
Vincenzo Cerami is better known as a screenwriter than a novelist, although *Un borghese piccolo piccolo*, the Italian title of *A Very Normal Man*, was published early in his career in 1976 and was an instant success. The early acclaim owed something to the recommendation given by the Italian author Italo Calvino, whose *Marcovaldo* also portrays a man who could be described as a very ordinary man. There is a difference in the characters of Giovanni Vivaldi, the creation of Cerami, and Marcovaldo, who is hapless, endearing, and relatively harmless. Giovanni Vivaldi, on the other hand, while leading a life of stultifying boredom, comes to perpetrate a crime of sadistic cruelty with chilling indifference.

We first meet Giovanni Vivaldi with his son Marco, enjoying an afternoon of fishing at the small shack Giovanni intends to make his retirement home. His daily work is as a minor official in a Ministry where he calculates pensions, including his own, to which he attends assiduously. At home his prime interest is his son Marco, newly qualified as an accountant. Having a son who has reached such heights gives Giovanni great satisfaction, while he plots and schemes to have his son appointed to the same Ministry in which he himself has spent his working life. To this end Giovanni joins the Masons to avail himself of their influence. The induction ceremony is described in all its inept ritual, but Giovanni felt ‘completely at home in the Lodge … where he could find support among friends and the strength of unswerving logic bent on setting thinking to rights and restoring justice’. (36)

Having gained the support of his superior, he also gained a copy of the exam question, in advance, which his son Marco has to answer in the entry exam for the Ministry. It is an exam for which Marco never sits. He is killed in a random gun battle in the street, as he makes his way to the hall where the exam is to be held.

Life changes for Giovanni. His wife, who has existed as a shadowy figure ministering to her two men with coffee and food while Marco studies for his exam and Giovanni pores over the Freemasonry’s strictures and philosophies, has a stroke and sits helpless, sagging in her cane chair. His daily routine is punctuated by visits to the cemetery where his son’s body lies in a coffin among a number of other coffins, all waiting for a niche to become available so that they can be buried. From time to time he is called to the police station to inspect a line-up of likely suspects for the murder of his son. His workmates cease to treat him as a bereaved father, a change in attitude that diminishes him. ‘But as time went by he was pointed out less and less and he felt he was being erased. His shoulders slumped back into the curve of his jacket and his face got old and faded again, the way it used to be’ (71), until he finally recognises the man who killed his son in one of the police line-ups. Rather than report this fact to the police, he takes his own action to avenge his loss, and it is this action that he emerges as a man capable great cruelty.

What has Cerami achieved in this story of the very normal man? In his preface to the first edition, and quoted in this edition, Calvino wrote that, rather than being a caricature, the story is one of extraordinary events casting ‘a magnifying glass angled over the unredeemed ugliness at the heart of a civilised society – and over the tenacious lust for living which clings on in a world emptied of meaning’ (v). In the writing, there is simplicity which leads to a vivid portrayal of a very ordinary life with its routine, frustrations and limitations. The
conclusion is reminiscent of a medieval morality play. The evil-doer does not meet a violent end, but his life has come a full circle to become a life devoid of meaning.

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