

**THE FRENCH CONFECTION**

In my lingerie drawer, one day when my daughter Michelle was a little girl playing grownup, she came upon a sturdy white cardboard box. Inside she found, carefully wrapped in lavender-scented tissue paper, a silk, lace-trimmed full slip. Michelle and her older brother, Bernard, will soon be college-age. Every few weeks, their hair is a different shade of day-glo neon color. This month his is bright burgundy, hers flaming tangerine. Though she is no longer a little girl, Michelle still loves to look at the elegant garment she found so long ago—touch it, smell it. She still loves to hear the story of the silk slip.

When, more than twenty years ago I flew frequently for business, I often saw chic women who used a folded mink coat as a pillow. Or, during a nap, they draped the luxurious fur over their laps as a blanket. I had never owned a fur coat. Women in my family wore sensible Republican cloth coats. One cold, winter day, I gazed at a dark brown fur in a store window. A recent bonus had been a windfall. A few days later, alterations made, I wore the warm coat out of the furrier's shop. Thus began my brief lapse into luxury.

On the way home to Yorkville in Manhattan, I passed a lingerie shop on Fifth Avenue. Whenever I walked by this store, a small sign back in the far corner of one window, intrigued me. Bold white letters on a black background read, CUSTOM MADE LINGERIE. All but hidden by an array of delicate pastel silk and satin garments, the sign's odd placement seemed to suggest, "We don't need or want your business."

That day, emboldened certainly by my new mink coat, I entered the small emporium.

As a young girl, I had frequently accompanied my overly endowed Aunt Endora to a corsetiere's shop. Here however, the abundance of glamorous, lace-trimmed items bore no resemblance to the sensible-Republican, flesh-colored, broadcloth instruments of torture, my aunt had ordered back then. Perhaps the sign in this window referred to custom-made bras. I wore standard-issue, white-cotton Maidenform.

Inside the shop, a sparrow of a French woman, the proprietor, greeted me. Put delicately she was past childbearing age. Nevertheless, she had magnificent porcelain skin and elegant fine features. Even an abundance of pale face powder and the severe black topknot on her head did not diminish the authority of her appearance. The sign, she explained in answer to my question, referred to a "centuries-old factory in France that manufactures a silk, Belgian-lace-trimmed full slip.

"Much of the work is finished in a fine French hand, you see," Madame explained through her thick accent. "The garment is made to the measurements of my select clientele."

Her haughty manner insinuated that, dressed in mink coats or not, select customers did not wander in off the street. They were seen by appointment—and her seamstress went to *their homes* to take measurements.

No matter. I now envisioned myself in the same league as blonde, tousle-haired Hollywood starlets whose photographs appeared on movie magazine pages. Accompanying print blurbs hinted that, in the middle of the night, these glamour princesses—wearing nothing but custom-made, lace-trimmed, silk full slips beneath mink coats—drove off to meet their lovers. Except, I had no lover.

Young, sad, prematurely widowed several years before, I was too busy for love. I travelled the country to manage the scientific software installations of my own select clients.

Not until that moment did the thought of a new romance occur to me. But, I now realized, I too had long blonde hair I could free from its chignon at the nape of my neck. I owned a car and, of late, a mink coat. The slip would complete the requisite alluring outfit, making my inventory three down, one to go. Bases loaded, so to speak—the lover, the home run.

In a fabric sample catalog, small, pinked-edge silk squares were pasted onto pages constructed of glossy, thick white oak tag. The book, about the size of a bible, and trimmed with mauve and lavender braid, had matching silk tassels to bookmark the choice of colors I would choose for my garment.

Before the fitting could be undertaken in the curtained dressing room, the seamstress brought me a cup of tea. She was a clone of the proprietor, bone thin, chic in all black—a soft cashmere turtleneck sweater and a wool skirt with a razor sharp hem. The differences between the two women were a few stray hairs in the seamstress' topknot and, around her neck, a functional pincushion hung from a thin red silk rope. A yard-long, yellow tape measure draped over that.

She handed me a, citrus-scented brew, hot from the faucet of a silver samovar that was tarnished just enough to confirm its sterling status. We sat on dainty white Chippendale chairs beside a matching teacart. The small table was set with translucent bone china cups trimmed in pink and red hedge roses, similar to the fitting room wallpaper, curtain fabric, and chintz-covered seat pads. In the background, New York's classical music radio station played softly.

Two weeks later, I received a note by mail. In Madame's delicate, plum-colored script, on rose-scented, mauve stationary, it announced: *Your custom-made garment, hand-finished in France, awaits your pleasure.* Clients without a store account were advised that cash was the acceptable form of payment.

Her message was clear. Mink coat notwithstanding, surely Madame considered me an upstart. A monkey in a tuxedo! She did not seem unkind. On the contrary, I sensed it was duty that dictated I must be kept in my place. Perhaps in her day, she had seen social climbers come to a bad end.

I returned to claim my purchase, this time—as Madame's note requested—by appointment. When I saw the caramel-colored silk slip trimmed with brown and beige Belgian lace, her attitude toward me was inconsequential. I owned the most beautiful lingerie I'd ever seen. Mine, and made for me! Two large darker brown lace initials, MC, were embroidered just where a low neckline would demurely hint at their existence.

Again, after the civilized prerequisite tea rite, I was allowed to try on the slip. Mice, who had stepped through the magic glass of a freestanding gilt-edged floor mirror with delicate Queen Anne legs, gazed back out at me. The fine silk fabric was a delightful, decadent sensation of softness against my body.

Madame entered the small dressing room to carefully check the fit.

"Perfect!" she announced finally. Nervously, I had half feared she might say my figure was not *select* enough after all, and void the transaction.

Relieved to have passed muster, I thanked her. Then I did something she could not have imagined. On impulse, I hugged her. Her reed thin body stiffened. With a look of dismay, brushing herself off as if fleas had landed upon her, she stepped back. Her expression said it all. My naïveté about class distinction and my place in the world would lead to heartbreak, she was certain. One did not lunge at strangers to embrace them.

Never again have I made such impulsive, extravagant purchases. The coat has been repaired several times. It remains serviceable on cold winter days. For sentimental

reasons, the threadbare silk slip my daughter Michelle came upon, remains wrapped in my lingerie draw. I no longer dare wear or wash it for fear it will evaporate. Truth to tell, it might not fit— as perhaps I have gained a pound or two.

Our large family includes the two teen-agers, four stair-step younger boys, a fat orange tabby, and an elegant gray angora cat. Years ago to complete this *mélange*, my-mother-in law, who spends most of her time here with us as well, bought the children a big black French poodle. The dog is almost as large as a pony. Thank goodness, our rambling old house, off the main street of a small New England university town, easily accommodates such a brood.

That day, twenty years ago, as Madame wrapped my purchase, a man entered the shop. How dashing he was in his dark wool beret and trench coat. Surely, I thought, a French movie idol, come to select a gift for his current lover.

Madame finished up and the handsome man and I exchanged some small chit-chat about the cold weather. He held the door open for me to leave. I thanked him.

Although he sometimes seems confounded that a noble impulse has morphed into this life of ours, as my husband now tells the story, it was love at first sight. And, occasionally, looking at her son's freewheeling wife, our two neon-haired offspring, the four boisterous younger ones and the spoiled pet menagerie, my proper French mother-in-law also ponders how this all came about.

What was his noble impulse? That afternoon at a nearby café, Madame expressed her concern for my future to her lunch companion.

"A lovely woman, but neither fish nor fowl. One should keep to their place. I see heartbreak ahead for her."

Those words sealed the deal. He couldn't let that happen.

Yes, a lovely woman. Someone must rescue her from a sad fate, thought the son Madame had raised alone.

She herself had learned some hard-won lessons.

He says now that he sensed my heart had already been broken once.

*A lovely woman indeed, he thought. I will do it—I will rescue her from Maman's sad vision!*

Well, you know the French will bend any rule for affairs of the heart—all's fair in love and war. Some detective work through *Maman's* shop records, a little of his ooh la la, a whirlwind romance—and here we are.

Madame, of course, agreed to arrange the small, tasteful wedding because one must make the best of even bad situations. Every so often through the years though, she exclaims—not without affection, "Mon Dieu, what a salad Nicoise we are here!"

And I respond, "C'est la vie!"