apartment where no one had ever lived, but they had all been rented or sold. Finally I found a little house on Montes de Oca Street that looked as if it were made of sugar. Its whiteness gleamed with extraordinary brilliance. It had a phone inside and a tiny garden in front. I thought the house was newly built, but discovered that a family had occupied it in 1930 and that later, to rent it out, the owner had remodeled it. I had to make Cristina believe no one had lived in the house and that it was the ideal place, the house of our dreams. When Cristina saw it, she cried out, "How different it is from the apartments we have seen! Here it smells clean. Nobody will be able to influence our lives or soil them with thoughts that corrupt the air."

A few days later we got married and moved in. My in-laws gave us a bedroom set, and my parents a dining-room table and chairs. We would furnish the rest of the house little by little. I was afraid Cristina would find out about my lie from the neighbors, but luckily she did her shopping away from the neighborhood and never talked to them. We were happy, so happy that it sometimes frightened me. It seemed our tranquility would never be broken in that house of sugar, until a phone call destroyed my illusion. Luckily Cristina didn't answer it, but she might have on some other occasion. The person who called asked for Mrs. Violeta: she was no doubt the previous tenant. If Cristina found out that I had deceived her, our happiness would surely come to an end. She wouldn't ever speak to me again, would ask for a divorce, and even in the best possible case we would have to leave the house and go live, perhaps, in Villa Urquiza, or in Quilmes, as tenants in one of the houses where they promised to give us some space to build a bedroom and a kitchen. But with what? (Impossible: we didn't have enough money for good building materials.) At night I was careful to take the phone off the hook, so that no inopportune call would wake us up. I put a mailbox by the gate on the street; I was the only possessor of the key, the distributor of the letters.

Early one morning there was a knock on the door and someone left a package. From my room I heard my wife protesting; then I heard the

sound of paper being ripped open. I went downstairs and found Cristina with a velvet dress in her arms.

“They just brought me this dress,” she said with enthusiasm.

She ran upstairs and put on the dress, which fit her very tight. “When did you order it?”

“Some time ago. Does it fit well? I could wear it when we go to the theater, don’t you think?”

“How did you pay for it?”

“Mother gave me a few pesos.”

That seemed strange to me, but I didn’t say anything so as not to offend her.

We loved each other madly. But my uneasiness began to bother me, even when I embraced Cristina at night. I noticed that her character had changed: her happiness turned to sadness, her communicativeness to reserve, her calm to nervousness. She lost her appetite. She no longer made those rich, rather heavy desserts out of whipped cream and chocolate that I so enjoyed, nor did she adorn the house from time to time with nylon ruffles, covering the toilet seat or the shelves in the dining room or the chests of drawers or other places in the house, as had been her custom. She would no longer surprise me at teatime with vanilla wafers, and never felt like going to the theater or the movies at night, not even when we could get free tickets. One afternoon a dog entered the garden and lay down, howling, on the front doorstep. Cristina gave him some meat and something to drink; after a bath that changed the color of its hair, she announced that she would keep it and name it Love, because it had come to our house at a moment of real love. The dog had a black mouth, a sign of good pedigree.

Another afternoon I arrived home unexpectedly. I stopped at the gate because I saw a bicycle lying in the yard. I entered quietly, then hid behind a door and heard Cristina’s voice.

“What do you want?” she repeated twice.

"I've come to get my dog," a young woman's voice said. "He's passed by this house so many times that he's become fond of it. This house looks as if it's made of sugar. Since they painted it, everyone has noticed it. But I liked it better before, when it was the romantic pink color of old houses. This house has always been very mysterious to me. I like everything about it: the birdbath where the little birds came to drink, the vines with flowers like yellow trumpets, the orange tree. Ever since I was eight I've wanted to meet you, ever since that day we talked on the phone, do you remember? You promised you would give me a kite."

"Kites are for boys."

"Toys are sexless. I like kites because they resemble huge birds; I imagine flying on their wings. For you it was just an idle game promising me that kite; I didn't sleep all night. We met in the bakery, but you were facing in the other direction and I didn't see your face. Ever since that day I've thought of nothing but you, of what your face looked like, your soul, your lying gestures. You never gave me the kite. The trees spoke to me of your lies. Then we went to live in Morón with my parents. Now I've only been back here a week."

"I've lived in this house for just three months, and before that I never visited this neighborhood. You must be mistaken."

"I imagined you exactly the way you are. I imagined you so many times! By some strange coincidence, my husband used to be engaged to you."

"I was never engaged to anyone except my husband. What's this dog's name?"

"Bruto."

"Take him away, please, before I grow fond of him."

"Violeta, listen. If I take the dog to my house, he'll die. I can't take care of him. We live in a very tiny apartment. My husband and I both work and there isn't anyone to take him out for a walk."

"My name isn't Violeta. How old is he?"

“Bruto? Two years old. Do you want to keep him? I’ll visit him from time to time, because I’m very fond of him.”

“My husband doesn’t like strangers in our house and wouldn’t want me to accept a dog as a present.”

“Don’t tell him, then. I’ll wait for you every Monday at seven in the evening in Colombia Square. Do you know where it is? In front of Santa Felicitas Church, or if you prefer I can wait for you wherever and whenever you like: for instance, on the bridge behind Constitution Station or in Lezama Park. I’ll be happy just to see Bruto’s eyes. Will you do me the favor of keeping him?”

“All right. I’ll keep him.”

“Thank you, Violeta.”

“My name isn’t Violeta.”

“Did you change your name? For us you’ll always be Violeta. Always the same mysterious Violeta.”

I heard the dull sound of the door and Cristina’s steps as she went upstairs. I waited a little before coming out of my hiding place and pretending I had just come in. Though I had witnessed the innocence of the dialogue, some muffled suspicion began gnawing at me. It seemed to me that I had watched a theatrical rehearsal and that the reality of the situation was something else. I didn’t confess to Cristina that I had witnessed the young woman’s visit. I awaited further developments, always afraid that Cristina would discover my lie and lament that we had moved to this neighborhood.

Every afternoon I passed the square in front of Santa Felicitas Church to see whether Cristina would keep the appointment. Cristina seemed not to notice my uneasiness. Sometimes I even came to believe that I had dreamed it all. Hugging the dog one day, Cristina asked me, "Would you like my name to be Violeta?"

"I don't like names based on flowers."

"But Violeta is pretty. It's a color."

"I like your name better."

One Saturday, at sunset, I ran into her on the bridge behind Constitution Station, leaning over the iron railing. I approached her and she showed no sign of surprise.

"What are you doing here?"

"Just looking around. I like looking down at the tracks."

"It's a very gloomy place and I don't like you wandering around here by yourself."

"It doesn't seem so gloomy to me. And why shouldn't I wander around by myself?"

"Do you like the black smoke of the locomotives?"

"I like transportation. Dreaming about trips. Leaving without ever leaving. Leaving and staying and by staying leaving."

We returned home. Mad with jealousy (jealousy of what? of everything), I hardly spoke to her on the way.

"Perhaps we could buy a little house in San Isidro or Olivos; this neighborhood is so unpleasant," I said, pretending that I had the means to buy a house in one of those places.

"You're mistaken. We have Lezama Park very nearby here."

"It's desolate. The statues are broken, the fountains empty, the trees diseased. Beggars, old men, and cripples go there with sacks to throw out garbage or to pick it up."

"I don't notice such things."

"Before, you didn't even like sitting on a bench where someone had eaten tangerines or bread."

"I've changed a lot."

"No matter how much you've changed, you can't like a park like that one. Yes, I know it has a museum with marble lions guarding the entrance and that you played there when you were a girl, but all of that doesn't mean anything."

"I don't understand you," Cristina answered. And I felt she disliked me, with a dislike that could easily turn to hatred.

For days that seemed like years I watched her, trying to hide my anxiety. Every afternoon I passed the square by the church and on Saturdays went to the horrible black bridge at Constitution Station. One day I ventured to say to Cristina, "If we were to discover that this house was once inhabited by other people, what would you do, Cristina? Would you move away?"

"If other people lived in this house, they must have been like those sugar figurines on desserts, or birthday cakes: sweet as sugar. This house makes me feel secure. Is it the little garden by the entrance that makes me feel so calm? I don't know! I wouldn't move for all the money in the world. Besides, we don't have anywhere to go. You yourself said that some time ago."

I didn't insist, because it was so hopeless. To reconcile myself to the idea, I thought about how time would put things back as they had been.

One morning the doorbell rang. I was shaving and could hear Cristina's voice. When I finished shaving my wife was talking to the intruder. I spied on them through the crack in the door. The stranger had a deep voice and such enormous feet that I burst out laughing.

"If you see Daniel again you'll pay dearly, Violeta."

"I don't know who Daniel is and my name isn't Violeta," my wife answered.

“You’re lying.”

“I don’t lie. I have nothing to do with Daniel.”

“I want you to know how things are.”

“I don’t want to listen to you.”

Cristina covered her ears with her hands. I rushed to the door and told the intruder to get out. I could now closely see her feet, hands, and neck. I realized that it was a man dressed as a woman. I didn’t have time to think what I should do; like a flash of lightning, he disappeared, leaving the door half open behind him.

Cristina and I never commented on the episode, though why I’ll never know; it was as if our lips were sealed except for nervous, frustrated kisses, or useless words.

It was around that time, which was such an unhappy time for me, that Cristina suddenly started to sing spontaneously. Her voice was pleasant, but it exasperated me, being part of that secret world which drew her away from me. She had never sung before, so why did she sing now, day and night, as she dressed, bathed, cooked, or closed the blinds?

One day I heard Cristina say the enigmatic words, “I suspect I am inheriting someone’s life, her joys and sorrows, mistakes and successes. I’m bewitched.” I pretended not to have heard her tormented words. Nevertheless, I started, God knows why, to learn what I could in the neighborhood about who Violeta was, where she was, and all the details of her life.

Half a block from our house there was a shop where they sold postcards, paper, notebooks, pencils, erasers, and toys. For my purposes the shop clerk seemed like the best person: she was talkative, curious, and susceptible to flattery. Under the pretext of buying a notebook and pencils, I went to talk to her one afternoon. I complimented her eyes, hands, hair. I didn’t venture to pronounce the word Violeta. I explained that we were neighbors. I finally asked her who had lived in our house. I said shyly, “Didn’t someone named Violeta live there?”

She answered vaguely, which made me feel ever more uneasy. The next day I tried to find out some other details at the grocery store. They told me that Violeta was in a mental hospital and gave me the address.

One day I heard Cristina say the enigmatic words, ‘I suspect I am inheriting someone’s life, her joys and sorrows, mistakes and successes. I’m bewitched.’ ”

“I sing with a voice that is not my own,” Cristina told me, mysteriously once again. “Before, it would have upset me, but now I enjoy it. I’m someone else, perhaps someone happier than I.”

Once more I pretended not to have heard her. I was reading the newspaper.

I confess I didn’t pay much attention to Cristina, since I spent so much time and energy finding out details about Violeta’s life. I went to the mental hospital, which was located in Flores. There I asked after Violeta and they gave me the address of Arsenia López, her voice teacher.

I had to take the train from Retiro Station to Olivos. On the way some dirt flew into my eyes, so that when I arrived at Arsenia López’s house, tears were pouring out as if I were crying. From the front door I could hear women’s voices singing scales, accompanied by a piano that sounded more like an organ.

Tall, thin, terrifying, Arsenia appeared at the end of a hallway, pencil in hand. I told her timidly that I had come for news of Violeta. “You’re her husband?”

“No, a relative,” I answered, wiping my tears with a handkerchief.

“You must be one of her countless admirers,” she told me, half closing her eyes and taking my hand. “You must have come for what they all want to know: What were Violeta’s last days like? Please sit down. There’s no reason to imagine that a dead person was necessarily pure, faithful, and good.”

“You want to console me,” I told her.

She pressed my hand with her moist hand and replied, “Yes, I want to console you. Violeta was not just my student; she was also my best friend. If she got angry with me, it was perhaps because she had confided too much in me and because she could no longer deceive me. The last days I saw her she complained bitterly about her fate. She died of envy. She repeated constantly, ‘Somebody has stolen my life from me, but she’ll pay for it. I will no longer have my velvet dress; she’ll have it. Bruto will be hers; men will no longer disguise themselves as women to enter my house; I’ll lose my voice, and it will pass to that unworthy throat; Daniel and I will no longer embrace on the bridge behind Constitution Station, imagining an impossible love, leaning over the iron railing as we used to, watching the trains go away.’”

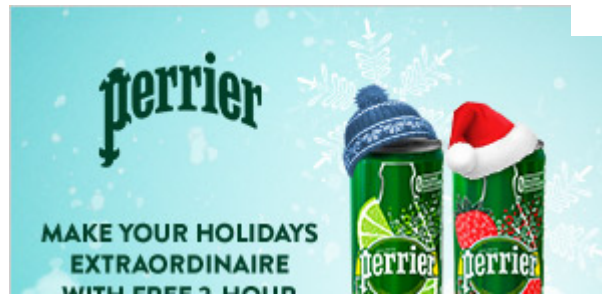
Arsenia López looked me in the eyes and said, “Don’t worry. You’ll meet many other women who are more loyal. We both know she was beautiful, but is beauty the only good in the world?”

Speechless, horrified, I left that house without revealing my name to Arsenia López; when she said goodbye, she tried to hug me, to show her sympathy for me.

From then on, Cristina had become Violeta, at least as far as I was concerned. I tried following her day and night to find her in the arms of her lovers. I became so estranged from her that I viewed her as a complete stranger. One winter night she fled. I searched for her until dawn. I don’t know who was the victim of whom in that house made of sugar, which now stands empty.

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REPORT THIS AD



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