

A Tale of Two Coats

Part Two



The snow is still falling when I walk to Clementina’s house; the sidewalks are slippery and look like walled fortresses on account of the snow that had been shoveled and piled up at the curb side. I keep my face turned up so I can catch snowflakes on the tip of my tongue and feel them melt in my mouth.

Clementina lives downtown, not far from the King Matthias statuary and St. Michael’s, in a former baronial palace that was seized by the government in the late 1940s. The building, now a city property, was partitioned into several apartments, of which Clementina, her mother, and her father occupy one on the second floor. The pièce de resistance of their dwelling is an enormous, Rococo-style, white terracotta heater with the baronial crest crowning its top, enthroned in the corner opposite the bow window in the huge room facing the street. Then in the small room adjacent to the kitchen one’ll find one of those objects I judge to be helpful in improving one’s self-esteem: a splendid mirror made not of ordinary glass, but of crystal—on which account it reflects an image purer and more refined than reality. In this mirror, a relic from the times of the Baronesses, I like to look at myself every now and then, for it does show a more beautiful and lady-like me; I also don’t appear to be too fat, which is always reassuring.

In addition to being Clementina’s mother, Mrs. Ana is a very fine woman, tall and massive; a devoted wife; a reliable neighbor; and a good cook. She’s an expert in cakes and cookies, but her finger-food and main courses are equally impressive. Her Viennese schnitzels are unbeatable, her pickles are divine, and I can only have words of praise for her fried potatoes. You see, grandma NEVER makes fried potatoes, she being a beans enthusiast (which I’m not); and anyway, food you eat at other people’s houses IS much better than food you eat at your grandma’s: I think it has to do with one’s inclination for experiment and adventure, one’s desire to explore and take pleasure in discovering new gastronomic territories. Which partially explains why I am a little plump. Anyway, I’m gulping down Mrs. Ana’s fries and schnitzels and pickles, and feel proud to be a friend of Clementina’s and a protegee of her mother’s.

“Let’s go skating tomorrow night,” says Clementina. “I heard the ice is fabulous at the skating rink in Grand Park.”

“Fine. Come get me after school, around six.”

She comes, her skates hanging from her shoulder on a leather strap. I take mine, and we walk through the knee-high snow all the way to Grand Park.

“Do you skate well?” asks Clementina.

“Well, sort of. I’m not sure. I did skate in my younger years, but only occasionally, on Garlic Creek when it froze over. This was, of course, in my parents’ small town way up North. Oh, I did try to skate on sidewalks too. It turned out to be not very promising.

As a matter of fact, during the three winter seasons I had spent with my parents, Father insisted that I went out skating every afternoon. He maintained that exercise would do me a world of good, because I was fat and needed to lose weight. I didn’t fancy skating at all, for I considered it a dangerous activity, as you could easily break your bones on ice if you



fell. Why I had heard horrifying stories of even good, well-mannered, parent- and grandparent-obeying children who, on account of misplaced trust in their own skill as skaters had ended up in the hospital with fractured legs and such. Not to mention bad kids, kids who didn't obey their grandma and grandpa and went out skating and ended up with God knows what missing teeth and bruised lips and other horrible injuries. Just thinking of it makes me shudder.

So whenever Father emphasized the benefits of physical activity and demanded that I fetch my skates and go out in the cold and for once do something good for my body, I would feign obedience: I'd grab the pair of them (the skates, you know) and make a grand exit through the garden gate. Once I was out of sight, I just walked up and down the neighborhood sidewalks with the skates hanging from my shoulder, hoping to God no one who knew Father would see me and report back to him."

"Well, you know," Clementina says "you can't expect your parents to raise to your own level of consciousness and responsibility. And that's a fact."

"Yeah," I agree "grownups would be like that. Now, however, it's a different matter: this is the big city, and they do have a real skating rink."

Which is actually a frozen lake smack in the middle of the park. In summer, swans would promenade their graces on the water, and birch trees would sink their undulating branches into it. But it's winter now. We don't know where the swans go in cold weather; and the birch trees look like ordinary sticks, all covered in snow.

Multi-colored lights are strung on tiny strings all around the lake, and pop songs and waltzes can be heard through a couple of speakers installed on the walls of the pavilion which, in summer, serves as a beer hall. We buy our tickets from an improvised plywood booth, walk across the small, arched bridge, and sit on a bench on the frozen lake to put on our skates.

I notice that Clementina's skates are of a newer model than mine; besides, she has white skating boots, modern and elegant; mine are brown and look old and overused, for grandma purchased them second-hand from the grandson of one of her lady friends. I don't quite understand why, since my parents are medical doctors, I have to wear clothes made from grandma's or Mother's old garments (it's called "economizing," grandma says); or why I have to put on skating boots someone else has worn before me.

To give but one example: just this past fall, on rainy days, I had to go to school with grandpa's black umbrella. It was aged and discolored from so much wearing (for it was a pre-WW II accessory) and a boy in my class, who used it as a parachute to jump from the top of his desk, remarked that it looked like an old French peasant's *paraplui* (that meant "umbrella" in French, grandpa told me afterwards).

That didn't bother me, but honestly I was a little baffled. Things were not what they appeared to be.

But I digress.

We both get on the ice, and Clementina skates like a pro. I don't think, though, that she's competition for Sonja Henie, whom I had seen over Christmas break on our newly purchased black-and-white TV set. Sonja played the main character in an old American movie celebrating the winter pleasures of Sun Valley, and she got to wear the most attractive skating costumes

ever. I don't know where Sun Valley is and frankly, the name sounds too good to be true, so perhaps they just made it up. But it doesn't matter, since she certainly took my breath away with her pirouettes and golden locks.

Perhaps I'm thinking too intensely of a song in that movie, *Chattanooga Choo Choo* that Father used to hum all the time; in my mind I am trying to get it right at a certain spot where he'd regularly mess up, so I can't pay due attention to what I'm doing on ice. Yet I can't help but notice that to my dismay I've completely forgotten what to do with my legs and feet. Somehow, I can't keep my body straight, my two legs go in two different directions, and I collapse like a bag of potatoes. It's a good thing I haven't got three legs, because I'd go in three different directions; and it's even better that I am sort of plumpish so I have a little protective cushion where my behind is. As I hit the ice I'm thinking of Father and how wrong he was to encourage me to lose weight—and where I'd be now had I listened to him, all my bones broken due to direct contact with a hard surface and lack of fat deposits; yeah, grownups don't know what they're talking about most of the time, and that gives me a little satisfaction; but even so it's a terrible thing and I am disgraced for the rest of my life in front of my friends and peers and their relatives.



Then I have this reassuring idea: obviously adults, too, have a way of making fools of themselves, I tell myself. I'm not saying they do it less in the warm months, but it seems to me they have a propensity for doing it in winter: for quick as lightning I recall those guys I watched yesterday riding King Matthias's copper horse in that crazy snow; and, more than anything else, grandma falling on ice, dropping her hat, and spilling a whole bag of onions on her way back from Trinity Church one winter: she had tried to outdo me at ice sliding, and I understood her nosedive as a sign from God. It was a grand sight, too, considering that for a while the onions rolled at great speed in all directions, then they slowed down, stopped rolling, and stood still among some withered rose bushes. Hah! I said it then and I say it now: grownups are forever trying to show you how to do it, but

boy most of the time they get it wrong, and sometimes they get punished for that. Anyway, grandma's hat landed in a hole under a birch tree, and some kids present at the incident had great fun. I was one of those kids.

A recollection like that fills my heart with joy and I feel much relieved, for that is what I call redemptive memory.

On the other hand, my own collapse is not to be taken as a sign from God, for I wasn't trying to outdo Clementina or show her how it's done, like grandma had attempted to show me how

smart she was at the time of that misfortunate event a few years back. In addition, I don't think God is trying to punish me for having made fun of grandma. She deserved it.

Mine is just a horrible accident. I get up with some difficulty, short of breath, tears in my eyes. I am hurting all over the place, and that includes my honor and dignity, which are terribly bruised.

But Clementina is a kind, considerate person. At least that's how she is to me. So she says:

“Don't worry. I know how to skate, and you know about music. We're quits. By the way, what happened to your fur coat? The *ourson*, you know. It would have helped to have it on when you fell, it's so thick and soft.”



Oh, that.

The *ourson* stayed in our family and became legendary, as members of different generations continued to wear it. My little brother followed in my footsteps when Mother gave him my coat to wear to school in first grade, and so it came to be that he was forever covered in shame among his classmates for wearing an out-of-fashion girl's garment.