



# That Big-mouthed Aida

March 26, 2019





If you walked down Bolyai Street past Ms. Hanna's windows and the toy store, thereafter attempting to cross Lenin Boulevard to go to *The Sister* supermarket and you were a kid of eleven or so, you had no choice but to break the law: there was no pedestrian crossing to take you straight to *The Sister's* entrance from this side of the boulevard. It was well and good for adults to walk another thirty meters on this side to get to the main intersection equipped with stoplights, and wait for the green light to turn on, so through exercising both foresight and perseverance they could at the end of a long and strenuous road find themselves on the desired side of the street, which was NOT the side they were on initially.

This didn't hold true for kids, though. Kids should not be supposed to possess—nor should it be required of them to even want to achieve possession (let alone strive for implementation) of—the wonderful though somewhat unexciting virtues of self-control, patience, wisdom, experience, and fear of the law adults have. Besides, everyone knows kids are never as tall as adults, and the natural as well as logical consequence of it is the actual fact of kids' legs being shorter. Now that would put even those patient, wise, and law-abiding kids who WANTED to walk all the way to the main intersection in an unfair position: their shorter legs would have to take at least TWICE as many steps as the legs of adults in comparable situations, and would bring undue mental and physical stress as well as unnecessary exhaustion to bear upon said kids. I mean, look at it this way:

Suppose your grandma sends you on an errand to buy miscellaneous foodstuffs from *The Sister*, and you have to follow the itinerary described above. What would you rather do? Stay on this side of Lenin Boulevard and walk on it THE WRONG DIRECTION all the way to the stop light (that'd be thirty meters), wait till the light in the metal contraption turns from red to green, cross the boulevard, then walk another thirty meters IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION, that is, the direction you were COMING FROM, but now on the *Sister* side of the street till you get to your destination? That makes NO sense. Any kid would tell you that.



I felt it in my bones that it was going to be a glorious summer day, and I was fully enjoying the benefits of not having to go to school, listing them one by one in my mind, when grandma returned from church and various other scheduled early-morning errands. Through the open kitchen windows her voice could be heard engaging in conversation with the sewing shop girls downstairs: she was distributing copies of the local newspaper and a few bottles of milk and yogurt she had purchased for them. "Thank you, Mrs. Leontine," proclaimed the chorus, and then she was free to climb the twenty seven steps, each of which gave her the opportunity to utter an audible and expressive moan. I knew she didn't do that on account of aches and pains associated with old age, for grandma wasn't an old person, and she was never going to become one; she was going to stay forever young. She moaned because she liked the sound and theatricality of it; moaning gave her impetus and fresh energy, the moral satisfaction of the thing well done, and a sense of physical well-being.

She unlocked the front door with the golden key—for at the initial distribution of keys she got to choose first, the silver one being relegated to grandpa—stepped into the kitchen, and, through the *Glasswand* door, into the large room overlooking Queen Marie Boulevard, where I was still in bed. She went straight to the windows and opened the metal shutters, letting the morning sun in. Her hair was done in a ponytail, as per usual, and on her body she wore a white pencil skirt and a blouse with what I believed to be an exceedingly exotic print sporting ancient Greek and Roman coins with faces of emperors and other military and civil figures of historical fame engraved on them. All in all she looked like Empress Agrippina in distress, I thought, but you had to know grandma to understand her choice of fabric design was not so much prompted by excessive lack of taste as by a complete disregard of what other people of no import or consequence such as myself might think of or about her.



I was just contemplating the sheer pleasure of not having anything specific to do that day, when she turned her back to the windows, took a few steps towards my bed, and interrupted my daydreaming to say:

“We need a few things, which I couldn’t get this morning: first, some fresh fish eggs from the fishmonger’s at the corner of Bolyai and Lenin; then, from *The Sister*, a kilo of sugar and a dozen eggs. I am making strawberry mousse today. Go get washed and dressed, comb your hair, get the grocery bag from the kitchen and be on your way. And for the thousandth time I strongly advise you not to cross the boulevard other than at the stoplight. Now go.”

I nodded in the approximate direction of grandma, to show her I understood her needs and approved of them. Especially since strawberry mousse was a favorite concoction in my books. I knew I was a plump kid, and that I’d do better NOT to have any strawberry mousse or anything even remotely suggesting sugar content, but frankly this morning I didn’t care: it was too beautiful a day to spoil it with thoughts of gastronomic restraint and weight watching. I therefore got dressed, grabbed the raffia grocery bag, and, as grandma had said, was on my way.

Before you got to cross Lenin Boulevard in illegal fashion, you had to walk for a while through a thick curtain of horrible noises coming from *The Frizz*, and, given my musical ear and genuine humane sensitivity, I could never pass by that shop without a shudder. *The Frizz* was the hairdresser’s shop for kids; I mean, not for kids like me, who were well into the ripe years of their youth and had acquired a certain wisdom with regard to these matters, but for small kiddies aged anywhere from two to five whom their Mommies, aunties, or grannies took to have their hair cut. This was normally done in spite of loud, sometimes violent protest from said kiddies, and these protests were expressed by means of screams and cries the likes of which you couldn’t even hear at the Opera. To appease the universal anguish, the store was equipped with rocking horses, small-size automobiles, vividly colored, and similar gadgets for kids to ride on or in while having their hair cut. Yet it was to no avail. Their cries came in thick streams of horrible sounds and reminded one of street battles and the barricades of the 1848 European revolutions.



As I positioned myself to cross the large avenue, looking left, then right to watch for incoming cars (not that there were too many at the time: two or three of the *Wartburg* and *Trabant* variety every hour or so, plus a few buses, vans, trucks, and electric trolleys), I saw *Dominica* coming out of *The Frizz* holding her little brother's hand. It was understood that she did that not because he was so weak he couldn't walk, for Peter was a healthy fellow of five, but because holding hands may have imparted a pre- and post-hair cutting sense of security, moral comfort, and compassion. Traces of tears could still be seen on Peter's face, but otherwise he was quiet and his manners subdued, like someone's who'd gone through a horrible trauma, but is gradually leaving it behind and looking forward to a new life with almost no hair left on his head. Anyway, we said *Servus* and then

*Dominica* went on:

"Are you coming tonight to watch *Aida*?"

"At the Opera?"

"No. We've seen that together this past winter, remember?"

"Yeah. And a big-mouthed one she was, I must say. I don't know how singers can open their mouths so wide without cracking them at the seams."

"Mouths don't have seams."

"Well I was talking figuratively, you understand."

"Sure. Now, are you coming to watch *Aida*? It's a movie with *Sophia Loren*, and they're showing it at *The Progress Gardens*."

*The Progress Gardens* was an open-air cinema which only operated on summer nights in the Art Museum's courtyard. And *Sophia Loren* was so famous I had no less than ten postcards in my collection showing her gorgeous face and body photographed from a variety of angles. *Sophia*—I mean her printed image—occupied a place of honor in my postcard album, and I'd never, ever trade any of those cards for anything in the world. Unless it was a *Claudia Cardinale* card.

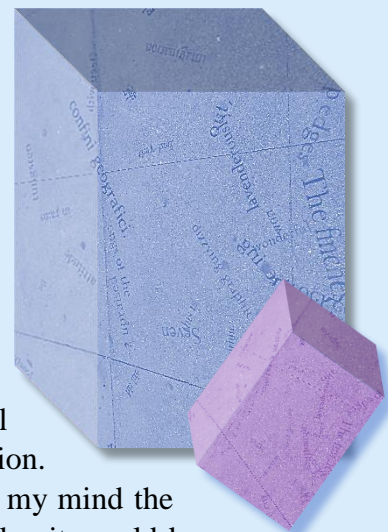
"Look," said *Dominica*, "when you cross the boulevard you'll be able to take a look at the movie poster; it's hanging in the beauty parlor's window next to the main entrance to *The Sister*."

“I’ll ask grandpa if I can go,” I said “but I’m sure they’ll let me. It’s a thing of culture, and they both think a girl like me should be given every opportunity to get as much culture as possible.”

Aida was this Ethiopian daughter of kings, which meant she was a Princess, only she wasn’t a princess from our part of the world like the ones you read about in the *Tales of the Brothers Grimm*. She resided somewhere in Africa, which I’d never seen except in movies like *Hatari!*, featuring, in addition to rhinoceros, lions, and other ferocious creatures, John Wayne himself and other American giants of the silver screen. Anyway, Aida, a soprano, was taken prisoner, became a slave girl, and fell in love with Radames, a tenor, who in turn was loved by mezzo-soprano Amneris who had a deep voice and was a nasty lady. There were no rhinoceros and such; not that I could see. The main thing to remember about *Aida*, though, was that they all wore exotic costumes sewn with golden thread, and enormous bracelets on their arms; and there was a ballet in the opera where ballerinas wore long black wigs and baggy Turkish pants which were known as *shalvars*, and undulated their tummies in contorted ways. I could well understand why Father was such an *Aida* enthusiast.

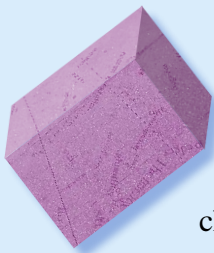


Aida herself reminded me of Aunt Carolina, grandpa’s other sister. Carolina was known far and wide for talking loudly and incessantly, and on that account she had earned from grandma the nickname Big-Mouthed Carolina (which grandpa didn’t completely agree with). And I could see why. I mean, once she’d stepped into the labyrinth of a phrase, Aunt Carolina simply couldn’t stop going on and on; her words were like paving stones, and she walked on that word-layered path till either she or you got blue in the face; it appeared that she missed every opportunity to take a breath, which would have arisen from her imagining



there was somewhere in her discourse a full grammatical stop. No, Auntie had no imagination.

But I did, and sometimes I could almost see in my mind the house I could build if I used her words as bricks: it would be a large and beautiful house, with tall windows and numerous gables and chimneys, and a brick-paved alley to lead to the front door.



Likewise, Aida did have a big mouth, no matter what Dominica said, especially when she (Aida, I mean) sang certain passages in *Vincitor del padre mio*—an aria of passionate love and despair—to Radames. Unlike Aunt Carolina, though, she also had sparkling white teeth and a lovely dark complexion: I could relate to that on account of my own good teeth and olive-colored skin. In some ways Aida and I were alike, except I couldn’t sing, did not possess any exotic outfits, and couldn’t speak Italian. But I could understand that an Ethiopian lady could do and have all of the above because this was opera, so it required, as grandpa used to say, something known as suspension of disbelief.

Dominica said:



“It’s agreed, then; my grandma’ll buy the tickets, and I’ll be at your house at six to pick you up,” then she went away, still holding Peter’s hand.



Before I ventured to cross the street I remembered I had to stop at the fishmonger’s. In my opinion it was an establishment of less than impeccable repute, on account of it exuding smells that reminded one not so much of some distant ocean or sea, but of putrid algae and dead mollusks and such. But I did like fish egg salad, so in spite of my reservations I stepped inside, went to the counter, and asked the sales person to weigh two hundred and fifty grams of fish eggs for me.

“Is Mrs. Leontine going to make fish egg salad?” the lady asked, plunging a wooden spatula into the mass of miniature jellified balls of uncertain color, then throwing the excavated stuff onto a piece of wax paper on the scale. I watched the red needle moving progressively from zero to infinitum to show how much the stuff weighted, and when it stopped it was pointing at two hundred and twenty.

“I think that’s enough, thank you,” I said. “Yes, it’s a fast day and we’re going to have that with beer; she’s also making strawberry mousse.”

“You drink beer yourself?” she asked, somewhat incredulously.

“Yes, grandma and grandpa let me have a small glass of beer every time we have either fish egg salad or cheese-and-butter paste with paprika and caraway seeds.”

“That pretty much boils down to drinking beer every Wednesday and Friday,” she said.

“Yeah. They say beer is nourishing, so I can have it on meatless days. Anyway, thank you for the fish eggs,” I said, and walked to the door holding my nose with the thumb and index finger of my left hand. I always did that on my way out, which meant I did it discreetly, my back turned to the sales person, for I was a considerate young individual and liked to show respect for other people’s feelings: the lady at the shop wasn’t responsible for the fact that fish, dead or alive, smell funny. It’s just something fish do.

I was now ready to cross to *The Sister* side of the street so I could take a look at the *Aida* poster in the beauty parlor’s window. There was this other thing, though, about crossing the boulevard in illegal manner, and it was something you absolutely had to do, otherwise you could get in trouble: you had to watch for the policeman responsible for the area’s traffic safety. The guy was supposed to spend most of his working hours inside his booth, the cylinder-shaped glass contraption with candy-striped sides located at the big intersection, watching cars and people go by. Every now and then, though, he’d pop out of that gigantic glass jar, put on his white gloves, grab his striped, black-and-white club, and take to the streets on foot like any innocent pedestrian such as you or I, and that’s what you’d be well advised to watch for. I mean this creepy individual could be counted on to follow you surreptitiously, possibly reading your thoughts, probably anticipating your intentions, certainly hoping to catch you red-handed; and



when he did, you'd hear a loud whistle right behind your back, no warning, and it was like the trumpets of the Last Judgment: it simultaneously pierced your ear drums, broke your heart, crushed your soul, and put the fear of God in you.

Many a time on many a beautiful day did I get away with it, and it was always cause for silent celebration and an inner sense of accomplishment and joy; today, however, was not one of those days. The man blew his whistle loud and clear in my left ear precisely at the moment I was about done crossing; I mean I could SEE

I only had a few more steps to go to be safely on the opposite sidewalk. He took the whistle out of his mouth, adjusted his cap, grabbed my hand and said:

“Stop right there! What do you think you're doing?”

I nearly dropped the grocery bag with the whole of the two hundred and twenty grams of raw fish eggs in it. Oh the tremor in my heart! The terror of it all! The ragged, shuddering remains of my flesh and bones—not to mention my wounded immortal soul! All my hopes of doing THE THING and NOT being caught shattered to pieces, no achievement, no pride left, and no self-respect.

“I'm so sorry, Sir. I was just trying to take the short cut to the store so I could quickly purchase a few things and get home faster. I swear it's the first time; never done it before.”

“Little girl, I'm going to have to fine you. The law demands it. You should cross the street at the big intersection over there, where my booth is. You should do that ALWAYS, no exception.”

As if I didn't know.

He went on, a deceitful, terrifying smile on his lips showing all his front teeth, which were white and pointed, and frankly quite scary:

“Cars are not supposed to slow down in this area, which means you could easily get hit. They'd take you to the hospital.” Then, on a more confidential, almost unctuous tone: “What's worse, you could die on the spot and then Mommy'll be left with no daughter.”

More and more did the man remind me of the Big Bad Wolf; he must have taken me for a local version of Little Red Riding Hood, I thought, and was about to apply the expected procedure: first, he'd take my money—well, grandma's money— and then ... Oh, any moment now he may open his mouth even wider, gulp me down, his stomach already starting to digest me together with the grocery bag and the fish eggs in it. I wondered if wolves liked fish eggs, or even just fish.

Whatever the case, I couldn't let that happen, so I gathered together the miserable shreds of what had once been my valiant self, and stood up to him:

“That is incorrect, Sir: you should say ‘granny will be left with no granddaughter.’ Mother doesn't live here. The fine is gonna come out of granny's purse, and she lives on her small pension and grandpa's. You see, we're even obligated to have no meat on two separate days of the week: it would be too costly a delicacy.”

Grandma would have crossed herself numerous times, had she been present and listening to this, for it was a case of shameless emotional blackmail.

“OK, smarty. Your grandma, then. By now she may be wondering what happened to you, so I'm letting you go this time. However, I strongly advise you NOT to do it again; there might be serious consequences, as I said before. Now go to the store, make your purchase, and return to your granny the safe way, do you hear me?”

“Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir.”

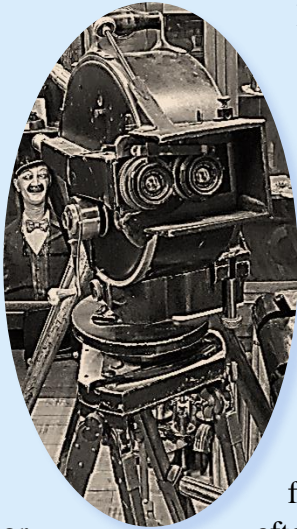
With a brisk movement of shoulders and neck I shook off the remains of terror and they fell to the ground like a constrictive girdle made of some heavy metal. No one heard it falling, no public penance was required, and, most significantly no fine had been paid, so I could continue going through my day pretending nothing had happened. This I did quite graciously, walking with ballerinesque steps and a straight back, rocking the grocery bag in my hand and the fish eggs in the bag back and forth till I got to the beauty parlor. You could say I was a young person of speedy yet full moral recovery.

Sophia Loren's face as painted on the movie poster sported mysterious eyes and a mouth that could compete with the policeman's in terms of size: what I am saying is that she had oversized lips, round and fleshy, and one would have no trouble understanding why Radames fell in love with a woman like that: she was probably a good kisser. The big mouth made sense from a professional standpoint, too: it must have been a requirement for anyone singing the part of Aida—otherwise how could she utter pitches similar in height and volume to the sound emissions of the kids tortured at *The Frizz*? Surely having a big mouth was a job requirement for Aida. By extension, it must be a job requirement for Sophia Loren as well.

Having decided that, I turned around, walked into *The Sister*, purchased the sugar and eggs on the shopping list, walked out, went to the curb side, looked up and down the boulevard, and saw the policeman at his post in the glass surveillance booth. The moment he started turning his eyes away from where I was I started my race across the street, not using heavy steps but rather taking a gentler, subtler approach to it so as not to break the eggs (I am referring to the chicken eggs, not the fish ones). The man never saw me.

Five minutes later I was back home, handing grandma the bag with the two hundred and twenty grams of fish eggs, sugar, and eggs.





or

afternoon breeze (we weren't told which) to underline more dramatic or romantic points in the story. She sang with gusto: certainly that larger-than-usual mouth of hers was instrumental in terms of sound emission, and I didn't miss the opportunity to tell Dominica:

Later that afternoon Dominica rang the doorbell: she was all dressed up, wearing white lace gloves and scalloped-edge white socks. In honor of the event I myself was wearing the faux-diamond ring and faux-gold serpent-shaped bracelet (both excellent matches for the Egyptian spirit of the movie) grandma had recently purchased in response to my insistent begging from *The Lilac*, the perfumery where Ms. Kati was enthroned as the true and only mistress. Thus adorned the two of us proceeded to *The Progress* movie garden and took our seats in the front row.

Sophia Loren donned a sleeveless red dress, and some white diaphanous stuff similar to a shawl, but not a real shawl, was hanging from her shoulders, every now and then gently fluttering in the morning

“See, what did I tell you? Aida's GOT to have a big mouth.”

“So she does,” said Dominica. “I don't mind your being right. Have a candy.”

I always knew she wasn't an envious person or anything, and the candy was so soft it melted in your mouth. It was good to be watching movies with Dominica. She was a truthful and generous person.

“Sophia is nice-looking, but Radames is breath-takingly beautiful,” she whispered. “I don't think I've ever seen a man so handsome.”

“Not even Clint Eastwood?”

“Nope.”

“Alain Delon?”

“Hmm. Yes, maybe.”

For a while we exchanged opinions on Sophia and her beau, and the splendors of ancient Egypt (I don't mean the architecture, which looked way too plain, employing as it did numerous square buildings and too little of the gracious curvilinear structures we had previously admired in French movies set in the eighteenth century, like *The Hunchback*, for example; I mostly refer to palm trees, exotic birds, colorful paintings on the walls, courtyard fountains and such similar stuff). Then Radames committed an act of treachery at Sophia's instigation—I mean Aida's—who was an annoyingly hesitant woman who couldn't decide whether she valued her duty to her country of origin more than she loved Radames, who was so stunningly good-looking.

“I wish she could make up her mind,” Dominica said. “She should choose either one or the other and stick with it.” I agreed: Aida was an unreliable person, and I wouldn’t want to be her lover.

Meanwhile Radames was sentenced to be buried alive, and finally Aida—I mean Sophia—made her choice (“Too little, too late,” I whispered in Dominica’s ear), thereafter hiding in the vault to share his fate. And while they were both in the process of expiring—and a most cruel death it was gonna be, thanks to her initial not-standing-up-to-her-father type of behavior, so much unlike my own approach in the matter of the policeman occurrence this morning—they still sang words of love to each other. A most unnerving end, we thought.

Dominica and I went back to my house, where grandma and the fish egg salad were waiting for us.

“How was the movie?” grandma asked.

“You know Aunt Carolina?” I said.

“Of course I know her. She’s my sister-in-law,” grandma said. “What are you saying? What kind of a question is that?”

“Well you know,” I said, “since grandpa isn’t here, I can tell you Aida has a real big mouth, just like Auntie does. That’s about it.”

