
Ship of my Dreams



I was standing on the second-floor balcony, watching the ship of my dreams as it stood against the immaculate blue sky of a glorious summer day. The ship's sails, the color of swan's wings and equally diaphanous dangled from their ropes with a slight flutter caused by the afternoon breeze, and although I had already turned nine that spring—thus attaining a superior level of maturity based on which I was able to acknowledge without too much sadness the fact that swans can't fly—I was nevertheless certain these particular wings or sails were exactly what was needed for the ship of my dreams to lift itself up in the air and fly all the way to the top of St. Michael's tower, ropes included.

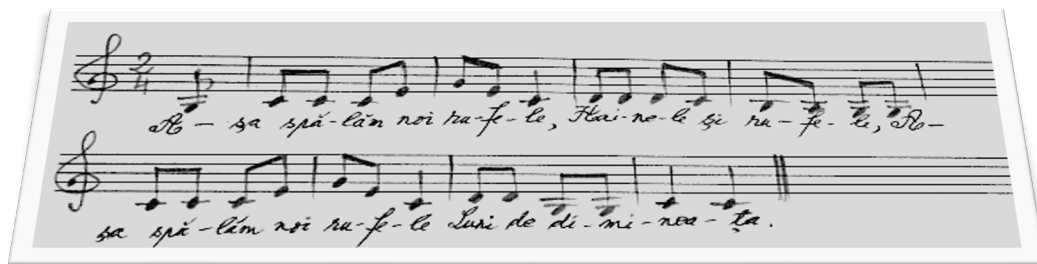
Truth is, grandma and I had just finished hanging my freshly washed underwear on the clothes rope stretched across the long balcony we shared with Mrs. Lenke and Mrs. Violet. The underwear wasn't only white: it was also monogrammed, for a few months back grandma had shown me how to sew my initials on the front of each item. I had used red thread, and now the articles in



question were swinging and swirling in the light Eastern breeze with a particular kind of elegance which I could only refer to as aristocratic, identifying me as their rightful owner.

Grandma had taught me a little song to go with the washing of clothes, and I used to sing it sotto voce as I washed and rinsed them: "That's how we wash our clothes and linen/Clothes and linen, clothes and linen/That's how we wash our clothes and linen/Every Monday morning//That's how we rinse our clothes and linen/Clothes and linen, clothes and linen//That's how we rinse our clothes and linen/Every Tuesday morning." The song went on to list the full range of procedures necessary to obtain, by the end of the week, perfectly clean clothing which was ready to be worn on Sunday at church. One procedure a day, and that included the pressing of said clothing on Saturday morning, dress, underskirt, and cotton panties, so you could achieve, through a whole week's work and abundant perspiration, a perfectly finished, impeccable look, the kind of crisp and fresh look you see in fashion magazines for girls like me. Especially if you wore the outfit with matching white cotton pantyhose and black lacquered shoes.

You could tell this was a song from the time grandma had been a preschool teacher before WW II, because it had the word "church" in it, whereas in the early sixties you would never ever hear any songs whatsoever that would include that word, for such were the times in which we lived now.



Holding on to the clothes rope, I bent a little to look at Mr. Felmery's mustache and peaked cap. He was standing in his shop's door, which opened into our cobblestone courtyard whose main attraction it was—if you didn't count the rear window of the tailor's shop, which also opened into the courtyard and was a rival to Mr. Felmery's door just like the tailors' (for there were several of them) little radio was Mr. Felmery's little radio's declared enemy: for the tailors loved to play Romanian folk music, and Mr. Felmery adored playing Hungarian folk music, and so our courtyard was a permanent battlefield on which Romanian and Hungarian culture and music were battling incessantly. There was never any ceasefire, except at night when everybody went home to sleep.

Above the door, a shop sign was hanging on a rod, and it said: *Felmery. Belt Shop*, so you knew instantly and beyond the shadow of a doubt that Mr. Felmery's job was to make leather belts. You couldn't be fooled into thinking that he might, just might make other things made of leather—say, shoes, for instance, or hats, or even gloves. No. The sign made it clear that such mistakes were out of the question—what I wanna say is that it was the sign's mission and purpose to make sure you knew that if you wanted a leather belt you went to Mr. Felmery; if



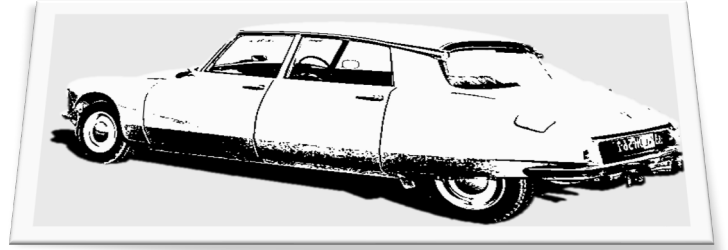
you wanted anything else, then Mr. Felmery wasn't your man. On a summer day like this he would leave his door and windows open, so the smell of leather and mysterious concoctions he used to cure it traveled all the way up to my nostrils. I breathed in and breathed out. The smell was wonderful. The day was glorious. I was in a good mood.

Then I raised my eyes to look at the golden cross of St. Michael's basking in the late-afternoon sun. Against the blue sky and the tile roofs of various ages, designs, and shades of red, it was a stupendous sight, and I thought many people would pay good money to be able to enjoy such a sight, which they would call a vista and brag about it to their friends. I stood there, watching in awe for the better part of five minutes, and thinking that life was great.

Then I heard Junior's voice from the third-floor balcony, and that completely ruined my contemplation.

Junior was our upstairs neighbor, son to Mrs. Nushi and brother to Margaret. They were half-Italian, half-Hungarian, and the Italian lineage gave them immense prestige, although Junior was nothing special either as a neighbor or as a boy. Margaret was a different story altogether: she was blonde (from a bottle, grandma said), had well-cared for nails (varnished, too) and two years later she started dating a French guy who drove all the way from France just to visit her. Cohorts of people of all ages would congregate around the car when it was parked on the street,

in front of our main gate, for Citroëns were never seen in our parts, and this was even better than a regular Citroën: it was a white Citroën. I was very proud to live in a building boasting such a grand automobile, and learned the words to the French national anthem to show my respect and consideration for the makers of it in particular, and the French nation as a whole.



Allons enfants de la patrie

Le jour de gloire est arrivé

But Junior himself was not a part of that grandeur, being, as he was, somewhat annoying; so were his friends, the Brothers Lucca. There were two of these siblings, both of Junior's age, therefore both about four years older than I. They lived across the street and came to our building every day to do the stupid things boys do as a rule, things I despised and feared: they were loud and obnoxious; they were patronizing; they made bad jokes; and above all, they thought I was fat. Which I was. I hated their guts.

Now the three of them were standing on Junior's balcony, looking down at me and surveying my underwear. You couldn't miss the large, red initial on the front of each article, and I had always thought that the pièce de resistance of my whole lingerie collection was a magnificent white nightie, which I had hung in such a manner that its beautiful lace trimmings could be clearly seen. But the boys didn't know zilch about finesse and such similar things, so Brother Lucca Number One said:

"My, my. Boys, what have we got here?"

Number Two answered:

"Oh, it's an Underwear Parade!"

Number One went on:

"Man, look at the size of that underwear! On my word, every item looks like a parachute."

For a moment I thought I would run upstairs, march onto their balcony, tell them to close their eyes, and beat the three of them to a pulp. I'll show them parachutes. But then I recalled that I had just shampooed my hair, and my head was smeared with egg yolk, and that stopped me dead in my tracks. It was one of grandma's ideas that egg yolk applied to your hair made it grow faster and thicker, so she rubbed it generously into my tresses every week. You were supposed to leave it on for at least a half an hour, then rinse it, and after that you could dry your hair in the sun. I stayed where I was, therefore, pretending not to see them, paying close attention to my ship's sails instead.



Lucca Number Two bent over the iron rail of the balcony and addressed me directly in a condescending tone:

"I didn't know you guys raised hens. Where do you keep them? Tell your grandma we'd like some eggs, too. It really seems a pity to waste good stuff just like that, smearing it all

over one's hair."

I felt murderous. I WILL run upstairs, march onto their balcony, tell them to close their eyes, and beat the three of them to a pulp. I'll show them hens.

But I honestly didn't think I had it in me right then to actually murder the three of them. One boy, perhaps, I could manage. But three boys at once were too much, I thought—let alone each one of them was four years older than I; no doubt, together they were twelve years older than me (for I was good at math), and I couldn't beat that, so I did something different instead:

I grabbed the nightie from the clothes rope, threw it on the balcony floor and stepped on it. The nightie took off like a huge white bird, and we sailed away into the summer skies, leaving Junior and the Brothers Lucca with their jaws dropping below the sea level, so to speak, and their eyes bulging out of their stupid skulls, you know, like snails do if you're ever lucky enough to catch a snail, for they're damn fast. Laying on top of my nightie I could see Mr. Felmery way down in the courtyard in front of his shop door waving his hand, and two birds flew towards us and landed on my nightie. We flew all the way to the top of St. Michael's, and from up there I could see the whole city spreading at my feet, and grandma stepping onto the balcony and looking around as if asking "Where's my granddaughter? She was here just a moment ago."

Yeah.