

House of Peony

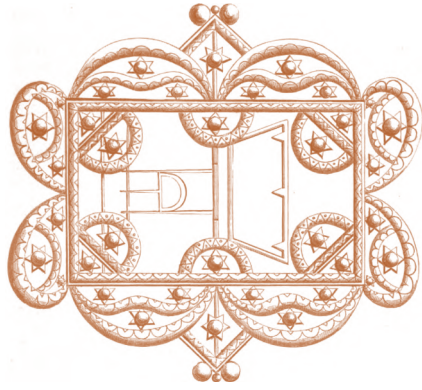
November 8, 2019

A shop like that, you can charge a pound for coming through the door ...

*And the painted sign, Benny? P&B scrolled together in a crest, which is what gives the shop its name
up and down the town ...*

John le Carré, The Tailor of Panama





It was difficult to find the main entrance to Mr. Peony's shop; and when you found it, it was a pain to find the shop itself. For Mr. Abraham Peony was a Master Tailor, and his shop was situated somewhere in the middle of a gloomy hallway on the second floor of an eighteenth-century building in Old Town. The correct address was 1, Vineyard Bridge, and from the street you couldn't tell there was anything behind the rusty iron gate leading to a flight of ancient, wide, decaying wooden stairs—anything other than pitch-dark emptiness on a cloudy, nippy late-March day. That, and musty smells.

Once you stepped through the iron gate, and if you watched your step carefully and didn't trip and lose your balance, you would—in due time and with infinite patience—get to the first landing; from there, through a large and dirty window you could take a peek into no. 3's backyard, but you probably wouldn't want to do that. There were more wooden steps making a sharp turn to the right, and if you took these you found yourself in the second floor hallway. A single unshaded lightbulb proffered some light, but it was really only a suggestion rather than the real thing; it was sufficient, though, to help you find your way to a small door on your left as you walked down the hallway—and that was the actual entrance to Mr. Peony's headquarters: the sign on the door said TAILOR'S SHOP.

I knocked, and there was no answer. I knocked again—still no answer; so I cracked the door open and stepped in. The bell hanging over the door went “ding-a-ling” once, then it took a long break, which was obviously well deserved on account of old age and overuse. There was no one in the room but solid silence, a full-length mirror hanging on the wall behind golden curtains, a large cutting table taking up most of the space, some shelves containing rolls of fabric of diverse textures and colors on the wall opposite the mirror, and, on the same side of the room, a few pegs you could hang your coat on (I don't mean to say you needed all of the pegs to hang a single coat on; just one peg would suffice). The window behind the table offered a truncated view of Vineyard Bridge.

I had come to Mr. Peony with some beautiful velvet of intricate design which I had bought from Ileana's shop for next to nothing. It was printed cotton velvet of respectable thickness, the kind of thing you couldn't find nowadays in Romania for love or money, for most textile manufacturers were closed down. The few that remained were making stuff that had you sweat in summer and freeze in winter—polyester of the cheapest kind trying to pass as nobler and classier fabrics. It was Ileana herself who had directed me to Mr. Peony's shop, and it was thanks to her that I found myself now in Mr. Peony's *sancta sanctorum*, clasping the fabric and hoping in the relatively near future someone was going to show up and ask me who I was and, more to the point, what on Earth I was doing in there.

It happened: a man came out of the next room, which appeared to be a vast expanse of space filled with sewing machines and three people sewing and ironing their lives away, and I said I was looking for Mr. Peony.

“That's me,” he said. “And may I ask what brings you to us today?”

It was worth the somewhat scary adventure of climbing up the decrepit staircase—a test I had passed with flying colors, not tripping, not breaking limbs, and keeping a cool head—for the man looked impeccably dressed: the very embodiment of the Master Tailor of the Old School, wearing a gray woolen three-piece suit of the most perfect cut, an immaculate blue shirt, a dark-blue necktie, and polished leather shoes. I thought I could safely deliver myself into his hands.

“Mr. Peony, you were recommended by a friend of mine. She says a friend of hers said you do stuff like no one else, and I have this large piece of velvet I bought from her. Some would say it’s upholstery fabric, but I don’t care. Can you make me a long coat out of it? You know, the most stylish coat you ever made in your life. Something people would go crazy about, something to turn heads and arouse mad jealousy in the entire population of this town and beyond. International envy. Universal bitterness. Do you think it’s possible?”

“Hmm ...” he said, and coughed significantly. “Everything is possible. Let me see. Give me the fabric.”

I did. He took it and spread it on the cutting table.

“So what kind of coat do you want?”

“I guess you could refer to it as a 1950s retro swing coat. You know, longish, fitted at the waist, and sort of flared from the waist down. I want a dancing coat, if you get my meaning, a coat that would bounce up and down at every step you took. Round collar. And I’d like velvet-covered buttons, if you please—it is my firm opinion that covered buttons lend sophistication to even the most humble of coats, and this one will be far from modest: it will be sumptuous.”

With my hands I drew shapes in the air to make him better understand what I had in mind.

“How many buttons?”

“Five, I guess. Oh, and buttons at the sleeves as well, please.”

“I see. Seven buttons. Right. Well, we’ll have to measure the fabric and see whether that’s feasible.”

“But Sir, you just said everything is possible.”

“Yes, Miss, but within limits. I need to see now what those limits are.”

He turned the fabric this way and that on the cutting table by the window. No muscle moved on his face, but I fancied I heard him mumbling to himself “... hmm ... international envy ... two meters and eighty centimeters ... crazy about a coat ... seven buttons total ... hmm ...”

After much consideration and numerous motions of the hands and measuring tape, “Miss,” he said decidedly, “sorry, cannot do.”





“You can’t do it?! Oh, my, Mr. Peony. That’s a major disappointment. And why is that?”

“Well you see, Miss, you have to understand velvet; it’s a strange animal, and a delicate one: it catches the light and reflects it in interesting ways, so you have to be very careful the way you cut it and stitch the pieces together. If the pile is facing down, you get a duller color; if it’s facing up, you get a more intense version of the color. Come closer to the window, please. See now?”

I did see.

“So you have to cut all the pattern pieces in the same direction, either up or down, but we don’t have enough material here to do that AND obtain the shape you describe. Consequently, you’ll have to think of a different pattern which requires less material, so the cutting is properly done.”

“Oh. That really saddens me,” I said.

It did sadden me, for the velvet’s behavior as explained by Mr. Peony was pointing to the fact that my dream of a fifties’ coat was being shattered to pieces under my very eyes. The buttons tore away from the coat that had taken shape in my mind, fell on the floor and on Mr. Peony’s cutting table, then rolled away and got scattered all over the place; I bent to collect them but I realized they were fictional buttons.



“Let’s do this, Mr. Peony: do your best with this fabric and I shall be grateful to you. Never mind it lay on a chair in our library room for weeks, waiting for me to make up my mind as to what I want to do with it: do I want to turn it into curtains or a sofa covering; or maybe I’d like grandpa’s library chairs to be reupholstered? It took so long for me to be suddenly struck by the idea of having the velvet turned into a coat, that now I can’t give it up. As I said, please do your best and make me a sartorial piece ordinary people in the street would admire and hate me for, simultaneously.”

Mr. Peony nodded with what I hoped was benevolence, and set a date for the first fitting.

Even at that early stage in its history the coat fitted to perfection. I don’t think I’d ever met a tailor who was such a master of his art. It occurred to me that when the piece was finished I should think of a label to be sewn some place on the inside, the way they do at famous *maisons*





great concentration served to the public at

de couture in Paris, Milan, London, or New York. A coat of arms displaying a *lion passant guardant* or a *dog statant* or even a *lion rampant* or some other such heraldic animal, like aristocratic houses in England or Spain or similar would possess and display to remind everybody of the family's noble deeds. Why even coffee shops and drinking establishments of some repute always have a plaque or two (that's a shop sign, in case some may think I am being too pompous [that means bombastic, in case the same people wonder]) affixed to their exterior walls to perpetuate the memory and labors of those who'd founded them, to spread the institution's fame, and to help make progress in the art of making money.

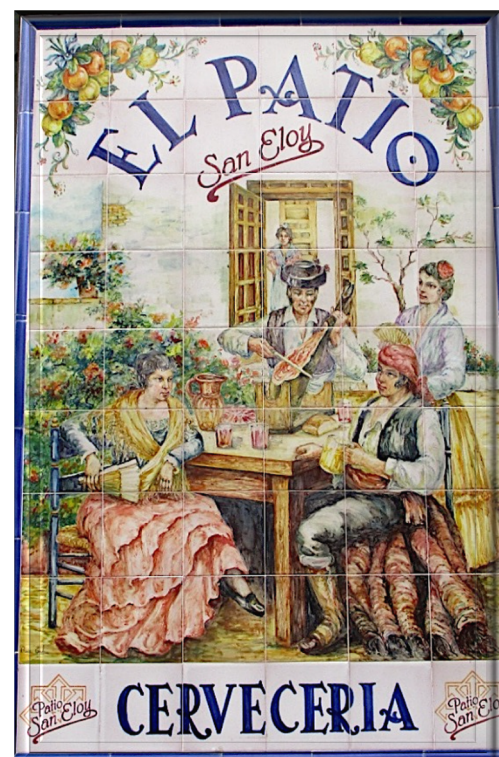
Like, for instance, the one to the left, whose obvious purpose was to praise the virtues of exquisite selected coffees of blissful aroma and



coffee shop in Seville, long since defunct.

The one to the right evidently calls for the numerous liquor lovers in town to stop at *El Patio* of San Eloy on a hot summer day to quench their thirst with a pint or two. No gender discrimination appears to have been observed or enforced in the city in those days, as members of both sexes seem to be greatly enjoying the pleasures of outdoor wine drinking on a background of gorgeous rose bushes, geranium pots, and exotic fruit.

Then why should Master Peony the Tailor on Vineyard Bridge in Old Town not have his own coat of arms? *Per fess Azure and Or a bar Gules issuant therefrom an eagle displayed between in sinister chief a decrescent Argent and in dexter chief a sun in splendour Or; in base sevenscastles Gules, a needle, some thread, and a pair of scissors.* Perhaps I should



replace the *sun in splendour* with a sewing machine *rampant*. That would be nice, and I'd be doing him justice.

These were the thoughts buzzing round my head when I brought home my own coat, the one Master Peony had so superbly cut and sewn. It was finished, complete, a work of art with its nine covered buttons (for in the end we settled for eight—four in front, two on the sleeves, two at the back; but he had given me the gift of one spare button) right where they belonged, and I at once spoke to the Artist of the Sundial. It was a direct request for a design for an embroidered label to best represent Master Peony's skill and shop. Now everybody knows the Artist is renowned for his work as a professional graphic designer, for that's how he's been earning a living for the past twenty-five years; so I knew the piece would be the paragon of all coat labels in the world. I should ask people to turn the coat inside out just so they could see for themselves. Furthermore, I expected the same people, friends and enemies alike to turn green with envy at the sight of the label alone—for it goes without saying that the sight of the coat in its plenitude (I mean on both sides) would have them collapse in cohorts.

"Of course," I told the Artist, "I am fully aware that some would think the fabric a weird choice for a coat; many perhaps would advance the idea that the material was better suited for draperies or such. But didn't Scarlett O'Hara make for herself a dress from green velvet curtains? And didn't she look adorable in it, as it perfectly matched her green eyes?"

"Yeah," he said. "But these are not Civil War times, you don't have green eyes, and your name isn't Vivian Leigh."

"Oh that. Well, this fabric may be velvet, but it's not green. And you're not exactly Clark Gable."

Consequently, he proceeded with the design, and created two versions so I and Master Peony could have a choice: they were both nice, and can be seen in the cut paper insert attached.

The Artist thereafter got word that somewhere in the capital of the country there was a shop in possession of a computerized embroidering machine that would read the digitized designs and turn them into real embroideries on silk, cotton, wool, or any other fabric that took your fancy. Rain, however, prevented him from reaching the establishment on his bike, and when the rains stopped and he was able to get there, the establishment was no more: it had gone bankrupt; I may be utterly wrong here, but perhaps they'd drowned on account of the abundant rains that visited the country throughout the spring; or perhaps not that many people in Romania were interested in turning their designs for clothing labels and such into embroidered works of art. At any rate, the delay took us well into Pascal times, when the Artist came home for a short vacation and incidentally found out somebody owned a similar machine in our small town. Several weeks later I took the printed version of his designs to the Wonder-Man-of-the-Embroidering-Machine to inquire whether he could do the job.

"Yes, of course, I'll do it" the Embroidery Master said. "I'm busy right now, though, as I have important technology conferences to attend this weekend, but I'll give you a call towards the end of next week to let you know where we stand."

He never did, nor did he return my calls. So we stood right in the middle of nowhere, as it was plain for everyone to see.

In time I understood that The Coat had been fated from Its very inception as a sketch in my mind to never ever bear the glorious colors of the House of Peony. I think in Its own coatish ways It must have been somewhat saddened by Its labellessness—as well as by the lack of enthusiasm and consideration on the part of the Embroidery Master. It was a Coat-Without-a-Coat-of-Arms, and that was not a good thing. To compensate for the emotional loss The Coat might have felt, I took to wearing It to the best art venues, where It could show off Its impeccable cut and splendid overall style. Why even the Queen of England’s daughters in law, duchesses as they were, would wear It with no hesitation to some of the minor social gatherings over there, I’m sure, It was possessed of such class.

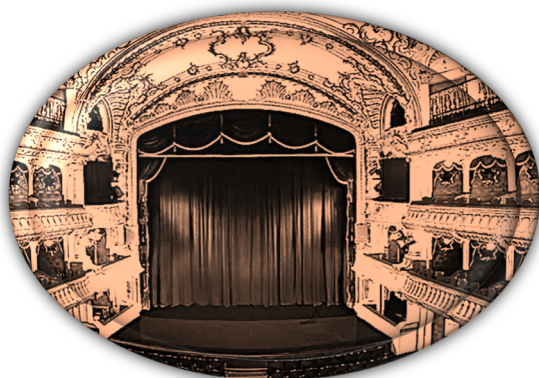
The Coat wasn’t too impressed with the first two musical performances I took It to, both by a known symphony orchestra, although both Brahms’s and Rachmaninov’s pieces were brilliantly performed to enthusiastic audiences, and the concert hall was done in the best of *Art Nouveau* style.

But *Don Quixote* at the Opera House—well, that was a different story altogether.

“My God,” The Coat whispered in my ear when the cloakroom attendant handed It to me during intermission,” [for I wanted to go out for a cigarette, and it was mid-September, thus a little chilly], “that first act sent shivers down my spine” [it was a velvet spine, you must remember], “although I was hanging over here on a peg. I could at least hear the music (I must tell you, I LOVE Minkus), although I couldn’t see the ballet dancers. This lady here tells me they’re fabulous. But with all due respect, I must say you didn’t do right by me, abandoning me as you did in the cloakroom in the company of so many unknown coats and shawls, some of which were rather plebeian neighbors. I may be deprived of a label now, but that doesn’t mean I am not a coat of noble character. Besides, from my inception I was endowed with artistic inclinations—please take me into the performance hall for the second act.”

Which I did. I placed It on the red velvet seat next to me and it became at once obvious that It belonged there: It, too, was pure velvet, and had distinction, style, and poise; right there and then it dawned on me that It had been made for that very kind of classy location—velvet curtains, golden tassels, crystal chandeliers, and little boy angels (known as *putti*) in the architecture holding laurel sprigs and lyres and harps and whatnots. The Coat was a born aristocrat.

Throughout the performance It never budged. You could only hear the buttons (especially the ones in the chest area) softly breathing during the orchestra’s *piano* passages, and an occasional “Oh!” or “Ah!” coming from the direction of the collar when the *prima ballerina*’s pirouettes literally took your breath away.



Turns out The Coat was addicted to ballet, for when I let it be known that I was going to see *Swan Lake*, It nearly jumped down from the coats hanger where It normally spent Its days and nights protected from dust and strong light by a thin paper bag.

“You’re planning on taking me, too, don’t you? I LOVE Tchaikovsky,” It said in tones of voice

which, although muffled, sounded quasi-imperative from behind the protecting sheet.

“On my word,” I thought, “you could safely say It is NOT a shy coat.” “Of course I am,” I said aloud.

“Just wanted to make sure. No offense, but since it’s late September and you may perhaps think you don’t need a coat ... well I’m telling you, you do. You know, autumn nights can be tricky in terms of sudden changes in temperature and unpredictable cool breezes rising from the Western Mountains. You most definitely need a coat if you don’t want to catch a cold.”

“Better say you long to see the *prima ballerina* again.”

“Of course I do. She’s the most exquisite, graceful, technically impeccable performer I’ve ever seen in my life ...”

“C’mon now, Master Peony only created you a few months ago; that’s not exactly a very long life ...”

“Let me finish,” The Coat said. “It may be you don’t realize that when I was still just a shapeless piece of one hundred percent cotton velvet I spent a whole month on a library chair at your house, listening to the best Classical music the world has to offer. I’ve seen countless opera and ballet performances on your TV—granted, I was FOLDED, so I couldn’t very well listen and watch with my WHOLE SURFACE, but I did the best I could to absorb the music through every pore that was not obstructed by a fold. Do you really think those experiences have left no traces? Do you really believe me to be such an obtuse, imperceptive, soul-less individual? And may I remind you that Master Peony himself drew your attention to the fact that velvet is a strange animal. Well, I am IT.”

It was.

So the two of us went to see *Swan Lake*, and I took It into the performance hall in spite of gently murmured yet audible protests from some fellow ballet-goers with whom we shared a row of seats.

The trouble started a few seconds after Odile’s entrance. The Coat became agitated, shook Its sleeves several times, cleared Its throat and uttered a few “Hmmm”s and “Oh, no”s, then turned to me:

“She’s evil,” It whispered in my ear. “Oh my God Siegfried doesn’t even realize she’s a bad witch from hell—look, look, he’s letting himself be fooled by this wretched woman pretending to be someone she’s not. How could a man be so stupid ...”

“Hush,” I whispered back. “First of all, he’s not stupid, he’s a dancer performing his part; second, this is ballet, so, like with opera, you need to apply something called ‘suspension of disbelief;’ I learned that from grandpa.”

“Oh no, she’s not a genuine swan,” It said. “The *prima ballerina* is an angelic figure, a lady full of elegance and grace! This other woman is an impostor, her pointe-work is unsatisfactory, her



makeup lacks sophistication—well I think it’s rather vulgar, and I distinctly saw the tremor in her arms and legs right before she started dancing her *pas de deux* with Siegfried.”

“It’s the same ballerina who also dances Odette’s numbers, except she’s dressed in black now,” I tried to explain.

“Please, whom do you take me for? It is with great sadness that I notice (and not for the first time) you don’t trust my artistic taste—give me some credit, will you? She’s obviously an intruder masquerading as the *prima ballerina*, and I am going to put an end to it right now. I’ll tell Siegfried how matters stand. That’ll make Master Peony proud of me.”

Suddenly The Coat tore itself away from Its seat, flew over the few rows in front of us and landed on the podium at Siegfried’s feet. All the children in the front row—little girls dressed like ballerinas, hair done in buns on top of their head, and little boys in miniature three-piece suits wearing bow ties—grew wild and started screaming with delight; unfortunately, the mature side of the audience didn’t seem to appreciate the uniqueness of the moment: there were hissings and angry shouts, and for a second I thought there was going to be a general uprising with people throwing rotten eggs and tomatoes at the *corps de ballet* assembled in full.

Siegfried, however, kept calm. He bent down to lift The Coat from the podium on which It lay, shook It gently to get rid of the dust, and placed It on Odile’s shoulders.

“My dear,” he said to the *prima ballerina*. “It’s rather chilly in here: the heating system has been down since this morning, and I saw you shiver prior to our last *pas de deux*. Please accept this coat from a fellow sufferer; it is a token of my consideration for your heroic efforts and an expression of compassion and comradeship.”

Then, ignoring the general unrest and clamor he looked straight into my eyes over all of those people’s heads, and, with a gracious bow:

“Much obliged, Madame. Thank you. This was the right thing to do: you threw us your coat just when we needed it most.”