

ORLANDO

A story by Virginia Woolf

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Chapter 1

Green and the Queen

On the day we meet Orlando, he is trying to write about green, and he can't manage it. He is a poet, he is young, a young poet who writes whilst sitting beneath an oak tree and has not yet realised a simple truth: what you write is never what you see. You try and try again, dipping your quill in the ink as if that were where the right gesture comes from, but it doesn't work. It doesn't work like that. Perhaps one could say that what you write is never what it is. But Orlando isn't thinking that right now: he is too young, and he is a poet. His real problem is that the green he was looking for – the real one, assuming there is a green that, once written, is real – is making him get the rhyme wrong. It is a green that has no words. Writing is so exhausting that Orlando closes his eyes, irritated and disappointed but also already weighed down by a thousand thoughts, as happens to very young people; and he falls asleep.

One might observe that not all poems need rhymes; but Orlando's do now. Because we are in England, a very old country, a country that is always new, in the realm of a queen called Elizabeth who is very old.

Elizabeth is a distant cousin of Orlando's, but above all she is the queen; and whilst Orlando sleeps dreamlessly in the shade of a tree, a trumpet sounds, Orlando wakes up suddenly; it is now evening. He hears the trumpet's call and so leaves his pen, ink and poor poem beneath the tree and runs, runs, runs: for the trumpet is announcing that the queen is on her way, and everyone, even the young poet cousins, must pay her homage. Orlando arrives breathless at the castle that is his home, races up the steps two at a time to his room, undresses in a hurry, washes, puts on clothes suitable for meeting a queen, races back down the steps two at a time, and arrives just in time to offer her a bowl full of water and rose petals in which she dips her hands.

Elizabeth is strange: her hairline seems to recede, revealing just how high her forehead is – it is very high indeed. A high forehead is a sign of great intelligence; there is more brain behind a forehead like that. She applies make-up to her skin with creams and white powders that make the dark red of her hair stand out. She wears solemn dresses, stiff as armour, as if she were always ready to take up arms, and in truth that is exactly the case. Peace is maintained only by keeping war close at hand. Her head rests on thick, high, white lace collars; it is as if it were always placed on a tray, separated from her body. It is

a fashion, of course. A way of making her stand out. Or of reminding the world that even kings and queens sometimes lose their heads.

Elisabetta is wrapped in layers of furs that smell strongly of a wardrobe – of dust, you might say. Yet she wears magnificent jewellery, especially pearls, which symbolise tears but also purity. When you see her from a distance and the sun is shining, she glistens like a lake. Up close, you see only the powder caked on her cheeks, and her eyes – those piercing, hawk-like yellow eyes, shiny as marbles – which search for you everywhere and always find you, just like those in paintings.

Elisabetta is old, and perhaps that is why she loves youth so much, just as we love something we have lost. She likes Orlando, the absent-minded young poet cousin with perfect legs in tight stockings, and eyes of velvet like violets. She will not forget him.

Two years pass. As in fairy tales, they pass in a flash. The queen is even older, Orlando is still the same as ever; he has written bundles of poems, probably all rubbish, when she remembers him. The memory is as sharp as the tip of a diamond, and sparkles in the same way. It is decided: Orlando will be her favourite, a knight, a trusted companion. Provided he lives at court with her.

You don't say no to queens, least of all to cousin queens. And so it is that Orlando goes to court and changes his life. He forgets his pen, his ink and all those money troubles. Now he must live.

Chapter 2

The fox Princess

When the Great Frost arrives, Orlando has been living at court for a time he cannot say: a short time, a long time, who knows. Every day is delightfully different and curiously the same, filled with leisure, feasts, hunting parties and balls. The Queen's favour did not die with her, for when she was very old but still alive, she bestowed immense honours upon Orlando in exchange for his company, making him even more noble and wealthy than he already was. Now there is another king, but for Orlando nothing has changed. He has grown up, of course; he has had lovers; he regularly flirts with three ladies of melodious names, as charming as any lady who dresses in the fashion of the day, each of whom might one day become his wife. Such is his life.

And then the Great Frost. The cold is such that anyone venturing outdoors risks being frozen stiff there, as shown by the sudden increase in boulders and rocks in the countryside. It is such a bitter frost that the Thames becomes a sheet of glass, only the glass is ice, transparent ice, thick and solid enough to walk upon as they do in Holland. The king orders a stretch of the river to be transformed into an open-air court, a frozen park, all lights and music, where people dance, meet and converse, and great fires with streaked flames warm the nobles without even managing to melt a little of the icy slab beneath, which holds captive, intact and motionless, many water creatures. Everyone has skates on their feet, because gliding is better than staggering.

And it is there, between a dance and a frivolous conversation, that Orlando sees her. She is a nimble, slender creature, dressed in velvet and fur and trousers; whether man or woman, one cannot tell. She emerges from the pavilion housing the Moscow ambassador and his entourage, gliding confidently on her skates, and immediately captivates him. She is like a melon, a pineapple, an olive tree, an emerald, a fox in the snow. All at once. But she is neither a fruit nor a tree nor a wild beast: she is a girl, her name is Marusja plus a string of other names, and she is the daughter of the ambassador invited to the party for the coronation of the new king. During a banquet, Orlando and Marusja find themselves close together, facing one another; she has eyes that seem to have been fished from the bottom of the sea and speaks perfect French, just like him. The other dignitaries do not. Thus begins a conversation all for them, just for them; at first they say nothing of note, quite the contrary; but it is as if they were in a bubble, the world around them vanishes.

Orlando and Sasha (as he calls her, like a white fox from Russia he had as a child) are always together. She soon tires of court life; like a white fox, she is used to wide open spaces, so Orlando takes her into the woods and the frost-covered pastures, where her Russia seems closer; and there they are, just the two of them, wrapped in soft, warm furs, embracing, kissing, telling each other a thousand silly things that all seem very important. Are they happy? No. Because happiness is ice that cracks, and once again Orlando, just like that time with the green, cannot find the words to tell Sasha everything he feels; after all, they speak different languages from different worlds, so how could they possibly understand one another once the kisses are over? Kisses are the same everywhere, but words are not.

Orlando isn't happy because he's jealous. One night he catches Sasha boarding the Russian ship, trapped in the grip of the ice like the rest of the fleet, and losing herself in the embrace of a wild-looking young man. He confronts her, insults her, despairs. She denies the accusations, asks him to trust her. They plan to flee together, away from the city, away from the court and their duties, and arrange to meet at midnight, just as the thaw is freeing the ships from their captivity. But in vain does Orlando wait for Sasha in the darkness torn by horrid creaking: and as the ice breaks and separates families, driving men, women and children apart, isolated and, in some cases, teetering like castaways on the blocks that sway dangerously, Orlando, in turn, faces danger as he leaps from one ice raft to another to reach the Russian ambassador's ship: and he sees it vanish into the distance, and on board is Sasha, sailing away, free and cruel as a white fox that, having bitten the hand that stroked it, regains its freedom.

Chapter 3

Poetry and interior design

Once the ice had all melted and spring returned, followed by summer – something one can never be entirely certain of until one sees it happen – Orlando fell into a deep melancholy and then into an even deeper sleep. Noises, clamour, music and songs: nothing could rouse him. He resembled Sleeping Beauty in her castle entwined with brambles, with the difference that his servants, cooks and all the people who surrounded the young nobleman were awake and busy trying to make him open his eyes. In vain. Only after seven days did he wake up and resume his former life. But he had changed, as great sorrows and searing disappointments change us, and he could never again be the naive, trusting young man he had once been. Thoughts of bones and death and skulls came to him, for life no longer tasted as it once did; he sought solitude and wallowed in it as dogs do in the dust, for no reason at all.

And then he began to write again. He had already tried it, as we know; and he had crammed the results into a cupboard with many drawers which he kept locked, and the key was made of silver. But the problem with writers is that they almost always need to be read; and so Orlando too decided that he absolutely had to obtain the judgement of a person of standing, someone capable of assessing his art. So he wrote a letter of invitation to Nicholas Greene, a celebrated poet and friend to poets and writers: he was expecting him at his home and would offer him hospitality in the hope that he might read and critique his work.

Nicholas Greene arrived by carriage at Orlando's magnificent mansion, where he was received with great courtesy. He was a small man, dressed in black, with a cap as limp as his lips, a receding chin, and a face furrowed with wrinkles. He was certainly not the image of a poet that Orlando had in mind (who, let's face it, perhaps saw himself reflected in a mirror whenever he thought of the word 'poet'). It was, moreover, pointless to try to elicit from him an opinion – even a harsh one – on his own poetry. Greene did nothing but speak ill of other poets, both living and dead alike; and he spoke at length of himself, of his sorrows, his problems, his interests. He decreed that poetry was dead, lifeless, finished; that fame is entirely vain and overrated; and he did so whilst joking, eating and drinking and looking around to take in every detail, for that is what people who write do; and in the end he returned to his home, to his little life, and composed a delightful, light-hearted little poem that spoke in mocking tones of a certain young, rich man who wanted at all costs to

be a poet even though his writing was only so-so. His little play was a great success; everyone recognised Orlando in it and had a good laugh – everyone except Orlando, who, embittered, decided to set fire to the manuscripts kept in the cupboard locked with the silver key. There was just one exception: a piece entitled *The Oak*, which was dear to him because it reminded him of his hopeful adolescence. He then decided to live in isolation with his dogs, which is not a bad thing in itself: he was done with people, he said. But perhaps we now know enough about Orlando to realise that he would soon change his mind. Because changing, transforming, evolving is the most human and vital thing there is. And Orlando was ready to change again.

Meanwhile, for quite some time (months, let's say; it's best to be specific because time is very elastic in this story) he did nothing. He would simply rush through the tasks he had to do to look after his home, his estate, the fields and the farmhands; and then he would reflect, think and daydream. All things, as we well know, that start off swiftly and carry us swiftly elsewhere, from one thought to another, along a chain that can become endless, in a time that stretches on and on and might never end. He thought of the pain that poetry and love had inflicted on him; he thought of the weight and meaning of words; he decided that glory was not important, and that it was better to live a simple life, to be anonymous and remain so, and to take pleasure in small joys. For him, it was like opening his eyes to a possible truth (one possibility, because the truth is never precisely or entirely true). And he opened them, and at last, beyond the web of his thoughts, he saw the world too, and his gaze fell upon something he knew well but was perhaps seeing for the first time.

His home.

To call it a house isn't entirely accurate, given that it was a residence capable of accommodating a thousand people – or perhaps two thousand, depending on the valley – and had three hundred and sixty-five rooms, one for every day of the year, if the days were people in need of a place to sleep and keep their belongings. It was an old house filled with old objects; it was smoky, stained and somewhat neglected. So Orlando decided to redecorate it, and that became his new project. For a long time, he dealt only in curtains, chairs, tables, glasses, rugs, cushions, candlesticks, but also nails, timber and fences, as well as animals, flowers and plants, because such a large house also had a very large

garden. (Telling you all this isn't really that interesting, but even the most extraordinarily fascinating creatures can sometimes do very boring things, or be very boring.)