



Buttons



It was Thursday, so on my way to school I walked down Queen Marie Boulevard, made a left turn on Bolyai Street past the corner produce store, and stopped in front of Ms. Hanna's windows. Ms. Hanna and her sister were our button-makers, and grandma had taken me to their apartment on the ground floor quite a number of times. Ms. Hanna was older than time, and, like grandma and grandpa, a survivor of two world wars and at least one revolution.

I was guessing she might also have been a grand dame of the interbellum years, for in her apartment comprised of one huge room, a bathroom, and a miniscule kitchen you could see tons of things you would never see in anyone's house nowadays. There were rosewood wardrobes, upholstered armchairs once fit for a palace, shabby silk screens, and old Persian rugs half-eaten by moths no less ancient than the rugs or the ladies themselves. There were creamy dollies everywhere, music boxes that played rococo minuets, silk flowers of faded colors, and blurred mirrors hanging on the walls, the glass yellowed and sick with age.

There were, too, squeaky parquet floors and cracked ceilings, and cobwebs at the corners; towards these, I thought, Ms. Hanna manifested forgivable indifference on account of her poor vision: she wore eyeglasses like thick jar bottoms encased in rounded frames, and these, together with her habitual gray robes lent her the looks of a large mouse with spectacles. You can't expect mice to look for cobwebs. Ms. Hanna, although tall and heavy built, had a very bent back, and perhaps this, too, prevented her from standing upright to see them.

In addition to all these riches, Ms. Hanna owned several blue-eyed porcelain dolls who said "Mummy" when you pressed secret buttons on their backs. They must have once been the glory and pride of some now forgotten Nuremberg doll-maker, donning golden curls, silk ribbons, velvet dresses in pastel colors, lace collars, white socks with scalloped edges, and diminutive lacquered shoes that you could take off and put back on. Not that she would ever let me touch the dolls; and not that I ever asked: Ms. Hanna was a person of such intense moroseness, even among adults, that you couldn't possibly contemplate asking her to do you a favor.

She and grandma had known each other for quite a number of years, and although I didn't think Ms. Hanna was in grandma's innermost circle of friends, like Luisa or Helen Peony or Aunt Florica aka "OuchAlas!," she still counted herself among grandma's acquaintances.

I said elsewhere that Luisa was notable thanks to her hats and fur collars. She also made delicious strawberry jam, and wore eyeglasses, but they weren't nearly as thick as Ms. Hanna's. Yet Aunt Florica was even more memorable, for she was nicknamed "OuchAlas!" by reason of once having cut her tummy with a pair of scissors to get rid of the fat deposited in that particular area of her body. Apparently all she could say afterwards was this word, which she probably used to express post-self-carving regret, mental grief and sorrow, and perhaps physical pain as well (but that was only my speculation). Anyway, the idea is that Ms. Hanna was not as close to grandma as the other ladies, but she was still our only button-maker, and that made her special and memorable.

The buttons were displayed in a wooden case placed in between the panes of the street-facing double window. They were really mind-blowing stuff. I mean, fascinating: round, oval, square, large, medium-sized, small, and covered in fabrics of many colors and prints. Ms. Hanna



changed the display in the case every Wednesday afternoon, and every Thursday morning I walked by her window and stopped to scrutinize the fresh collection. Covered buttons were an expression of supreme elegance and taste, and were worn on ladies-of-modishness's dresses, and on such dresses only.

Why even grandma had repeatedly emphasized:

“Classy ladies NEVER buy dresses from clothing stores. That would be degrading. Besides, look at the stuff they’re selling in stores nowadays. It’s pitiful. Real ladies, darling, ALWAYS have their dresses made by some dress-maker of prestige and fame (at least local), and the more prestigious your dress-maker is (like, for instance, someone schooled in Vienna or Budapest in pre-WW II years), the better your chances to be considered a lady of consequence. Next to silk flowers, hats, and lace gloves, covered buttons are simply the best accessory to high-ended fashion.”



Certainly grandma was a lady of consequence, for she had a personal dress-maker coming to the house, and that was Bertha. And she ordered her covered buttons from Ms. Hanna.

“Grandma, looks like covered buttons are like upholstered chairs,” I said once.

“What do you mean?”

“Well at the Opera or the movies people of consequence always seem to be seated on upholstered chairs, which are practically ordinary chairs covered in some fabric or another. Similarly, covered buttons without the cover would just be ordinary buttons. But they ARE covered in some fabric, and that gives them dignity and a sense of purpose, so the same ladies that would sit on upholstered chairs would also wear covered buttons. Right?”



“And hats. I always told your grandpa you’re a clever girl.”

“AND with a sense of fashion,” I thought. “Grandma, what about Mother’s bone buttons? You know, the ones that spell her name? You keep them in the *Écarté* box, remember, with grandpa’s *Gentlemen’s Wear* ones. Are they not as classy as covered buttons?”

“Yes they are, but they’re in a class of their own. They were made by inmates at Diciosanmartin Prison, and then sewn on a Burgundy-colored dress Bertha made for your mother; of course, it all happened before the war.”

“But then, grandma, you mean to say inmates made buttons from human bones?!”

She looked at me in disbelief. I realized she was shocked, but I was more than shocked, I was shaken to the very marrow in my bones. I mean, really, really stricken with horror, and this is why:

In *The Count of Monte Cristo*, which I had just finished reading, Edmond Dantès, as a result of wicked machinations had been thrown in prison for no fault of his. He remained there for fourteen agonizing years, an innocent man buried deep down in a dungeon with no natural light and little food and nearly going mad till he met another inmate, the Abbé Faria, who taught him



the laws of survival and many such like things: for instance how to make ink from his own blood, or a pen from fish bones to write with on sheets made from torn shirts.

But I didn't think you could make buttons from fish bones: they were too flabby. Buttons had to be hard, and Mother's were; all things considered, they must have been made from human bones. Now THAT I judged to be gruesome.



"So that's what happened to people who died in prison," I thought. "They were turned into buttons, and then sold to ordinary people like grandma to sew on Mother's dress front. It's strange, though, that Dumas never mentions the custom in *Monte Cristo*. But oh! How dreadful. How cannibalous. Or cannibalesque? Cannibal-like, more like."



"Oh, dearie," grandma regained her voice, "you really say such appalling things! I must say, for a clever girl you are quite silly. Of course the bones were not human. They must have been cow or dog bones, or some other such animal."

I didn't know they kept cows in prison, but this just goes to show that one learns something new every day. Dogs I understood: they warned against intruders; also, a dog is a man's best friend; but cows? I tended to trust grandma, though: she came from semi-peasant stock, so she must know about cows and such.



Grandma went on:

"I bought them from the prison shop to help the wretched people get by."

This didn't sound right, either.

"What, grandma, you in fact gave money to improve the lives of thieves and burglars? How could you do that?"



"Oh sweetie, don't talk like that. Who knows what their real sins were? Who are we to judge? Who told you they were thieves and burglars? And even if that were so, how do you know some of them didn't steal a slice of bread to feed hungry children?"

"Oh, like in *Les Misérables*, you mean?"

You see, in *Les Misérables* Jean Valjean had been thrown in prison for doing just that: stealing bread to feed the hungry. Now THAT had one hundred percent my approval, and Jean Valjean was my hero. As far as I was concerned, he could have gone on to rob dozens of bakeries and I would still have said he did the right thing. So perhaps if while in the dungeon he took to carving buttons from animal bones to then sell them to make his own life a little easier, I myself, had I possessed any money of my own, would have spent it on some of his handicraft.

Yeah, I would have done that to compensate for the great injustice he had suffered. Additionally, I would have torn Javert's buttons from his uniform one by one and thrown them

away, and then I'd have grabbed his head and banged it against the wall to avenge poor Jean Valjean and teach Javert a lesson. Yeah, I'd have done that, for sure.



But that had been an earlier conversation. Standing now in front of Ms. Hanna's window I saw Mathilda on the sidewalk, holding her violin case. She was walking fast towards me and stopped to say hi.

"It's Thursday," she said, "so I came to see Ms. Hanna's new display."

Mathilda was my classmate, and the cutest girl you could imagine: a slim brunette with longish hair and an adorable face. Mathilda was incredibly brainy, a math champion, had perfect legs and the thinnest waist, but what made her really special was the two dimples that showed every time she smiled, one on each cheek.

"Listen," I said, "today is the day I've started to think more seriously about buttons and their use."

"Sure," she said, "everyone knows they are very useful things, and lovely—especially the covered ones. First of all, without them a woman couldn't be a lady of consequence ..."



"... even when seated on an upholstered chair, wearing a hat," I continued. "Second, and this goes for ALL buttons, they sort of impart a sense of finality and achievement, don't you think? I mean, a dress couldn't be declared perfectly finished if it had no buttons, right? Something would be missing from the picture."

"Well," she said, "there are zippers, you know ..."

"Zippers are a different thing, not as aesthetically pleasing and certainly not in the same league with buttons."

"Yeah," she said, "zippers are more industrial ..."

"... more institutional ..."

"... more plebeian, so to speak."

"I agree. Besides, buttons and zippers are not at the same level of sophistication. Buttons you can button up one by one with elegant gestures; you can take your time, make a pause, work at moderate speed, AND look distinguished in the process. Not zippers."

"No, most definitely not. With zippers is zipppp! And you're done. Too fast. Like Haydn's *Rondo all' Ongherese*."

Mathilda was a violinist and I was a pianist, and we both played Haydn's Trio in G major, so we knew what that was all about. Buttons were more like tranquil second movements in Classical sonatas, and zippers were like crazed-tempo third-movement Rondos.



You could catch a fingernail in a zipper and break it; zippers were dangerous things,

with sharp metal teeth, like some futuristic animals of prey hidden in the folds of your skirt to grab and hurt you.

“Come to think of it,” said Mathilda, “you know, *cute as a button* wasn’t invented for nothing.”

“Yup, buttons are darling things,” I concluded.

“Say,” said Mathilda, “do you wanna walk to the bridal store? Then we can go to school.”

The bride-and-groom store stood at the opposite corner, with a collection of de-luxe dresses and suits, and glamorous, be-rouged plaster mannequins displayed in its windows. It was almost as fascinating as the window displays at *The Universal*, the department store on King Ferdinand Boulevard. Except that *The Universal* people changed displays every Tuesday, and how could you forget the one showing Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, with turbaned mannequins and silks and brocades all over the place, and rubies, diamonds, jewels of every kind, and gold coins cascading down from half-opened bronze coffers? The bridal store was a bit more modest, and they only had new displays every month or so.

But never mind that. Mathilda and I were now sticking our noses to the cold glass of the shop’s window, when the mannequin on the other side smiled at us. She was seated on an upholstered chair and wore an exquisite green lace dress, ankle-length and long-sleeved. As she smiled, she bent her head and lifted her right foot, encased in black lacquered sandals. With a graceful movement she re-arranged the folds of her dress, then got up and took a step towards us.

“Hi,” she said. “You like buttons, don’t you?”

The two of us froze on the spot.

“I like them, too,” she continued. “It’s a pity the dressmaker didn’t use any on my dress. She thought a zipper would do, but I myself am not of that opinion. I mean, I’ve been complaining since four weeks ago, but nobody in the shop seems to listen. That’s why I approached you, guys. Zippers are not classy enough. They’re not ornamental. They’re too plebeian. I’m Lucy, by the way.”



She must be reading our minds, I thought.

Mathilda was the first one to come back to her senses:

“Excuse me, Miss Lucy,” she said, “I thought the satin ribbon hanging from the chest line down is ornamental enough. Besides, the zipper doesn’t show. Not from where we are.”

“Oh, that,” said Ms. Lucy. “Yes, of course, but buttons would have added a touch of class.” Then, turning to me:

“Doesn’t Mrs. Leontine have any green ones in her *Écarté* box? I know she orders her buttons from Ms. Hanna.”

By now the numbness in my brain seemed to have gone. Obviously, from behind her window Ms. Lucy had seen grandma dozens of times walking down the street carrying grocery bags or newspapers or opera tickets or full milk bottles from *Miorita*, the milk-produce store. So I said:

“Grandma keeps tons of buttons in that box, but I’ll have to check and see if there are any matching your outfit. If so, I’ll bring you some. When are you available?”

“Oh, I don’t move around much these days. I’ll be here until one o’clock.”

“Then it’s settled: I’ll go home and look for buttons; will be back in no time.”

Mathilda and I turned on our heels and started running. We crossed Queen Marie Boulevard, at the time paved with glazed yellow bricks, and ran all the way to no. 3, up the twenty seven cracked stone steps, through the ten-meter long exterior balcony, and through grandma’s door.

“What do you think you’re you doing, bursting in here like a wild goat? It’s almost one o’clock and you should be on your way to school,” grandma said from behind the stove, where she was supervising the bean soup.

Grandpa was reading the newspaper; I heard him say to grandma:

“Leontine, there is an article in here with photos showing a flying saucer someone saw a month ago in Hoia Forest. I don’t believe a word of it.” Then, turning to me:

“You should be on your way to school, girl.”

I didn’t bother to answer: it was vital that I should get to the *Écarté* box as fast as I could. I found it in grandma’s vanity, took it out, opened the lid, and plunged my hand in the mass of buttons. They were running through my fingers like gemstones of all colors and sizes, just like in the Ali Baba window display, and in the end I found five silk-covered ones, the color of Ms. Lucy’s dress.

We put them in Mathilda’s violin case and ran back the length of the balcony, down the twenty seven steps, past the downstairs sewing shop, covering our ears to avoid going deaf from the clatter of sewing machines; we crossed Queen Marie Boulevard and a few seconds later we were in front of the bridal shop’s window.

Ms. Lucy wasn’t there anymore. Only the chair remained.

“She’s gone!” cried Mathilda. “She’s gone, and we didn’t even get a chance to say good bye!”

Then, looking at her wrist watch:

“Oh God, let’s hurry. It’s one fifteen already!”

We started running towards Napoca Street, the buttons in Mathilda’s violin case going “rattle-rattle-rattle,” and I was thinking of Ms. Lucy’s wish, and that we should do something to get the buttons to her, although she had abandoned us so thoughtlessly. But we gave her our word, and grandpa said that once you give your word, you must stick to it no matter what.

Now grandma had repeatedly told me that every time I was in need of something I should say a prayer to my Guardian Angel: I raised my eyes and looked at the sky (he was supposed to live up there) to establish contact and ask him to make Ms. Lucy come back, so we can give her the buttons. The sky was clear blue and the mid-day sun shone as it usually does on a beautiful, mid-September day. For it was the 19<sup>th</sup> of September, 1968, and school had started only a few days back.

Five silvery oblong shapes were floating high up in the sky, looking like oversized oval buttons from Miss Hanna's case. I mean they were not moving, just HANGING there looking calm and glowing and staring down at us in a sort of surveillance-like mood. Clearly they, either individually or collectively, were NOT my Guardian Angel. He was supposed to have wings, long golden hair, blue eyes, and a beautiful face.

"It's UFOs!" I thought, and pinched Mathilda. "Quick, look up there!"

The five UFOs were now gently swinging left and right, and I thought of what Ms. Lucy had said: she was supposed to be gone by one o'clock, and so she was. Jesus, I said to myself, she must have been an extra-terrestrial person, what with her talk about zippers and buttons, and her knowing all about grandma and Ms. Hanna, and her beautiful smile—all the way reading our minds. Surely Ms. Lucy in her green lace dress was safely ensconced in one of the UFOs by now, grandma's buttons and our efforts forgotten, let alone the nice conversation we had had. Last month's flying saucer must have left her down here, and now they're back to pick her up.

The five Unidentified Objects made a sharp right turn, sped up, and were gone in a second, headed towards Hoia Forest.

That afternoon at school I was on tenterhooks. Everyone was talking about the UFOs, and it seemed that the local newspapers had already published testimonies by an eyewitness or two. Every time we got a chance, Mathilda and I exchanged furtive looks, and during the mid-afternoon recess we took a solemn oath: we'd return to the bridal shop and leave the buttons on the window sill; maybe the UFOs will come back one day.

The bell rang, and we were on our way, running like mad first on University Street, then down the boulevard towards the Opera House, past the University Library, the National Bank and the pub, the pastry, tobacco, lottery, and coffee shops, the Orthodox Church, all the way to the bridal store.

The window display had entirely disappeared. As Mathilda opened the violin case and took out the five green buttons, the shop attendant came to the door:

"Hi, girls," she said. "You should come back in a day or two. We are just about to change the window display, and had to take away the mannequin. We moved her to the storage room. She'll be back on Monday."

But we knew better.