

# The Husbandress



A Short Story from  
The Fine Art of Making Paprikas



**Warning:** Those who think husbandress is a compound word, comprised of husband and dress, and that it may indicate that someone's husband is wearing his wife's dress, beware: that is NOT so. It simply isn't the case. Rather, husbandress in this story is employed to refer to a feminine character performing tasks generally accepted to fall into the category of husbandry. By extension the term refers to an establishment, store, or organization employing the work of a normal husbandress, in this instance, mostly meal preparation and serving. At least that's what Husbandress was taken to mean on the establishment's yellow neon sign. Furthermore, there are historical precedents to the use of the term: for instance, Trebellius Pollio's description of Zenobia as a "husbandress of wealth." So there you go.

I didn't know the names of the two women, but to me they looked like they should be called Erji and Böji. They weren't exactly twins, like Mrs. Mia and her sister at the sewing shop: rather, they looked as if one day soon they could become twins. Also, they were not seamstresses at all: rather, they held the desirable position of cooks at *The Husbandress*, the We-cook-for-you establishment on our side of Queen Marie Boulevard. Grandma was a subscriber to their services, and I was a staunch supporter. *The Husbandress* was a great idea and a useful enterprise which grandma discovered when I was in first grade, and I thought she should be deeply indebted to me for the revelation:

There was this girl in our class who every day for lunch would bring a different cake to munch on during the twenty minutes of the mid-morning recess (9:50 to 10:10 a. m.). She would pace up and down in the school yard, cake in hand, now and then pensively sticking it in her mouth; every time the cake came out of her mouth it would look smaller by a square centimeter or so, and this loss of surface and volume suggested that the girl very much enjoyed what she was eating. I, on the other hand, only had one type of cookie to bring in my lunch box, day in, day out, and THAT I judged to be both annoying and humiliating. So I told grandma:

"Marianne brings a different kind of cake every day to school, and you always pack for me the same old boring cookie. It don't think it's fair, for I am a more accomplished student than she is, and my scholarly efforts should be rewarded somehow. You know comrade Ionescu said my capital *F*'s and *G*'s and small-case *k*'s and *s*'s are the best in class." (The letter *k* is not used in Romanian except in words like *kilogram* or *kilometer*, so more power to those of us who could really draw the weird, non-patriotic shape.)

Grandma thought for a minute, then said:

"You're right. I'll ask Marianne's mother. It somehow doesn't sound right that she should be baking a different tray of cakes every day of the week. I mean, it's sort of discourteous to the rest of us, who are not such avid cake-bakers. Maybe they have an extraneous source of sweets, and I shall see to it that we get it, too."

You could really count on grandma. She would always get to the bottom of things, no matter how much effort and time she spent investigating even the most complex situations.

The next day she proclaimed, grandpa and myself present and standing to attention:

"We're going to subscribe to *The Husbandress*'s weekly menu. They offer two versions, Menu I and Menu II, and we can pick one and stick to it for one week; then, if we find we don't like it that much, the next week we can switch to the other one. The great thing is that they have three-course meals, and that includes not only a different soup and different second, but also a

different type of dessert every day. That's what Marianne's mother does, and that we shall do, too, with no further delay. I went to the place and brought back two sample menus. Look for yourselves."

And from her capacious shoulder-bag she extracted two leaves of thin, typewritten paper.

Never mind I was only in first grade and this was just the second month of the school year: I could read a printed text all right ever since I was five, and on that basis for two years now had been an assiduous reader of *The Flame*, the magazine of national impact which kept me on top of world affairs. It was the cursive letters that gave me hell. So I asked grandma:

"And who gets to pick the menu? I mean, who decides whether we take Menu I or Menu II?"

"Well, I suppose we need to reach a consensus, since there's three of us. Dionysus, what do you say?"

"Let her choose, Mother; although I must say she's a bit on the chubby side, so perhaps we're not doing the wisest thing; we shouldn't let her stuff herself with sweets."

I had always held the opinion that grandpa was somewhat strict, even rigid both as a grandparent and a person, what with his old-fashioned ideas, especially when it came to homework, school dress, pencil-sharpening, and organizing things on my desk. But that he would take over grandma's territory, which encompassed shopping, doing the laundry, and gastronomy, well, that was a bit too rich. And yet there we were: grandpa was trying to tell grandma what we should NOT eat. I KNEW that in the course of time he would insinuate himself into matters which were none of his business, and that one day he'd commandeer us in the kitchen and preside over the stove, pots and pans, forks, knives, spoons, and generally speaking anything having to do with food intake. Of course, grandpa had been a lieutenant in WW I, and now it began to show, I thought. It was a good thing the Russians took him prisoner, so he didn't get to be a general.

I tried to ignore his hostile attitude and grabbed the paper leaves. First and second courses didn't interest me much, but I looked long and hard at the sweets, and they sounded marvelous: there were cakes with caramel filling on those menus, and *cremesh*, and pasta tossed with sugar and ground walnuts (you couldn't take these to school in a lunch box, but you could have them when you came back home, so they were



OK), apple *strudel*, lemon cake, and crepes; but the best of the lot was a special kind of plump, fluffy, ovoid pie called *gogoasa*, which I greatly favored for its strawberry- or sour-cherry jam filling and powdered sugar crust; among other things, a *gogoasa* also reminded one of the shape of an Unidentified Flying Object, and that made eating it even more exciting. It was like ingurgitating little green men, only these were cherry-colored. You couldn't beat that.

Apparently the cooks at *The Husbandress* were true professionals; it was really difficult to choose between Menu I and Menu II, so I suggested we went for no. 1 now, reserving no. 2 for the following week.

"So it's settled," said grandma. "I'll go back to subscribe and pay. Dionysus, your assigned task for this coming Monday is to carry the lunch pail to *The Husbandress* and back."

You could tell grandma had been a pre-school teacher: she was quite good at assigning tasks.

Thus our culinary Odyssey began. Grandpa (and, on occasion, even grandma) would walk the lunch pail back and forth between our building and *The Husbandress* on a daily basis. What I mean to say is not that they just WALKED the pail for the heck of it: such was simply not the case; rather, I mean that on the way there the pail was empty, and on return it was full, and I would reap the benefits. This went on for a number of years: I was a sophomore in high school when the operation was still in full swing; and by all standards it had become a time-honored tradition in grandma's and grandpa's household.

The strange thing is, though, that I never got to walk the lunch pail myself till I was in seventh grade. This might have been for conceptual or more down-to-Earth reasons: first, because grandma didn't want me to carry such a huge responsibility on my shoulders; on second thought, it was probably because she didn't want me to spill the stuff and make a complete ass of myself by spoiling my dress and ruining that day's meal.

But when I was in seventh grade they were invited to an out-of-town reunion organized by former students of grandpa's, so it became necessary that I should be left in charge of culinary arrangements. These included taking the empty lunch pail to *The Husbandress*, having it filled, and walking it back home.

It was a glorious September day, and I felt in a celebratory mood: neither grandma nor grandpa were to be at home for two days, I was finally the master of the house, could do my own thing without close supervision, AND was entrusted with the business of fostering the excellent relationship we as a family had established with *The Husbandress*. It was a special occasion. I was to meet the cooks for the first time, and it became apparent that I should dress to impress.

Careful analysis of my wardrobe resulted in rejection of the school uniform (dark-blue, below-the-knee potato sack and pale-blue, shapeless, long-sleeved blouse) and a few other things. I chose the *pepita* sarafan instead. The *pepita* sarafan was in fact a black-and-white, checkered jumper dress made of the finest wool. It had been sewn for me in the summer by the ladies at the 23<sup>d</sup> August Street shop in my parents' town. It has to be said that on multiple occasions (first and second fittings, that is) the ladies had warned:

“You have a bit of a tummy here, you know; the dress is not going to look all right on you. This type of dress was conceived with someone thinner in mind, someone not possessing a midriff protuberance.”

I myself thought this was adding insult to injury: first of all, it had taken me some time to fully accept that sarafans were not just for grannies (grandma had had a black one made for her before the war, and she was still wearing it on top of a white blouse) or ushers at the Opera. What I mean is, I had spent TIME thinking about the issue and had made an EFFORT to agree to wearing a sarafan when I was only thirteen and had no plans to be a granny at all, or look like one, let alone be an usher anywhere. Then I had gone



through hell and high water to suck in my tummy every time I went in for a fitting, and really thought I had succeeded in convincing the seamstresses I had a supple body. And now this.

Anyway, the piece was done and I had to wear it, and this was my first opportunity to do so.

I grabbed the lunch pail and was on my way.

Grandma had said:

“Careful not to spill the soup when you come back. It goes in the bottom container; they will place the second course in the middle container, and the dessert in the top one. It’s the soup I am worried about. Don’t swing your arm, just hold the holder tight and keep your back straight. If in trouble, say a prayer to St. Lawrence, the patron saint of cooks.”

Grandma’s favorite saints were St. Anthony of Padua and St. Francis of Assisi, but on occasion she would enlist the help of others, as the necessities of life demanded. St. Lawrence must have been a trustworthy, benevolent person, because Marianne’s mother’s husband (which is to say, Marianne’s father) was called Lawrence, and it had been thanks to Marianne’s mother we heard of *The Husbandress* in the first place.

Walking down Queen Marie Boulevard I was expecting wide expressions of public appraisal with respect to my looks. None came. I walked some more, every now and then stopping to admire myself in store windows, straightening my back, sucking in my tummy, and generally speaking trying to emulate the gait of a ballerina. After all, my friend Dominica WAS a ballerina, or at least a *studiosa* of Classical ballet, and in our long years together I’d learned a thing or two from her. But no public or private admiration was expressed. Not to my knowledge.

I went past the hardware store on my left, where Mrs. Lena worked as an accountant; then past the produce store, the pie store, and a few more. *The Husbandress* was situated in the vicinity of grandma’s favorite perfumery, *The Lilac*, and as I got closer the smells of cooked food and lily-of-the-valley were beginning to mix together to create a new, foreign fragrance. It was intriguing, but I wasn’t sure I liked it.

*The Husbandress* was full of people standing in line, holding enameled lunch pails of all sizes and colors. Compared to those shiny splendors, ours wasn’t that grand looking altogether. And I noticed too late that its reddish-brown tint was a less than desirable match to the black-and-white checkers on my sarafan. In other words, I wasn’t color-coordinated. Surely that’s why no one looked at me twice, for people in our town had a sense of fashion.

Mrs. Böji and Mrs. Erji looked stupendous: snow-white aprons enclosed their massive bodies, and each woman wore a voluminous cook’s hat the size of a half-opened parachute. Amazons with ladles, I thought (I knew what “amazon” meant: it was in the *Dictionary of Modern Romanian Language*; it was also in the *World Atlas* which lay on grandpa’s desk, but that was a river in South America, I remembered).

“Hmm, in spite of the clamor of pots and pans banged together, Mrs. Böji and Mrs. Erji don’t seem to be cauldronized at all,” I reflected.

“To be cauldronized” was a term used by grandma whenever she wanted to indicate dizziness in the head induced by too much talk from either grandpa or myself.

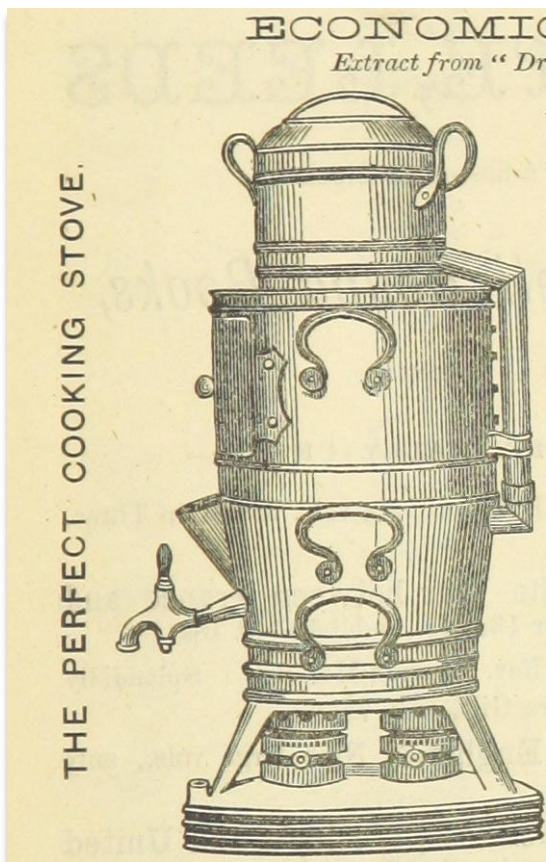
“Don’t cauldronize me, Dionysus,” she’d say. “I’m cauldronized enough as it is by your granddaughter.”

I supposed she thought of the loud noise soup or some thick sauce made when boiling on the stove, and of the steam rising from the cauldron, treacherously insinuating itself into one’s brain and turning it into mush. You could tell grandma was a husbandress, too, for even her everyday vocabulary included highly specialized culinary terms.

She was also a profound cogitator in the area of political economy, and a brilliant anatomist: the human stomach, seat of hunger, was for her The Class Enemy, in other words, The Enemy of the People. For The People were the Working Class, and whomsoever gave them grief—in this case, pangs of hunger—was their sworn nemesis. Eating meant class struggle as well as final triumph of the Working Class over the Class Enemy, and that’s why nourishment figured so prominently in grandma’s vision of the world. I always thought this was a bit rich coming from a woman who in pre-war times had been acquainted with kings and queens, some of whom even sat at her table, and suspected her of voluntary sarcasm. Well anyway, you could tell grandma was a sharp person.

But the cooks were not being visited by any thoughts of class struggle, and not bothered by trifles such as babble from hurried customers or the sound of sharp or heavy objects colliding in the background. They went on with their job, serene as two archangels of gastronomy distributing food from Menu I or Menu II with pomp and fairness.

To the tune of some inaudible music Mrs. Erji lifted her ladle high in the air, performed a few



flourishes, and plunged the tool in the cauldron. The ladle broke the tranquil surface and came out full of a hot, yellowish, transparent liquid; then she immersed the ladle once again into the vessel, and it came out filled with fluffy dumplings; once more, and several plump carrots emerged: she added these to the soup and dumplings in the pail.

I was thinking how perfectly color-coordinated the elements of the mixture were: pale golden yellow for the soup, off-white for the dumplings, and bright orange for the carrots. The yellow went well with her gold front tooth. She added some shredded parsley leaves, and those were green. A perfect color scheme. Then she said:

“Now give me the second container.”

Certainly Mrs. Erji had a sense of fashion, I thought. For in the second vessel she spooned some fried eggs, sunny side up, and spinach sauce; these were yellow, white, and green, respectively, and a perfect match for the colors in the soup.

It was a Friday, thus a fast day. Mrs. Erji and Mrs. Böji were Roman-Catholic, and their religious belief was reflected in their cooking: no meat on



fast days, just gentle vegetables and an innocent egg or fish here and there. And I was sure for dessert they would have something like ground walnut pasta or *Vargabéles*.

Now *Vargabéles* was a Hungarian specialty you could only get in our parts, just like *Kolozsvári kaposzta*. It was made this way:

You took some thin pasta and boiled it in salted water. When cooked, you strained the pasta and mixed it with cheese, eggs, sour cream, raisins, and sugar. On a thin pie dough you spread



the mixture, brushed it with egg wash, and baked it in the oven till it acquired a crunchy brown crust. *Vargabéles* was divine and I used to pray there were more fast days in the week than those decreed by the Roman Catholic Church, for clearly meatless dishes were far more delicious: they were, as they should be, GODLIKE.

“Besides,” I thought walking back home, a firm grasp on the pail handle, “one should notice the chromatic harmony: the pasta, cheese, and sour cream are of different kinds of white; eggs lend a golden hue, and raisins add a rosy touch; the sugar, of course, had melted at that point, so it has no chromatic

impact, but it gives the mixture the heavenly sweetness appropriate with the nature of fast days.”

And so, in a haze of chromatic happiness and gastronomic well-being I went on musing and walking down Queen Marie Boulevard.

All of a sudden the lunch pail started to rock. Somebody’s hand had grabbed the handle and was pulling at it. I could hear the soup in the lower container going “splash, splash,” and it started to spill; soon little rivulets of golden liquid were streaming down the sides. I pulled in the opposite direction, holding on to the handle for dear life. That’s when the spinach sauce went berserk, and it was like being in the middle of an earthquake. Except I didn’t exactly know how earthquakes were supposed to work: I had only heard about them on the radio, and they were only happening in distant places such as Japan. Oh, and Sicily. Of course, there was also the Krakatau, but THAT would have been too farfetched: the Krakatau was a volcano, and it would have erupted, not quaked. Besides, we were definitely not in the Philippines (or was it Indonesia?), for I knew it for a fact: Filipinos—well, actually Indonesians—didn’t know zilch about *Vargabéles* or spinach sauce; clearly we were from different cultural backgrounds: our food did not belong in Indonesia and their volcanoes did not belong in Transylvania. There you go. Yet although this couldn’t be a volcano eruption, it may still be an earthquake.

I looked down at the pavement: it was supposed to be cracking, but it wasn’t. The buildings on both sides of the street were not collapsing.

“Oh God, it’s thieves,” I thought. “It’s thieves, and they want our lunch. They know grandma left me alone and now they want to steal our meal. It’s highway robbery, just like in *Robin Hood*. Dear St. Lawrence, help me in my hour of need!”

The soup now had spilled on my checkered sarafan, mixing with the eggs and spinach, and I knew the dress was ruined: a large, greasy, gold-and-green stain was forming above the hem, and grandma always said stains like that were untreatable.

Then I heard a voice from above saying in sweet, angelic tones:

“You shouldn’t be carrying a full lunch pail when you’re dressed so nicely. Let me help you with that.”

St. Lawrence grabbed the lunch pail with a firm hand, and I was filled with a sense of relief and gratitude: surely someone up there loved me, I thought, and they were doing a good job answering my prayer so promptly and with such accuracy.

Only it wasn’t St. Lawrence.

It was Mr. Gicu, Mrs. Lena’s husband from upstairs.



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