



*Velvet and Plum  
Brandy*





“I fell on a chicken,” Mrs. Angelica said.

She looked at me with her Baltic-blue eyes; then a smile lighted her entire face and her tall, sturdy body started shaking with laughter.

I didn’t think I had heard well. One couldn’t fall on a chicken. I thought she said she fell on something else, more appropriate, like a nail or a piece of broken glass, or some other such protruding object. I looked for an apparent trace of wound somewhere on her body, but my search returned no results: she was clear of wounds. She looked fine. And she continued laughing. Out of sheer puzzlement I cried out:

“You mean you fell on a nail, right? Or something.”

“I mean I fell on a chicken.”

Mrs. Angelica was my current seamstress. That is, she wasn’t my possession or anything; I didn’t own her. She was a seamstress on Carpathians Street near the Farmers’ Market, who a few years back had opened a shop devoted solely and exclusively to alterations and repairs. Her shop was across the street from the glass-cutting and framing shop owned by Mr. Stelica, a diminutive, plumpish man with a big mouth and a permanent good disposition. Stelica wasn’t his name. As a matter of fact I had no idea what his name was, but he did look as if he should have been called Stelica. Mrs. Angelica and Mr. Stelica were not only neighbors but also went along pretty well, to the extent that he had manufactured and framed a little hand-written sign for her to hang on the wall and read whenever she felt under the weather. The sign said NO STRESS, and every now and then when she had to deal with an annoying customer Mrs. Angelica would sigh, and glance significantly at the sign with her limpid Nordic eyes.

“You gotta be kidding me. No one can just fall on a chicken. And what did the chicken do?”

“It expired.”

“You mean it died?”

“Well, duh, you see me, right? I am big enough to be able to kill a chicken when I fall on it.”

“You mean to say you murdered a chicken? What for? How on Earth did you manage? What did it do to you?”

“It didn’t do anything at all. Even if it wanted to, it COULDN’T do anything: I fell on it, remember?”

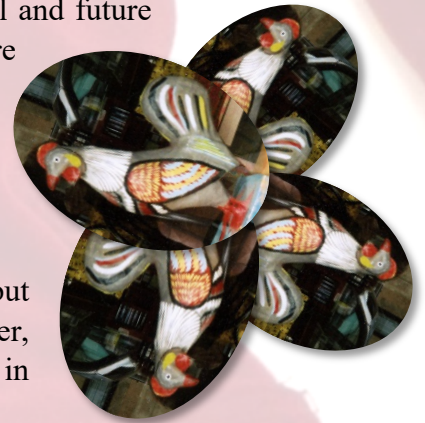
“Is this a regular occurrence? Are you in the habit of falling on chicken? Are you a sworn chicken exterminator and it all comes to light now?”

I could just imagine her on horseback, storming like one of Wagner’s Valkyries into the mass of hens and chicken and whatnots in her back yard and slaughtering the lot of them on account of some minor fault of theirs, or no fault at all. She lived in the country and, in addition to fowls she also owned and raised cows, pigs, and rabbits. I wondered whether she was valiant enough to fight the cows as well. Clearly she had not been meant to be called Angelica, for one imagines Blessed Angelica to have been thin, frail, and demure. I secretly thought Flavia was a better fit,

for Mrs. Angelica, although not being married to a Roman general and future emperor, had something generalesque, even imperial in her posture and demeanor.

She laughed some more, then said:

“God, no. Don’t judge a book by its cover. I mean, I know I look massive, and I admit that with my own hands I take the life of the occasional chicken or hen or rooster to make soup and *paprikas*, but that is one of life’s bare necessities. One has to eat. This time, however, it was an accident. I bent over the fence to feed the birds, and I fell in their coop head over heels.”



“And once it was dead and cold, what did you do? Did you bury it?”

“What do you mean, bury it?”

“I mean, was the chicken entombed, interred, laid to rest in a hole, or what? Were prayers said for its soul? Did you repent?”

“Oh well, don’t you know a chicken’s fate once it’s no longer of this world? It ended up as chicken soup and *paprikas*, although truth be told I didn’t wanna have chicken meat for dinner yesterday. But a body has to know how to keep misfortune in check, and my husband does like *paprikas*. So I had to cook the bird, may its soul rest in peace. We ate it with sour cream and polenta (the bird, not the soul, I mean).”

“Yeah, I can see that.”

“But that’s not all,” she went on.

“You mean to say?”

“That’s not all that happened since last night.”

“Of course not. Tell me more.”

“Well this morning I got in the car to come to town. You know I open my shop at 9 a.m. I parked the car in the front, unlocked the door, went straight to the desk and pulled a chair to sit down.”

“These don’t look like such intriguing or even unusual occurrences,” I said. “It seems to me that every morning when you come to the shop you’d need to sit down, right? After all, you’re a seamstress.”

“Yeah, but this time I broke the chair.”

“What?”

“I broke the chair. Or the chair broke under me. Just like that, with no warning. It was like with the chicken.”

“You FELL on the chair, too?”



“Not exactly. I sort of tried to sit on it but for some reason the chair wasn’t responding, so to speak; or perhaps this was its response to my soliciting. God knows. Anyway, I didn’t fall on the chair, I fell on the floor after the chair went to pieces. And there were no chicken around.”

“You are a fowl murderer and a furniture destroyer in one, you mean?”

“It appears to be that way, don’t it?”

Oh well, I thought, it doesn’t matter. That she falls on birds and annihilates them, or that a chair disintegrates upon her sitting on it wouldn’t change things a bit: she’s a true champion of alterations and small repairs.

After discovering Mrs. Angelica’s shop and Mrs. Angelica herself, I started rummaging through the boxes in which I had kept for two years all the garments I had shipped back from America and never wore on account of their no-longer-satisfactory shape or size. Every week or two I would put a dress, skirt, jacket, blouse, or a pair of pants in a plastic bag to take to Carpathians Street to be modified according to my taste of late, which no longer coincided with my taste at the time the garments were purchased. I mean, that’s obvious, isn’t it; otherwise, why have them altered at all.

And that’s how I ended up with a completely new collection of clothing for all seasons and occasion.

The first garment I asked Mrs. Angelica to alter was a pair of beige lace pants lined with beige satin. These were oversized, for such had been the trend twenty years earlier when I purchased them, flattering myself I was a lady of true modishness. Ah! The pants were a glorious sight: they were truly Mozartesque in both fabric and cut, possessing as they did slits on the sides, and ending slightly above the ankle.

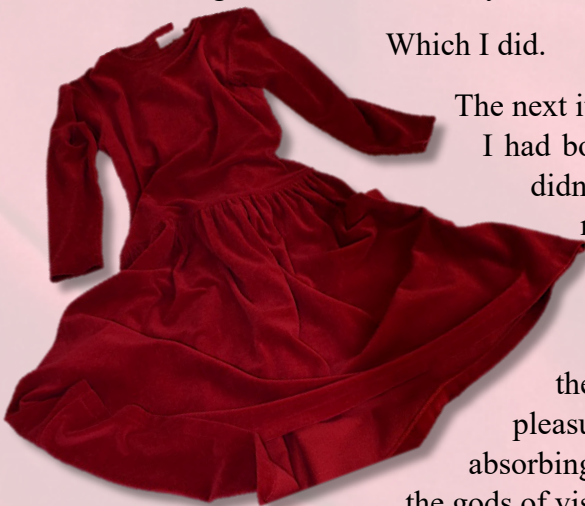
“On my word,” said Mrs. Angelica, “these are some noble pants.”

“Yeah, I suppose they had been meant to be worn with ample-ruffled cream-colored silk chemises, buckled satin shoes, and powdered wigs. Count Almaviva would have gladly clad himself in a pair of pants like that.”

Mrs. Angelica agreed:

“You’re right. When I’m done, you must wear them to the Opera with a black velvet jacket.”

Which I did.



The next item was this fabulous sour cherry-colored velvet dress I had bought in San Francisco in the late 1990s. I am sure I didn’t acquire it to celebrate the end of the millennium; rather, I was attracted to the color first and the fabric next, or to both simultaneously, I couldn’t say. The piece was absolutely breathtaking: calf-length skirt, low waist, long sleeves, rounded neckline. Touching the velvet gave you goosebumps and drove you mad with pleasure, for it was a feel of the greatest sensuality; absorbing the color through your eyes was like saying a prayer to the gods of visual richness. I swear you could DRINK that color like



you would vintage Burgundy, it was so thick and nearly fragrant with tint, and—well, velvety. Yeah, it was the perfect color for velvet to have.

I wore that dress paired with a black hat on Geary Street one afternoon, and the Green Woman of Plaster seated among her bags in front of the now defunct *Hotel Frank* eyed me and turned greener with envy. I don't know why, for we had been on amiable terms ever since we met a few years back. Every Saturday on my way to the Goodwill store on Geary I would stop and pat her hat, and she never minded, nor did she ask for remuneration. She even let me take her picture once.



When I took the dress to Mrs. Angelica to take it in at the waist and hips, the second-hand shop keepers on Carpathians Street all came to her door to watch; and one of them said “Oh my goodness thank God for your dress, it's high time most of us here should learn something of the ways of the world! So that's how they make dresses in America!”

Carpathians street connected Little Square, where the public toilets had been since times immemorial, to the Farmers' Market. In my early youth it used to be a thriving commercial thoroughfare, however diminutive, where shops of every kind offered their services to the public. For a broken window you went to the glazier's; gutter trouble was fixed by the tinsmith; there were carpenters, watch repairers, cobblers, and lots more on that street, which was greatly animated from the early hours of morning till late afternoon. On account of various needed house repairs, and also on account of the street's vibrancy, Father used to be an assiduous visitor; but little of that remains, except for the second-hand clothing stores and the shop sign of the former *Fisherman's Restaurant* of ill fame, the establishment itself now abandoned by both smelly Bacchus' adorers and its owner.

Little Square was a source of earthly delights as well, for it provided space for the occasional itinerant circus show where you could watch and be horror-stricken by the snake-woman and the colossal whale skeleton on display next to the stage where a man alternatively swallowed fire and swords without batting an eyelash.

All of that has been long gone. Mrs. Angelica had brought her sewing machine and the rest of her tailoring paraphernalia to Carpathians Street only recently, and now she was asking me:

“What do you want to alter this dress for? I'd wear it exactly the way it is. Why you think all dresses should cling to one's body is beyond me. Why look at it: true, it's sort of oversized and one might suppose you have no waist at all, but THAT's the style of the garment. Someone perhaps more experienced than yourself must have thought long and hard about how to make the best of this gorgeous fabric, and this is what they came up with. On my word, you should not alter a square centimeter of it.”

“Mrs. Angelica, it's not that. It's only that from the hips down this dress reminds me of a potato sack. Granted, a princely potato sack; nevertheless, just a sack. Someone ought to give it a more appealing, curvaceous shape. And I believe that someone is you.”

Mrs. Angelica had a tremendous eye for lines, and an uncanny dexterity with regard to sticking pins into fabrics. She required no fittings at all: you put your dress on and with the speed of



light she would stick a pin here, a pin there, till she got an idea of the desired shape. Next time you went to her shop it was to pick up the finished dress, and it would fit your body to perfection. For Mrs. Angelica wasn't your run-of-the-mill seamstress: she had a college degree in fashion design, and she was a true artist down to her fingertips, literally.

She fiddled for a little while with the measuring tape on her work table, then said:

"Except I'll have to undo the whole thing, eliminate the excess fabric, and sew it back again, and that's gonna take some time. It won't be ready by next week, for this is brandy-making season."

"And what's it got to do with anything? How is my dress connected to brandy-making?"

She smiled benevolently, like people do when facing ignorance or stupidity or both, and started to explain:

"We have plums. Lots of plums. Hundreds of kilos of plums. No one in their right mind around here EATS plums. They are reserved for making plum brandy, the most delicious kind you could imagine. Fragrant and strong, like fire rushing through your throat. I'll bring you some when it's done."

Now I knew Mrs. Angelica was greatly addicted to husbandry, and an artist at that, too, as proven by the five-liter jar she once gave me filled with aromatic pickles. Between repairing holes in old trousers, re-hemming dresses and skirts, and generally bringing clothing alterations to a whole new status and dignity, she had sowed, watered, weeded, and grown a whole parcel of cucumbers which she then turned into heavenly pickles. She also grew potatoes, cabbage, corn, green beans, carrots, parsley, celery, red beets, parsnips, and even pumpkins. Mrs. Angelica was an accomplished person in every way.

But I didn't know she was also an expert in plum brandy.

"Look at my face," she said. "I haven't slept the whole of last night. Where do you think I was?"

"Now Mrs. Angelica, I can't imagine you as a habitual of night clubs and such similar places of perdition. Fowl killing and chair breaking is one thing, but night clubbing, if that's a word, is a different thing altogether. No, I don't suppose you spent last night in a place of ill fame. You don't strike me as the type."

"Of course not, don't be ridiculous. I drove to the distillery at two in the morning to take the fermented plums my husband had left behind, and see that the men didn't get too drunk."

"At that ungodly hour?"

"Yeah, you know, people stand in line at the distillery, and it's a matter of when your turn comes. It's in high demand at this time of the year."

I could imagine her maneuvering humongous, hundred-liter metal cauldrons and plunging Gulliver-sized ladles into the thick, hot, bubbling liquid; I could smell the plums and the alcohol, and I could see the steam raising and taking possession of both the room and Mrs. Angelica like thick fog, till she could be seen no more. I myself felt a little inebriated from the vision, so I left the shop in a hurry; my gait was a little wobbly, I thought.





Three weeks later, when the velvet dress was done I took it home and put it on to go on parade in Old Town. I met Imelda on Vineyard Bridge and she greeted me from afar: “Hellooooo! You look as if straight from the Internet.” I knew what she meant, and it was the greatest compliment anyone aged fourteen or younger could pay these days.

Imelda was a gipsy girl of about eleven whom I had met on a walk in the Municipal Park, and her real name wasn’t Imelda. I don’t know what she was called, but she looked to me like she could rightfully bear the name, so I christened her in my mind. Imelda was a beauty in her own right, the owner of huge green eyes and rosy lips, and a smart child in the bargain: every time we met she would ask me for a buck. It wasn’t the humble and quasi-polite “Spare some change” you get in the States. It was more like she believed she was entitled to ask, and it was understood that you would be either stupid or downright ill-mannered to reject her royal demands. I didn’t oblige every time, though, for after some deliberation Imelda and I had reached an agreement, and that was that she’d get a buck from me EVERY OTHER time we met. Today was not one of those times, so she wouldn’t get anything, and that’s how I knew her admiration, like the Green Lady’s on Geary Street, was genuine. Imelda didn’t turn green, though; she was too young for that.

Walking on Vineyard Bridge I kept thinking of the increasingly apparent association between my sour-cherry velvet dress and beverages containing alcohol in smaller or larger percentages. Obviously, on account of color the vintage Burgundy connection had been there from start, but it was now becoming necessary from a logical standpoint to establish a link between dress and plum brandy, which was a colorless, uninteresting liquid. I mean, not chromatically catchy. How could they be joined in an impeccably coherent statement?

It then occurred to me that for the longest time Mother, now ninety-four, had been an advocate of the one-tumbler-a-day principle. That meant she drank plum brandy at the rate of one small glass per day. I myself cared nothing for the taste or smell of plum brandy, but she was quite enthusiastic about it. I tended to give her some credit, as she had been a medical doctor; surely she must know a great deal about the beneficial effects of alcohol intake on the elderly. I suspected it had to do with blood circulation: as alcohol ran through one’s blood vessels, it either enlarged them so as to make more room for blood, which then could flow more easily; or else it simply burned the fat deposits, so veins and arteries won’t get clogged. Yes, that must be the answer.

Anyway, when her tumbler was empty and bone-dry (it’s a widely known fact that alcohol evaporates quickly) Mother would always place it on the table, bottom-up. She did that not only with tumblers, but also with goblets, beakers, wineglasses, tea cups, and coffee cups. But it was the tumblers that killed me.





“I fail to see why you’d do that, and it annoys me no end: it seems an unthoughtful, almost barbarian custom. Of you, of all people, I certainly expect lady-like manners and suave behavior. You have a degree in philosophy, and you graduated med school. Why do you turn your tumbler upside down like the lowest drunk? Is it for some subtle philosophical reason that I’m not aware of?”

“And what’s it to you?” Mother said. “I don’t know why I do it. It’s a mystery to me. It’s not important, and I just do it because I’ve always done it.”

Surely Mother, like Mrs. Angelica, was not a frequenter of drinking establishments. Well yeah, in the old days if you went to *The Fisherman*, *The Ignish*, or any other such dump in town or country you could probably see drunken fellows replacing their glass on the table in the wrong position, but that was on account of the high density of fog in their brain. But my own mother was a brilliant, well-mannered person and had been so her entire life, so where on Earth she could have acquired the habit was beyond me.

Now it’s a known fact that walking increases heart activity, so the organ itself pumps blood faster and more energetically. In turn, this blood by necessity travels to one’s brain at great speed, making one more intellectually alert and prone to solving disquieting issues quicker. I was now walking as fast as I could in my sour-cherry colored velvet dress, and suddenly it dawned on me. This was why Mother turned her tumbler upside-down:



Grandpa Dionysus, her father, had been a lieutenant in the Austro-Hungarian army during WW I. As such, he was taken prisoner by the Russians and spent four years in several POW camps, mostly in Siberia. Now everyone knows it’s beastly cold in Siberia, and they have some of the world’s most trying winters, so it stands to reason, I assumed, he and his comrades followed the local custom of drinking both hot tea AND hard liquor to alleviate the crucifying pain of thinking they could die by congelation of blood and freezing of limbs. Since the time I became aware of his existence, which happened when I turned four, grandpa never drank anything but water, syrup, milk, cocoa, and hot tea; and he never, ever reminisced about such times when he with his own lips COULD or WOULD have touched brandy, vodka, or any other kind of alcohol other than the wine used in Communion at church.

As luck would have it, though, not long before Mrs. Angelica gave my velvet dress a new lease on life I had read a book authored by one of grandpa’s former comrades-in-arms and published in the 1920s. The book was called—damn, I didn’t recall its title. It started to bother me no end that I was on the verge of a historical breakthrough, yet a small detail like that stood in the way. I came to a complete halt, then turned on my heels and ran back home, straight to the library room. And there it was: sitting on a shelf, alongside a whole bunch of books dealing with WW I, S. Ghisa’s *Romanians Fighting Bolsheviks in Siberia, 1918-1920*, page two hundred and fifteen: “Russians drink lots of tea, up to six cups [presumably at one single meal, I speculated]. If you are with people of significant social standing, you thank your host; but if you are in a commoner’s house you simply turn your cup upside-down. This shows you are done drinking, so the host knows not to offer any more tea.”



I burst into Mother's room:

"Mother, do you know why you place your tumbler on the table bottom-up?"

She was watching the news on TV, so she sounded really pissed:

"Leave me alone. What in the name of God possessed you to ask me now? It's not important, I told you. Go away!"

"Mother, it's VERY important. It's of great significance. I am trying to establish historical facts here. I am trying to reconstruct the past to justify the present. Grandpa must have acquired the habit when he was in Russia, and as a child in his home you MUST have witnessed him performing the gesture thousands of times. And now, that you've reached this splendidly old age, your brain is bringing to the fore memories of your earliest years. Yes, I'm sure, that must be it."

Mother said nothing for a while, but her eyes grew narrower and the creases on her cheeks seemed to grow deeper. Then she parted her lips into a dreamy smile:

"Do you know what? I like that. I like that a lot. And I also like your velvet dress. It's of supreme elegance and good taste. Now go away and let me watch the news."

The next day I went to Mrs. Angelica's shop to take some more stuff to be altered. She was standing in front of the sewing machine and, as I removed the garments one by one from the plastic bag, she bent and grabbed something from the floor: it was another plastic bag, containing a bottle filled with some chromatically uninteresting liquid. Mrs. Angelica said:

"Allow me to present you with a small quantity of the area's most delicious plum brandy. It's a gift for a loyal customer."



