

Dress for Success

or the Etiquette of Using Mirrors

'Now, as I am the tallest among you and the oldest as well, I am taking the van's mirror on the right side. You can brotherly share my car's ones!' Vesselin was having fun with the boys as the only mirrors out of the house were the ones on the cars parked in the yard.

'I am getting the Trabant's one, it is irresistible!' Dimitar was bending his lathered face over the small mirror, 'Do you think it will be easier if I sit inside and stick my head out of the opened window?'

'I am not sure, but if you get stuck in the door, it will not be a problem, we can always get you out with scissors!'

'What kind of scissors?'

'I bet a manicure one will do the trick but I also have the garden shears somewhere around. Considering the flowers around you it will be appropriate. Who got my shaving gel, I need more!'

The second floor was also preoccupied. Tantche and Vantche were sitting on Rada's bed wrapped in their bed sheets and were patiently listening to her rants that instead of three-day worth of salami they could have brought her something decent to put on for her wedding. After a minute or so Tantche let a theatrical sigh and looked at Vantche, 'Imagine only that we have crossed the country for an authentic ethnic wedding in a painted postcard village on the other side of the map only to find that the bride will go naked! What would her ancestors say! Where is Mitzi, by the way?'

'I think she is hiding! She started all that and now she is nowhere to be seen!'

'Seriously, Rada, you will look gorgeous wrapped in the doormat, just put on something, ethnic, modern, skirt, leggings, whatever.'

'Now that stuff about the ethnic, are you serious about it?'

'Unless the village has a band ready in the bushes, we will have to be content with you in whatever local costume you will find. We may go around pretending to be ethnographers but I doubt the local people will be naive enough to believe it. Listen, it is an old house. Ask Konstantin, he should know if his grandparents have something special in a drawer!'

'I don't know!'

'Konstantin, Rada just said she does not know something, run fast, she may repeat it and it is your last chance!' Vantche was hanging halfway through the window over the yard.

'Coming!' the groom climbed the stairs two at a time. He opened the door of what was his bedroom and looked at the three girls draped in sheets.

'Ahem, what did you not know, sweetheart?'

'I need a dress, you know. These two said they came for an ethnic wedding and suggested that Grandma Elka may have costume somewhere in the drawers. I could not stop them!'

'But of course! Girls, that was a stroke of a genius! Grandma does have a chest full of completely new long shirts! She passed her winters embroidering them. Vesselin's mom had been sending her the laces for ages! I bet there will be some aprons also and they are to be tied around, so they will fit everyone. Stay here! Georgi! I need some strong hands now!' it was Konstantin who was hanging from the window.

Huffing and puffing the two brothers brought in a beautifully carved wooden chest.

'Boy, am I glad I had to howl this first and get my thirty seconds of bath time later! I will get Lorelei to join you and will go get myself in order!' Georgi whistled so loudly that the girls got startled. His wife appeared dressed in a simple red dress and comfortable shoes, holding a hairbrush in hand. He kissed her nose and sent her to the bedroom then left to pick up his toiletries.

When the petite German entered, the girls were bended over the open chest and Rada was pulling reverently from there shirts made of finest cotton with embroidered sleeves and fronts, woolen dresses lavishly decorated, vests that closed with spun rope loops and knobs and kerchiefs that were so thin that their embroidery was the only thing preventing them from flying away with the breeze. Thick woolen belts

were glowing in multitude of colors, the silver of their buckles as shiny as the day they were made some hundreds of years ago.

'Just tell me that you have nothing to wear again!' sighed Tantche lovingly touching a blue and orange robe covered with intricate square patterns. 'Now make up your mind fast as I also want one but you, as a bride, have the first pick!'

'If one is not supposed to wear underwear with these costumes, just let me know and I am discarding mine!' Lorelei giggled and looked intently at Rada. 'You should teach me some Bulgarian for me to communicate with your friends!'

'Tantche and Vantche both speak pretty decent English, so just switch the languages! And help me get my hair down!' Rada was pulling at her long braid.

Two big pillows were stuffed under Milena's legs and one under her head on the bed. She used the opportunity to help her circulation and not to miss the vivid exchange between Mitzi and Vesselin.

'He is committed to her, Mitzi, and nothing you say will change his mind, so there will be time for it later, calm down!'

'I am not saying that he will renege on his promise, I just want this one to start without skeletons in the closet.'

Both Milena and Vesselin laughed and Mitzi joined them because it was good and she could relax in their company like all the worries in the world did not exist. They had that knack, no, that knowledge how to do it, which was rare by itself and in their case came with decades of practice. She thought about the innumerable hardships and humiliations that they have endured alone or as a family and how they have come victorious over and over again. Neither frail health nor outside forces stood a chance before the union of souls that were determined that tomorrow would be a better day. Unlike many others, they have seen it coming. There was a tinge in Mitzi's heart for she had stood with lossif as their matron of honor, the family ties between them growing like wild vines that survive wind and fire. She wished lossif were there to lead their granddaughter to the altar, but as he was not, Vesselin was the man to do it. He was the last remaining man of their group that stayed and fought and won. He had the right to celebrate on a personal level as well and Rada was the pearl in his crown of thorns.

'If you want to get all the skeletons from the closet you need much more time my dear. I think you should leave it for tonight and tomorrow and the day after. These are the Hot Days, the sea is not good for bathing anyway - I heard from the meteo guide today. What is left to be done - sit down in a circle and tell them some stories?'

'They may not believe most of them, Mitzi, be prepared that they will think of them as the tales of an old woman.' Milena's voice was that familiar comforting mixture of lilt and deep tones.

'Let them have their rings in innocence. By the way, am I presentable enough?' Vesselin motioned down his Hawaiian shirt and dark blue trousers. 'I doubt I will fit in any shirt the boys may spare, they come in shorter versions these days!'

Both women smiled - very few men indeed came in Vesselin's impressive height at any time. Even in his seventies he was towering over almost everyone. He had gained some bulk along the years but was still a handsome man with his straight posture and patrician features. The irony of fate - despite his tormented life his hair was liberally sprayed with gray but the mass of it was still raven. The man did not wear even reading glasses! Mitzi looked at Milena and saw in her periwinkle eyes the same flame that was there when he first brought her to introduce to them as his bride. Her hair was as bright purple as at the moment and she was smiling as if marrying the guy who Sofia socialites considered the epitome of bad luck was a dream come true. If some marriages were made in heaven, theirs was one of them. Mitzi looked at them again and stood up. 'I will see if they had a giant around the village to borrow something otherwise Father Ivan may frown and move the wedding to the beach.'

The three boys as Vesselin had dubbed them were sitting in the kitchen still dressed in what they have been clothed in the morning. Konstantin was arguing:

'Now, the girls will all show in local dresses and we will look like aliens!'

'I am an alien who dragged a suit across Europe for you, brother mine!'

'If you are thinking that I will be seen even in the village in your grandfather's woolen baggy trousers, you have to think twice!'

'I am not saying everything needs to be nineteen century replica! But in grandpa's chest there are shirts that really look good!'

'Embroidered with flowers?'

'No, silly, they are man's shirts! They have geometric patterns...'

'Dimitar, it is his wedding finally, he wore an absolutely idiotic grey suit for me, I owe him that much, Come on, be a sport, join us!'

'That will cost you a lot of beer, guys, be warned, but let's go for it, I don't have a suit anyway...Let us go and ask the big guy also, he may change his Hawaiian mood. Do you think you have something his size though, he is at least an XXL height?'

The flower garden was in full bloom and Elka had been taking great care of it. She had loved her roses which thrived in the mild humid climate. Lorelei was given shears and free reign to prepare Rada's bouquet. She cut blooms from the pink bush, added some cream whites, found leaves that were like baby breath but still she thought something was missing. The garden was sprawling and she went further until she reached a small support wall. On it a climbing rose grew in full sun, covered with tiny pink flowers, hundreds miniature copies of the rose blooms that she had left on the garden table. The young woman squeaked in delight and started cutting the clusters that were just beginning to open. Her skirt was full but it did not seem to have made a dent on the climbing bush's beauty. She turned to go and her dress was caught by a minuscule thorn, as if the rose bush was trying to not let her go. Lorelei looked back to shake off the vine and then saw it. How did she miss it in the first place? Across the stone-clad path a small rose bush was shyly standing alone. It was an ancient one if the base of thorns was any indication but its only two blooms explained why it had been kept. They were dark velvety red ones, perfectly identical and had opened a day or two ago. The long stems were straight and not a thorn could be seen on them. Lorelei bended over the blooms and their aroma was so sweet, so enchanting that her head spun. She remembered a tale forgotten long ago. The eastern viziers liked to kill their unsuspecting victims by putting them asleep forever with vast quantities of rose petals. At the beginning of a feast the delicate flowers would permeate the air with their sweet scent but then more would be brought in and the more vapors would swirl around and the revelers would get drowsier and drowsier until the servants would pore buckets of the tender petals through the ceiling and under their sweetness the victims would lay poisoned by the scent that literary would take their breath away. Lorelei had thought it impossible maybe because in her small garden the roses were new hybrids that hardly

smelled at all but the red beauty before her would be lethal in a basket load. The young woman carefully cut the two blooms and run to the table. There was not much time left before three o'clock.

The groom and the best man followed the tradition to be at the church first. That was five minutes before the ceremony and Dimitar had his chance to bug Konstantin that he had not have much time to get cold feet and neither had Rada. Father Ivan came and asked for the rings and the best man smacked his forehead.

'Was I supposed to get them? I thought that Mitzi will be taking care of that as well!'

'She did not tell me anything about rings!' Konstantin was shaking his head.

'Fast, there should be a spare ring somewhere - the girls should have some spare ones!'

'Wait, if the worst comes to the worst, I have my grandparents' set. I will go get them!'

'Ask Mitzi first!'

Dimitar speeded up the few meters to the house. The ladies were all set to go when he stormed in.

'Mitzi, Father Ivan asked for the wedding rings. Georgi thought you are going to provide them, but if you will not, I have with me my grandparents' ones. I will be glad to give them to our newlyweds! The rings are upstairs, I will go get them!'

The elder woman looked pensively at the young sculptor and put up a hand to stop him, 'Thank you, my dear, but there are two special rings for today and they are with me both. Let us go!'

At that moment the young sculptor looked at the group and whistled. The four young ladies were dressed in white long shirts, blue sleeveless robes and red aprons. Lorelei, Tantche and Vantche were wearing white kerchiefs with few roses in the pins that were securing them. Rada was breathtaking - her curls were secured in a crown of tiny pink roses and more roses were attached to the mass of ringlets cascading down her back. She wore a magnificent pearl necklace with matching earrings and not a drop of make-up. Dimitar was standing in front of her enchanted.

'Good looking girl, isn't she?' Tantche nudged him in the ribs, 'Don't you dare to run to the church and spoil the surprise, we are going together!'

'Kosta is one lucky man! If the love of my life was looking like that, I would agree on even less notice for my wedding!' the sculptor clapped his hands.

'Then bring her here while we have not gone home and we will dress her accordingly! Come on, I will melt in a puddle!' Vantche was dangling the big door key.

Smiling Father Ivan was waiting for them at the church entrance. One could understand it - he had forgotten when the last wedding he had officiated had been and it had been definitely not in Brashlyan. The village needed more new blood, young people to replace the dying old men and women. He hoped that the couple would somehow bring a good luck and joy to the old church. He looked at Dimitar who nodded at Mitzi and she stopped in front of Georgi. The elder woman took out of her bag a minuscule package and reverently unpacked it. In it there was a big signet ring, the dark-red stone depicting a khala blowing flames. She passed it first to Vesselin, who held it for a second and handed it to Georgi. Mitzi pulled out her own engagement ring, the one she had not taken off since she had married in 1947. Rada was looking at her incredulously.

'You will give me your rose?'

'Yes, my dear, and I hope that what this ring was meant to be will finally come true. I would have given it to you long ago, but it has some last moment hitches that I would rather avoid. I think this time it is safe and it will flourish with you. Are we ready?'

The old men and women of the village were all there, seating at the narrow chairs along the walls. Father Ivan looked at them and his heart ached - there was not one person who was younger than seventy-five and most of the chairs were empty anyway. The people, clustered as close as possible to the altar, had changed their everyday faded black dresses for their Sunday best - they were wearing an eclectic mix of garments dating from centuries ago to modern suits. They have all brought flowers, lots and lots of flowers, old-fashioned blooms and branches, and had decorated the altar and icons with them. The coolness of the church and the fresh flowery aroma was battling the furnace heat coming from the open door. The bride and the groom passed the white cloth thrown over the polished stone floor, the best men Georgi and Vesselin stood behind them and Father Ivan waited until all the guests were seated before opening his Bible.

Konstantin was trying to concentrate on the words but it was not possible. His gaze was fixed on Rada and his thought was that she was his, only his for now and forever. He owed Mitzi a great time, first for introducing the young woman to him and then for sending her to him and then for that impromptu wedding. No, he owed her for raising her like she had, for helping shape her unique personality, for making her right for him. He wondered why he had not seen it in Sofia, why he had not acted earlier, then his grandparents would have been able to be present at their wedding. Gran would have been elated to open her chest and see the years and years of painstaking stitches making his bride and the girls more beautiful. Grandpa would have patted Vesselin's shoulder and remembered other weddings in that same church. The elderly women of the village would have prepared lavish flower decorations for the God's home; someone would have washed the chandeliers' hundreds of hand-cut crystal elements, polished the bronze candle holders, washed the glass in front of the icons and put a new layer of bee wax on the stone floor. The young man looked around and realized that it had been done - and felt guilty as he had not taken part of it. Of course the church was prepared for the fest of St. Elijah which was five days away. The village would not dream of offending the thunderous saint - nobody who lived by the mercy of elements would do that.