



Lace

FEBRUARY 5, 2017

Mother said:

“Back in February I started bringing down into the kitchen and cleaning the empty glass bottles and jars that had been collecting in the attic for years: there were hundreds of them, and I was worried that the house’s ceilings would crack from the weight, God forbid. With the money I got from selling the bottles, I bought two point five meters of pink lace from a lady who just returned from Hungary.”

My mother was a medical doctor. She worked in a microbiology lab scrutinizing, describing, fighting, and generally giving hell to all sorts of bacteria, viruses, and other such miniscule creatures which she looked at all day long through a microscope. In addition to these, the lab possessed a collection of assorted ladies with relatives in foreign parts; these women were constantly returning from Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany with exotic things for sale. On Monday afternoon, coming from work, Mother reprised the lace idea:

“You and I are going to Mariska Néni and taking the fabric with us. Your father and I want to give you the gift of a new dress for your seventeenth birthday.”

In those days turning sixteen wasn’t a big deal; not in our part of the world. What counted was turning seventeen, and I had already done that in May, so this was a belated gift.

We walked to Mariska Néni’s house behind the Jewish synagogue, stepped into her glass-walled veranda, and rang the doorbell. Mariska Néni was always at home in the afternoons, for either she was retired, or else she didn’t have to work a 9-to-5 job because her husband was a mining engineer—I didn’t know which and I didn’t care. Anyway, she was a sartorial genius, as the masterpieces she had sewn for me over the years had plainly shown.

“I love the lace. It’s exactly the color an olive-skinned girl like you needs to set off her complexion.”

She unfolded the fabric on the living room table, and it was a vision in pink. It had a pattern of delicately embroidered flowers and leaves of different sizes intertwined with long, undulating stems. These went on and on, interlacing into infinity to form a rolling, rosy landscape. I had had two pink outfits before that, but this one was going to be a chef-d’oeuvre.

Mariska Néni pulled out her notepad, picked the Koh-I-Noor pencil from her desk, and started sketching. From time to time she would pause, raise her Delft-blue eyes to the ceiling, then to the curtained windows, and frown pensively. She averred:

“You’ve lost weight and you look charming. This dress is going to be fit for a princess. Mind your manners when you wear it.” And to Mother: “It will need lining. You’ll have to purchase three meters of pink satin. We also need lots of pink thread.”

But I already had my own idea about this particular garment. My inspiration came from the one I had seen on my friend, Dolly, who had visited Morocco two summers earlier. Dolly had blue eyes and a pen-pal in Casablanca. She got an invitation from him to visit; she got a passport; she got a Romanian exit visa; and a French transit visa. This was something so extraordinary in those days that it elevated her status to that of a movie star. She spent there an entire month, and when she returned she told the most wonderful stories about her Moroccan friend, his family, places they took her to, and the amazing things she saw in Casablanca stores.

I had watched *Casablanca* on grandma's Judas-money TV (introduced in a previous story), and it seemed to me now that, unquestionably, Dolly was a cinematic hero. I admired her no end.

Anyway, when she returned in mid-summer she came to visit, and we climbed the wooden staircase connecting our pantry at the back of the house with the attic. Up there I had furnished a corner of which I was the sole administrator: among the huge, pre-war trunks we had gotten stuff shipped in from grandma's, the hundreds of dusty, empty glass bottles and jars, and freshly washed clothes hanging to dry, I had pinned center-folds from *Mademoiselle Age Tendre* and *Salut les Copains*, its older companion. It was unbearably hot in the attic, but Dolly and I never minded. We would sit on the trunks and sweat. We would chat, drink lemonade, and contemplate pictures of major French pop stars. Through the four attic windows we would peek down at passers-by.

"I saw real orange trees," she said.

We got our oranges from Jaffa, once a year, right before Christmas. I knew that from the word JAFFA stamped on them in block letters. People lined up in a frenzy to get them at the grocer's, and they were gone in a week. Jaffa was where Bertha had moved in the early '60s. After she left, she once sent us a postcard, and it dawned on me that she was living in Orange Land.

But we were in the early '70s now. Sipping delicately from her lemonade, Dolly told me:

"I had a layover in Paris, at Orly airport."

You couldn't beat that.

The next day I went to her house, and Dolly showed me the garments she had brought back from Morocco. They looked foreign. They were exotic. They were made of fabrics you couldn't see in our stores, and they smelled awesome. There was a light-blue jeans suit which you couldn't get in Romania for love or money, and for which she was to be the talk of the town, and envied for years thereafter. But the standout number was a light-blue lace mini-dress she modelled for me for the grand finale. With her blue eyes and almost-blonde hair, she looked positively glamorous, an image of foreignness and Western opulence.

This, then, was the frock I took as a model for my own pink one, so I told Mariska Néni:

"Could I borrow your pencil and pad?" She handed them to me, and I sketched the dress. I modified the original here and there, but my version was equally stunning, I thought. Simple yet dazzling. It had to be of simple shape, because the lace was complicated; it was fated to be dazzling by virtue of that same, lacey complexity.

To begin with, it was a mini-dress. Next, it was a princess dress: it was to have an elevated waistline, which I placed just below the chest. From there, the skirt was A-shaped and of mid-thigh length. There were above-the-elbow, balloon-shaped sleeves; and an oval-shaped neckline. Then I sketched the finishing touches: narrow satin bands circling the neckline and the elevated waistline, with a large satin ribbon hanging down all the way to the hemline. The slits in the lace would facilitate the catching of glimpses of the shiny satin lining. I imagined an evening at the opera: the satin would reflect the lights of the tulip-shaped lamps in the foyer, as I slowly and deliberately descended the marble steps of the *Grand Escalier*, the Grand Staircase. That dress was definitely going to be my magnum opus. And Mariska Néni's.

PARTHENIA IN-VIOLATA.

OR

Mayden-Musicke for the Virgins Bass-Viol

By Robert Hol

Selected out of the

All you professors of
So strue your eart^h for
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omposure of the parts
all Harmony of hearts.
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Cum privilegio



Now opera-going in those days was an affair of undeniable cultural significance and immense social prestige. Grandma had been attending performances since the 1930s, and even Mother, born in 1923, had been named after a famous opera singer of the day, Lya Popp. In the 1960s people were queueing at the box office. We lived on the very same street, and every week grandma would stand in line to purchase tickets for me; not for herself, though, for she had a real sneaky way about the whole thing. She didn't want to spend the money for two tickets, so this is what she did:

"We're going to the opera tomorrow tonight. They're performing *Aida* (or *Barber of Seville*, or *The Marriage of Figaro*, or whatever else they were playing on the morrow). Dionysus (that was grandpa), would you polish your granddaughter's lacquered shoes."

And to me:

"I am going to press your dress and braid your hair tomorrow afternoon. You are to get on your white stockings. I have some perfume left in the right-hand drawer of the vanity. Look for the blue bottle. Go easy on it."

"I thought you kept the *odicolon* in the blue bottle." *Odicolon* was 'eau de Cologne,' but I said it the way grandma did, for she had taught me all I knew about perfumes and other good-smelling concoctions. Not that I knew too much: for instance, I was a total ignoramus in matters of face creams or body lotions or nail polish. Grandma had decreed that I didn't need them.

"The *odicolon* is in the pink bottle. The *oditolete* (this was 'eau de toilette') is in the white one. Learn your bottles."

Grandma purchased perfumery from the shop down the street. The shop had a distinctive name, as proven by its lilac-colored neon sign, which read *The Lilac Perfumery*. Ms. Kati was the boss at the shop, and she was a bossy lady. She was tall, slim, had a big rouged mouth and protruding upper teeth, and her long, pointed nails were always varnished a dark red. She had a big head of hair, meticulously coiffed. Somehow she managed to look like a horse, I always thought. She wore garments of great elegance underneath her snow-white work uniform, but the most impressive article in her attire were the high-heeled, pointed shoes. Her appearance was intimidating, so I never entered the shop unless accompanied by grandma.

But the stuff Ms. Kati was selling was heavenly. Perfume was not sold in its own bottle in those days. Rather, it was sold in minute quantities poured from the dozens of two-liter glass containers neatly arranged on shelves behind Ms. Kati's counter. There were mirrors mounted on the wall behind the shelves. They reflected the bottles and the multicolored liquids these bottles contained. It was a magnificent sight.

"How many milliliters from the jasmine?" Ms. Kati would ask. This was a vanilla-colored liquid. "I see. And from the roses?" and she would point at a pink-colored container. "Any lilac today? We just got a new shipping of lilies-of-the-valley."

Grandma would hand over her little bottles and specify the needed quantities.

So in preparation for going to the opera I would apply whatever perfume or *odicolon* or *oditolete* was left in the right-hand drawer of the vanity. She then would go on:

“Here’s money for the program booklet and here is some money for sweets (go easy on those, too; you’re not exactly thin, you know).”

We had an impressive collection of opera program booklets, which grandma had kept since long before my days in elementary and middle school. They were neatly piled in the bottom drawer of one of grandpa’s large oak bookcases, and I had free access to them. There were two bookcases, each equipped with double glass doors through which you could see the book spines. The bookcases had been made in the 1920 at grandpa’s request, and in consultation with the best carpenters the town could offer. So was all the furniture in my grandparents’ apartment. The doors were locked, but the keys were in the locks. Some amount of physical labor as well as moral determination were required to pull the bottom drawers open. The wood was old, it was heavy, the drawers wouldn’t budge, and I was only a child. But once the job was done, there was no end to the wonders one could find in there. The delightful thing about these opera booklets was that they contained not only famous singers’ names and photographs, but also the synopsis, which I could read again and again to my heart’s content.



Grandpa, who had graduated in the late 1920s with a Philosophy and Pedagogy degree from the University of Bucharest, had hundreds of books. These were mostly philosophy and psychology tomes, so I found them utterly uninteresting. But there were some novels by Romanian authors, and not a few of the volumes were Romanian translations of noted English-language writers: Louis Bromfield, Pearl S. Buck, and the like.

Grandpa was an irritatingly meticulous person: he had all of his books numbered and listed alphabetically by author in a *Repertoire*, which he kept in the left-hand side drawer of his writing desk. The numbers themselves were also written in blue ink on diminutive, circular labels he had pasted onto the front cover of each volume.



For instance, the three hard-cover volumes of Queen Marie's *Memoirs* (called *The Story of My Life*) published in the mid-'30s were nos. 388, 389, and 400, respectively. Bromfield's *The Rains Came* in two volumes bore the numbers 755 and 756 (these had been purchased by Mother in 1940, when she was a Philosophy undergraduate at the University of Bucharest).

It was from reading grandpa's books that I found out Romania had once been a kingdom, and had had a Queen called Marie, who was half-Russian, half-English, and a granddaughter of Queen Victoria's. We never learned that in school. But somehow, throughout my childhood I knew that when Queen Marie died her heart was scooped out of her chest and taken to her palace in Balchik. That was a disturbing thought. The body was embalmed and shown at the Pelesh Castle in Sinaia to mourners from all over the country, and grandma and

grandpa traveled all the way to Sinaia just to see the Queen's corpse.

It was July 1938, and on that occasion Mother was sent to live with relatives at a place called Rebra, where she saw a large number of people with neck wattles. The wattles came from lack of iodine, Mother said. They were so big, people twisted them around their necks and threw them over their right shoulders, like scarfs. That was another scary thought: I had seen double-chinned people, triple-chinned people (Mrs. Mia was one of these), and real turkeys with neck wattles in Ileana's back yard; I even had a schoolmate called John Wattle; but that people themselves could have neck wattles and wear them like collars was really weird.

Nevertheless, Queen Marie's *Story of My Life* was a marvelous tale, adorned with lots of photographs of the Queen as a child, a young woman, a bride (she had married Prince Ferdinand of Romania), a mother, and as Queen of Romania. It was a truly attractive item.

But the opera program booklets were by far superior.

On the evening of the performance grandma would take my hand and we would walk down the street to the opera house. She would show my ticket to the usher and say:

"Honey, I am not going to stay. I'm just walking in with my granddaughter to make sure she gets her seat. Look at me, I'm not even dressed for opera. I'll be out in no time."

They would let us pass, and I would take my seat. She would stay behind to chat with the cloak room attendant till the lights were dimmed; then she would step surreptitiously into the performance hall, hunt



for a seat that had not been taken, and take possession of it with dignity and poise. From that post she couldn't be dislodged till the end of Act I. Gradually, over the years she developed a celebrity aura of her own, and became known to both ushers and cloak room attendants as "Mrs. Leontine who is bringing her granddaughter to the opera." In the mid-to-late '60s she never had to buy a ticket for herself. She was already a legend.

Such were the subtle ways of grandma.

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But these were occurrences of some years before, when I was still a child. Nowadays grandma didn't accompany me to the opera anymore, for I was seventeen and had grown into a young lady. And that's how I envisioned myself in my new lace dress: beautiful, adorable, stunning, wistful, romantic, desirable—yet poised and untouchable. A vision in pink.

And yet—NO: Fate decided otherwise. I didn't get to wear my pink lace dress to the opera in the fall, for the simple reason that over the summer I put on precisely the weight that made it impossible for the garment to fit. The weight came from the larded bread I had been eating every day with Dolly at the municipal pool.

The dress is still hanging in my wardrobe. A few months ago I took it to my current seamstress, Mrs. Monica, to be altered: all it needs is a few additional centimeters at the hemline. Mrs. Monica, who works out of a shop on Carpathians Street down by Farmers' Market took the dress, turned it inside out, then back again, and averred:

"They don't make lace like this anymore. This dress is a masterpiece."



Here ends the book
called
Matters of Couture
Written by
Luminita Florea,
ancilla ancillarum Dei
in the year of our Lord
2017

Mrs. Monica, a seamstress of genius of whom there is talk in the
last paragraph of this story

has passed away unexpectedly in March 2021. She is
irreplaceable as a strong, vibrant, and funny human being; and
as a masterful couturier.

To her memory is dedicated the story
“Velvet and Plum Brandy,” a special feature of the month of
March,
which the inquisitive reader may read at his or her leisure
in *Archives and Contact*
on this website by clicking on said link which he or she will find
at the top of the Home page

VALE