

ALLERGIES

Carolyn Oliver

On Friday evening, Benedetta Borelli settled in with *Star Trek*, pickled cauliflower, and her crossword puzzle, tissues at the ready for the onslaught of sneezing and eye-watering that was surely coming. Allergies. In Italy they never gave her trouble. Maybe she should go back and visit her sisters for the winter; Giulia could use the help with Lucia, and Joey and Sophia could keep an eye on the house. Below, she could hear the patter of the little boy's feet; avoiding his bath again? When Joey was that age, thirty years ago, he loved the bubbles and the attention given only to him. If she'd been more practical, she would have bathed the children together. But she couldn't resist seeing him so happy.

She woke with a start, still on the sofa. Why didn't Giulia call? Shuffling into the kitchen to make coffee, she bumped into a dining chair, which groaned across the floor. Such an ugly set. She should have let Arturo take it

in the divorce. But when would she have been able to afford another table, more chairs?

On with the brown sweatpants, the light pink housedress, socks, clogs. Too early for breakfast, but cool enough to go out to the garden for tomatoes, arugula, maybe an eggplant or two. Green beans. Calvin loved them in her sauce, which was good because she cooked a pork chop in it, like her grandmother and her older sister did. Better than his mother's sauce, no doubt.

By the open kitchen window she sneezed again. *Plink. Plunk. Plink. Plink.* Confused, she reached for the tap. But it wasn't water—her nose was bleeding onto the edge of the counter. Bright red, too bold for such a dull sound. She barked a curse and reached for a clean dishtowel—not a good one—as she tilted her head back and pinched her nose. Her bag clattered to the floor as she banged into the kitchen table, headed for the bathroom and the mirror.

So much blood. Too much? It had been so many years ago, a parched summer like this one, when she'd been snapping the washing dry over the balcony. Lucia came out to scold her for jostling the bougainvillea and then abruptly pulled her into the kitchen, reaching up for the matches just as Benedetta looked down to see her Sunday dress spattered with blooming spots of red.

Now she sat on the toilet and waited, listening to the cars starting to whirl faster and closer together on the street. No sound downstairs yet; the little one must be tired. She checked the clock on her Jitterbug: half past six. Gingerly she brought her head forward—how her neck ached! And then she pulled away the towel. Red, red, red, still gushing.

The woman's voice on the phone sounded pinched and far away. Benedetta was surprised. As a translator, she'd heard the recordings in court plenty of times, but she thought all that static was the recording, not what a caller would hear. Five minutes for an ambulance. *Drip, drip, drip.* Now the floor, Mama Santa, the cleaning she'd have to do. Her back creaked as she scrambled for a bath towel and tossed her phone book in the bag.

Benedetta let herself tread heavily on the steps. She rang the bell at the back porch twice. Waited. Nothing. Again. Footsteps, fast. But not pattering. The wife, then. That was good; she realized now she didn't want little Calvin to be confused by all the blood.

The woman—Kaitlin, or Kaitlyn, or Catelyn—pulled open the door with a sucking noise. Black shorts, an ugly gold T-shirt, hair a wreck. Bumblebee, Benedetta thought. Kaitlin looked aggravated; they'd agreed months ago that Benedetta wasn't to ring the bell before 8:00 or after 6:00 and not at all on

weekends unless it was an emergency. But the leak had been eating away at the wood in the basement, wasn't that—

“Hi, Benedetta.” Then she saw the bloody towel. “Oh my god, what happened? Come in, sit down!”

“No, no.” Benedetta waved her off. “Someone is coming. Can you call Sophia—I am thinking Don has her number, and my Joey—oh no. Wrong book.”

“What book?” Kaitlin stepped through the screen door onto the porch with a soft thud. “Go wake up Daddy, okay baby,” she said behind her.

“Sorry, sorry. Va bene, I left the door open—Don can go upstairs, find the book and call Joey?”

“Sure, sure. Sit down on the step, Benedetta. You have your keys? Don't look, keep your head back. Yes, your keys are in the front pocket, okay? Just rest. Here they are.”

The paramedics were all so young, so crisp, like the first bite of a fall apple. She waved off Kaitlin's offer to go with her.

The doctor took forever to see her—oh, the tomatoes broiling in the heat! She should have picked them yesterday—then *scritch*. The doctor held up a

match and told her to breathe the smoke, just a little. Benedetta complied immediately—she remembered Lucia doing the same thing that afternoon in the kitchen, years ago.

“Better?”

She nodded, wondering again why Giulia hadn’t called last night—was Lucia worse?

“Good. We need to watch you for about an hour. Anyone we can call for you?”

“No, I call my daughter now. Thank you.”

The chirping ringing lasted for a full minute. No answer—but Sophia was in Maine, two hours away, she remembered. Nobody at Joey’s—the tenants must have called. He was on his way.

Twenty minutes later, the slap of small shoes on the polished floors, and then Don knocked on the frame, and little Calvin peeked around the curtain, imp. Kaitlin handed her a potted bright red gerbera daisy, and asked, “How are you feeling? We don’t want to intrude, but we thought we’d see if you needed a ride home, if you don’t need to stay.”

The nurse bustled in, clogs silent. “She’ll be all set in just about a half an hour. You have to make sure she takes her blood pressure medication at home—“

“I’m so sorry, but we’re not family,” Don said apologetically. “We don’t need to know the details.”

Benedetta waved them off; the nurse looked confused. “My neighbors,” she explained.

“Tenants,” said Kaitlin.

The nurse was astonished. “You should give them a break on the rent this month.”

“My rent is the lowest in the whole area. I’m so tired, every day there is some new problem.” She didn’t miss the look the nurse gave Don, or Kaitlin’s shrug and twisted smile.

At home she thanked them again, relief at being alone overwhelming her until she saw all the blood still to clean. She took her medication, as Kaitlin had reminded her, then tried calling her children and Giulia. The air in the apartment was still and heavy with heat.

After her nap she rummaged through the bar cart in the dining room, bottles thick with dust clanking softly. She found an old bottle of sparkling

wine—not Italian, or chilled, but it would have to do. She took the steps down to the shared front entryway slowly, placing both feet on each one.

She wavered with her hand inches from her tenants' glowing doorbell, wondering if she should just leave the bottle by the mail. Outside the fat bees wavered too, wavered and fell out of the sky onto the soft white-green carpet of buds on the sidewalk. No, too late for buds, she thought. Maybe they were blossoms. She savored the word with satisfaction. In the afternoons, her English didn't flow quickly, and when she spoke, her accent would be thicker than it had been in the morning.

The wife, she was like the bees. Fat and slow and too high off the ground. Unpredictably irritated, too. How did he stand her and those loud clothes? Always red and yellow, blue and turquoise and purple. Never sensible colors. What did she have to be so proud of anyway?

But she had been useful, even thoughtful.

"I still can't believe Joe said that when you called." The voices slipped through the crack under the door, interrupting her deliberations.

"I know. 'Sophie's it!' Who leaves for vacation when their mother is in the hospital and the sister is two hours away? Not like she showed up. I mean, I know Benedetta's annoying—"

“Like a mosquito you can’t get rid of,” agreed Kaitlin.

“But come on. That’s your mother.”

“It’s awful.”

Gasping for breath, Benedetta bent down to leave the bottle of wine on the mat. She sneezed unexpectedly, loudly, her fingers grazing the cool surface of the tile. Silence. No blood. With an agreeable shiver she stood up straight, turned, and snapped her door shut behind her.

She’d go to Italy for the winter, and she would stay. Lucia and Giulia needed her. She would accept her children’s calls like a static-voiced dispatcher, like the buzzing of bees in the bougainvillea.

A graduate of The Ohio State University and Boston University, **Carolyn Oliver** lives in Massachusetts with her family. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Midway Journal*, *Constellations*, and *HOOT*, among others. Find her online at <http://carolynoliver.net/>.