Do people grow to resemble their houses, or is it the other way round?

In the case of Misha’s and Alexei’s family home, there could be no neat correlation between house and occupants, as the brothers could not have been more dissimilar. Misha had a gregarious nature and was a prankster whose party tricks amused and sometimes scandalised staid gatherings of conservative, Russian émigré youth. His elder brother Alexei, taciturn, saturnine, preferred to spend his leisure in solitude by the mud-coloured river, catching catfish which he fed to his tom cat, Bars. It was no party trick, but he had been known to fly into a state of wordless fury or blind frustration, stabbing his catch with a filleting knife, slashing it to slivers.

If the mood of the house resembled either of its occupants, it had to be Alexei. Situated behind a disused cemetery, encroached upon by sombre Chinese elms, it was a place of green gloom. The high windows admitted murky light, absorbed by the walls, which were also greenish and other nondescript shades where the paint had darkened over time with oxidation and grime.

Kitty wondered what the house had been like when Misha’s family had filled it – his parents, grandparents and seven siblings. Surely it had overflowed with vitality then: with continuous sounds of food preparation and chatter, scolding and laughter. The rooms would have been lighter when the paint was fresh, and the curtains laundered regularly, although the crushed-velvet drapes that flanked the rotting cream lace were also a bilious shade of slime green. Still, the table linen must have been white, and there must have been accents and splashes of colour: cushions, upholstery, Oriental rugs, flowers… Now the two brothers, adult orphans, camped in the spaces vacated by parents and siblings. Their presence wasn’t ample enough to compensate for the absences.

Kitty had been invited to dinner because she was Delia’s sister. Delia was friends with Misha’s fiancée, Tamara; so Delia and her fiancé, Nigel, were the intended guests. Kitty had been an afterthought on Tamara’s part. With one eye on Alexei, she now suspected. It was only a matter of months since Kitty had moved to the city from the country town where she and Delia had grown up.

Approaching the house via the old cemetery road for the first time on an autumn evening, with the leaves on the Chinese elms a jaundiced yellow matching the fading sky, was a slightly unnerving experience. The candle light inside dulled the greenish tinge without dispelling the gloom. Kitty felt claustrophobic on entering, despite the spacious, high-ceilinged, sparsely furnished rooms, but even if she’d been handed the car keys she couldn’t have fled, because from the moment she set eyes on Misha, she seemed to have fallen under his spell. She was at a loss to account for the unprecedented effect he had on her, but she also realised she couldn’t muster the least resistance to the peculiar sensation his presence induced in her.

It was hardly Misha’s fault. He had only made eye contact for a moment when he greeted her, but that had been enough to demolish her sense of reality. She moved through the evening as if suspended by invisible strings.

Alexei seemed sociable enough at first, helping mercurial Misha and bubbly Tamara prepare a sort of Russian stir-fry with noodles to accompany the dumplings.

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and stuffed cabbage rolls Tamara had made that morning. But once they were all seated at table, the shadows cast by the candles flickering eerily on the walls, he seemed to retreat into himself. Kitty’s attempts to engage him were futile, although she did manage to ascertain that he had a normal, regular job – well, if you could call importing caviar normal. She’d tasted some for the first time before the meal, with a glass of champagne. ‘Russian Vegemite,’ Misha had quipped, catching her eye. Kitty had almost choked at that point, and had to be thumped on the back, mortified.

Alexei, while unwilling to chat, seemed not oblivious to the non-verbal cues passing between Kitty and Misha. As he watched, from under his brows, his brother’s covert appraisal of Kitty, and her attempts to evade eye contact, a sardonic mask slipped over his features. It fitted him well, for Misha always got the girls, but why should Alexei care? Women made him uncomfortable. Still, did he wonder how it would feel to be the one sought after, for once…?

Delia and Nigel – an aspiring academic who tended to take himself rather too seriously – were touching each other’s thighs under the table. Tamara was her usual witty, effervescent self, holding the gathering together with her chatter and anecdotes, her delicate teardrop earrings flashing beside her pert-featured face and tilted green eyes. Her ancestry was not Russian, but Tartar. If she noticed Misha’s gaze straying across the pickled mushrooms and cucumbers, the herrings in brine, to linger on Kitty’s startled features, she gave no sign.

After the zakuski and main course, Alexei, Tamara and Misha excused themselves and retired to the kitchen to prepare the sweets. Before exiting, Tamara had dropped an old LP on the ancient gramophone to entertain them while they waited. It was a recording of a torch singer of the Soviet era. Delia, who had studied Russian at university, translated one of the lyrics for Nigel and Kitty:

Coachman, don’t urge the horses on:
I’ve nowhere else to hurry to,
there’s no one else for me to love,
so don’t whip up the horses...

The melancholy old romance seemed to echo the mood of the house in its evocation of a bleak night and deserted streets pervaded by a sense of stagnation and despondency. Where were the balalaikas, the hectic gaiety she’d been half expecting, Kitty wondered.

Tamara soon returned with Alexei, bearing plates of flaming Crêpes Suzette which they placed in front of the guests with a flourish, in a parody of sideshow magicians.

‘Where’s Misha?’ asked Delia.
‘He’ll be here in a moment,’ said Tamara, changing the record on the turntable. ‘I give you – Vertinsky!’ she announced airily.

As a nineteen-thirties cabaret number struck up, into the room burst Misha, befrocked and bejewelled, his amber-brown eyes elegantly though heavily dramatised with eyeliner and eyeshadow, his faux lashes mascaraed, lips a sultry moue of peony, framed by a long, dark, silky wig with a fringe brushing his high-arched brows. His lithe build and olive complexion were complemented by a slinky black sheath, though the jutting bosom would have to be fake.

Glitzy bracelets and rings caught the light as he minced around the faded
Oriental rug in time to the music, wearing a pair of Tamara’s stilettos. At every pause in the lyrics, he struck an attitude, glancing archly over his shoulder at Kitty.

Kitty was devastated afresh. Aghast yet mesmerised. Tamara looked amused, but she had seen it all before. These antics were already beginning to pall. As one in a trance, Kitty gazed at the silhouette on the wall as Misha thrust out a hip or rotated a naked shoulder. He had never so much as laid a finger on her, other than to briefly clasp her hand in greeting, yet she felt ravished by his presence, by the current of intense energy he was directing at her.

Approaching the table, Misha eased on a pair of elbow-length black gloves, kissed his fingertips to his audience, slid an index finger under Kitty’s chin to tilt her face upward, let his painted lips hover over hers for an instant, gave a brief laugh, then made his exit.

Nigel assumed a patronising expression, as if bored by such cheap theatrics. Kitty flushed with embarrassment that Delia had noticed, as had Alexei.

‘Are you OK?’ Delia asked.

Kitty nodded uncertainly.

‘You mustn’t take any notice of Misha,’ Tamara said kindly. ‘It’s just his way of releasing tension. Just a bit of fun.’

But Kitty felt as if a demon had wormed its way into her consciousness since she’d arrived at this house. A demon whose human form was slim, boyish, smooth-skinned and tawny-eyed, taunting her with the mysterious energy she found so compelling.

During the drive home, Kitty shrank into the back seat as Delia’s and Nigel’s thigh-fondling became more urgent in front, despite the restraining seat belts.

When a few days had elapsed, Kitty called Delia and asked, in what she hoped was a casual tone, for Misha’s and Alexei’s address. ‘I’d like to say thanks for the dinner,’ she said. ‘You know, send an old-fashioned card or a note…’

Delia, after a hesitant pause, dictated the details.

A week later, Kitty’s note was returned with the words scrawled across it ‘No such address’.