

GRANTA

LETTUCE
NIGHTS

Vanessa Barbara

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1982



Vanessa Barbara is a journalist, translator and writer. Her publications include *O livro amarelo do terminal* (2008), which won the Jabuti Award, the novel *O verão do Chibo*, co-written with Emilio Fraia (2008) and the children's book *Endrigo, o escavador de umbigo* (2011), illustrated by Andrés Sandoval. She recently published a translation of *The Great Gatsby*. Barbara also edits the literary website A Hortaliça (www.hortifruti.org) and is a columnist for the newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo*. 'Lettuce Nights' ('Noites de Alface') is an extract from her forthcoming novel.

When Ada died, the wash hadn't dried yet. The pants' elastic waistbands were still damp, socks swollen, T-shirts and washcloths hanging inside out. A rag was left soaking in the bucket. Rinsed recycling bins in the sink, the bed unmade, open cookie packages lying on the couch. Ada had gone away without watering the plants. The household things were holding their breath and waiting. Since then, the house without Ada has been nothing but empty drawers.

Otto and Ada were married in 1958, just as the town was transitioning between mayors. They bought a yellow house and decided not to have children, no dogs or cats, not even a pet turtle. They spent almost fifty years together: cooking, assembling massive puzzles of European castles and playing ping-pong on the weekends, until arthritis set in and made the game impossible. In the end it was nearly impossible to tell the difference between their tone of voice, their laugh, their way of walking. Ada was thin with short hair and liked cauliflower. Otto was thin with short hair and liked cauliflower. They wandered up and down the hallways and took out the trash together. Ada dealt with the various household details and did most of the chores while Otto followed her around telling anticlimactic stories. They were such good friends that Ada's death left a silence in the hallways of the yellow house.

As time went on, Otto learned what to do with dead light bulbs but still didn't have the heart to change out of his pyjamas. And so he stayed that way, wrapped in a plaid blanket even on hot days, missing Ada and taking care of household tasks, couch stains, dirty dishes. He was a quiet widower, reserved and hard-working. He saw his wife in these chores and it made him feel like never leaving the house. He had groceries delivered from the corner store and medicine from the pharmacy, led a peaceful existence and didn't bother anyone.

The delivery boys cultivated this silence respectfully: they'd knock on the door as if they were entering a monastery, have Otto sign receipts and ask how he was doing for the sake of asking. They liked to turn their heads upward and remark: looks like it's

going to rain later, better take the clothes off the line, it might cool down a bit and you'll have to change out of those pyjamas. The weather's crazy. How's your sciatica? Otto would nod, half distracted, thinking about how the delivery boys acted differently when Ada was still around. Ada used to answer the door and would immediately have the boy from the pharmacy sitting down. Nico would open his backpack to show her something, and the two of them would go on chattering about very important subjects, so that sometimes Nico would end up forgetting to deliver their ointments, aspirin and blood-pressure medication.

Ada kept all the neighbourhood's secrets. She knew every single neighbour's life story and recounted them to Otto at dinner in a near whisper: Nico made next to nothing at the pharmacy; what he really wanted was to be a professional swimmer; he lived with his mother and spent all his free time at the gym. He swam very badly but had made up his mind to cross the Strait of Dover – even if it meant he had to go part-time at the pharmacy. Whenever he laughed, he resembled a monkey, his mouth gaping wide open but without making a sound. Then one day he dove into the pool, and when he came up for air, he was laughing like that. 'Everyone laughed,' Ada recounted. 'He went down again, came up and was still laughing. Everyone was laughing. But then he went under and didn't come back up again. He hadn't been laughing, he'd been drowning and nearly died.' The moral of the story: 'If you laugh with the same face as when you drown, better change your ways.'

Ada was central to the neighborhood. She was the one who organized the block parties, who solved everyone's problems and found work for those who needed it – even those who didn't want help ended up with some odd job as a bagger at the market, caught off guard like someone who answers the door to a visitor on a Sunday morning.

After Ada's death, the neighbourhood went into mourning for three days, during which time not even Teresa's dogs barked. The postman stopped delivering the mail strictly out of a sense of

propriety, since he usually made his rounds belting out songs like, 'Boy, Was That Guy Ugly', and no one turned their radio up all the way, no one shouted into their cellphones, no one used their blender at two in the morning to whip up an avocado mousse. After this mourning period, the town returned to its usual commotion. Alone in that huge house, Otto became even sadder: every time the knife sharpener passed by, it reminded him how Ada wasn't there anymore; no longer would she jump up from the couch or rush to lean out the window, waving vigorously and laughing through her nose. Now, whenever Teresa's dogs got out, he'd close his eyes and try to imagine Ada tripping over herself as she ran out into the street, shouting for everyone to save themselves while they could, absolutely terrified of the wild canines crashing into gates and leaving behind a trail of fleas, until Teresa caught up to them and restored order with the well-aimed swipe of a plastic bottle.

Otto had only really interacted with his neighbours through Ada and now was left stranded in that sea of collective insanity. He decided to go on sitting in the living room, with the blanket on his knees, silently watching the days go by. Without Ada there to explain all the stories, things happened incoherently. But little by little, Otto started overhearing a conversation there, a blender here, and began to understand his neighbours.

For example: there was the night the newly-weds watched a foreign film. It was a documentary about a mother camel, Ingen Temee, who gives birth to an albino camel. But she doesn't take to her offspring and rejects it, so that the albino calf cries for the rest of the movie. In a heart-warming twist, a boy named Little Ugna decides to set off for the village to find a violinist who will play a beautiful song so that the mother camel will love her calf. It works. Little Ugna is very clever. Then Little Ugna's father tells the people gathered how camels used to have horns, but one day they lent their horns to the deer to wear to a party. That's why to this day camels always stare fixedly at the horizon (even while chewing cud), waiting for the day they'll get their bony ornaments back.

The newly-wed young man slept through the documentary you could hear him snoring and the girl got a bit upset, but watched the whole movie. When it ended, she went to bed and didn't speak to her husband the next day. Otto heard the man trying to get her to say something. 'So, the albino camel was sad the whole time?' But she washed the dishes without responding. 'Little Ugna managed to find a violinist?' But no sign of an answer. Eventually her anger subsided, as usual, and everything ended in a theatrical fight in which she screamed: 'Drop the knife!' while he squirted lavender water at her. A couple of lunatics, Otto concluded, thinking back on ping-pong afternoons with Ada – the dented balls, extreme paddle manoeuvres, Otto shouting that it didn't count because the ball had hit her finger. You can't score when it hits your finger. It was one of the few rules they followed in ping-pong.

Something else that Otto noticed in those first few weeks was that Teresa's house was being invaded by a nocturnal army of cockroaches. In the middle of the night, while lying in bed, he could hear his neighbour killing insects with her flip-flop. She'd already tried exterminating them in the living room, judging by the smell, but it hadn't really worked because the pests adored Roach-B-Gone – he could almost hear them licking their chops and flocking in hordes to the house next door. All the better for him, who could muster neither the same readiness nor the same gusto for squashing them with a paper towel, as when he used to say 'hand me your flip-flop' while Ada fled behind the curtains.

At this point, Otto no longer went out into the backyard unless it was to hang clothes on the line. That was where Otto and Ada used to spend afternoons lying in the sun, reading cookbooks and doing crossword puzzles. Ada was always looking for the definitive recipe for breaded cauliflower, one in which it wouldn't fall out of the breading when you fried it and that would keep it glistening and crispy. She never found it. She used to stretch out her legs 'to get my fat rolls nice and toasty' and go on talking about the lawn, the plants, the tulip bulbs she'd gotten as a gift from Teresa last winter. Otto and

Ada's yard was the biggest in town, a grassy field full of rusty tools, old buckets and tulips waiting to emerge. Ada loved the backyard. When Otto was with her, he loved it too; on his own, he hated the tulips as much as he hated the neighbours.

With the blanket over his knees, Otto had the sudden urge to go to the kitchen and cook up some tasty cauliflower, but it felt too soon. So he stayed put, blinking his eyes vaguely. Still, the sounds, smells and sights of the neighbourhood found their way into his living room (blender, Roach-B-Gone, mad dogs), and he passed the time assembling these pieces into stories to tell. ■