

SILVINA OCAMPO, THE IMPOSTOR AND
OTHER STORIES

(tr. Daniel Balderston)

THE VELVET DRESS

SWEATING, mopping our brows with handkerchiefs that we had moistened in the Recoleta fountain, we finally arrived at the house on Ayacucho Street, the one with a garden. How amusing!

We took the elevator to the fifth floor. I was in a foul mood because my dress was dirty and I hadn't really wanted to go out. I had planned to spend the afternoon washing and ironing my bedspread. We rang the bell: the door opened and we—Casilda and I—stepped into the house with the package. Casilda is a dressmaker. We live in Burzaco and our trips to the capital make her ill, especially when we have to travel to the northern part of the city, so far away. Right away, Casilda asked the servant for a glass of water to take the aspirin she had brought in her purse. The aspirin fell to the floor, along with the glass and the purse. How amusing!

We went up a carpeted staircase (which smelled of mothballs), preceded by the servant, who showed us into the bedroom of Mrs. Cornelia Catalpina, whose very name was torture for me to remember. The bedroom was completely red, with white drapes and mirrors in golden frames. We waited for a century or two for a lady to come from the next room, where we could hear her singing scales and arguing with various voices. Her perfume entered; then, a few moments later, she herself entered with a different scent. She greeted us with a complaint: "How lucky you are to live outside Buenos Aires! At least there's no soot there. There may be rabid dogs and garbage dumps . . . Look at my bedspread. Do you think it's supposed to be gray? No. It's white. Like a snowflake." She took me by the chin and added, "You don't have to worry about things like that. What a

joy to be young! You're eight, right?" Then, addressing Casilda, she added, "Why don't you put a stone on her head so she won't grow up? We're young only as long as our children are."

Everyone thought my friend Casilda was my mother. How amusing!

"Ma'am, do you want to try it on?" Casilda asked, opening the package, which was all pinned together. Then she said to me, "Get the pins from my purse."

"Trying things on! It's torture for me! If only someone could try on my dresses for me, how happy I would be! It's so tiring."

The lady undressed and Casilda tried to help her into the velvet dress.

"When are you supposed to leave on your trip, ma'am?" she asked to distract her.

The lady couldn't answer. The dress was stuck to her shoulders: something kept it from going past her neck. How amusing!

"Velvet is very sticky, ma'am, and it's hot today. Let's put on a little talcum powder."

"Take it off, I'm suffocating," the lady cried out. Casilda held the dress and the lady sat down in an armchair, about to faint.

"When is the trip supposed to be, ma'am?" Casilda asked again to distract her.

"I'm leaving any day now. Today, thanks to airplanes, you can leave whenever you feel like it. The dress will have to be ready. To think that it's snowing there. Everything is white, clean, and shiny."

"You're going to Paris?"

"I'm also going to Italy."

"Won't you try on the dress again, ma'am? We'll be finished in a moment."

The lady nodded with a sigh.

"Raise both of your arms so we can first put on the two sleeves," Casilda said, taking the dress and helping her put it on once again. For a few seconds Casilda tried unsuccessfully to pull the skirt of the dress down over the lady's hips. I helped as best I could. She finally managed to put on the dress. For a few moments the lady

rested in the armchair, exhausted; then she stood up to look at herself in the mirror. The dress was beautiful and complex! A dragon embroidered with black sequins was shining on the left side of the gown. Casilda knelt down, looking in the mirror, and adjusted the hem. Then she stood up and began putting pins in the folds of the gown, on the neck and sleeves. I touched the velvet: it was rough when you rubbed it one way and smooth when you rubbed it the other. The plush set my teeth on edge. The pins fell on the wood floor, and I picked them up religiously, one by one. How amusing!

"What a dress! I don't think there's such a beautiful pattern in all of Buenos Aires," said Casilda, letting a pin drop from her lips. "Don't you like it, ma'am?"

"Very much. Velvet is my favorite material. Fabric is like flowers: one has one's favorites. I think that velvet is like spikenard."

"Do you like spikenard? It's so sad," Casilda protested.

"Spikenard is my favorite flower, yet it's harmful to me. When I smell it I get sick. Velvet sets my teeth on edge, gives me goose bumps, the same as linen gloves used to when I was a girl, and yet for me there's no other fabric like it in the whole world. Feeling its softness with my hand attracts me even if it sometimes repels me. How can a woman be better dressed than in black velvet? She doesn't need a lace collar, or a string of pearls; everything else is unnecessary. Velvet is sufficient by itself. It's sumptuous and sober."

When she had finished talking the lady was breathing with difficulty. The dragon also. Casilda took a newspaper from the table and fanned her, but the lady made her stop, saying that fresh air did her no good. How amusing!

I heard the cries of some street vendors outside. What were they selling? Fruit, maybe ice cream? The whistle of the knife sharpener and the ringing bell of the ice-cream vendor also went up and down the street. I didn't run to the window to see them, as I had on other occasions. I couldn't tear myself away from watching the fittings of the dress with the sequin dragon. The lady stood up again and, staggering slightly, walked over to the mirror. The sequin dragon also staggered. The dress was now nearly perfect, except for an almost

imperceptible tuck under the arms. Casilda took up the pins once more, plunging them perilously into the wrinkles that bulged out of the unearthly fabric.

"When you grow up," the lady told me, "you'd like to have a velvet dress, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," I answered, feeling the velvet of the dress strangling my neck with its gloved hands. How amusing!

"Now help me take it off," the lady said.

Casilda tried to help her to take it off, holding the hem in both hands. She pulled on it unsuccessfully for a few seconds, then put it back on the way it was before.

"I'll have to sleep in it," the lady said, standing before the mirror, looking at her pale face, the dragon trembling with each beat of her heart. "Velvet is wonderful but it's very heavy," she said, wiping her brow. "It's a prison. How to escape it? They should make dresses of fabric as immaterial as air, light, or water."

"I recommended raw silk to you," Casilda protested.

The lady fell to the floor, the dragon writhing. Casilda leaned over the body until the dragon lay still. I again caressed the velvet, which seemed like a live animal. Casilda said sadly, "She's dead. And I had so much trouble making this dress! It cost me so very much!"

How amusing!