

Hymenoptera

By

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THE wasp appeared in the salon that morning. It was early spring and unusually cold. The windows were laced with ice, and there was frost on the grass outside. Linderstadt shifted uncomfortably on the sofa. In nothing but shirt and socks, he was fighting both chill and dream. He had quarreled the night before with Camille, his favorite model, accusing her of petty treacheries for which she was blameless. After she left, he drank himself into a stupor, stumbling from one workshop to another, knocking down mannequins, pulling dresses from their hangers, sweeping hats to the floor. He raged at his own astounding pettiness, the poverty of his newest collection, the bankruptcy of life in general. Had he been cinched up in one of his own tight-fitting corsets, he couldn't have felt more constricted. Pinched of breath, of vision, blind to the most obvious truths. And this the man who just the week before had yet again been dubbed king, whose attention to detail, to sleeve, waist, and line, was legendary, whose transcendent gowns were slavishly praised, copied, stolen. Linderstadt the genius. The master. Linderstadt the drunkard, wrestling with his empire of taffeta, guipure, and satin, flailing at success like a fly trapped behind glass.

Dawn came, and sunlight appeared along the edges of the heavily curtained windows, penetrating the salon with a wan, peach-colored light. Linderstadt was on a couch at one end of the room, half draped with the train of a bridal gown he had appropriated from one of the ateliers. The wasp was at the other, broadside and motionless. Its wings were folded back against its body, and its long belly was curled under itself like a comma. Its two antennae were curved delicately forward but otherwise as rigid as bamboo.

An hour passed and then another. When sleep became impossible, Linderstadt staggered off the couch to relieve himself. He returned to the salon with a glass of water, at which point he first noticed the wasp. From his father, who had been an amateur entomologist before dying of yellow fever, Linderstadt knew something of insects. This one he located somewhere in the family Sphecidae, which included wasps of primarily solitary habit. Most nested in burrows or natural cavities of hollow wood, and he was a little surprised to find the animal in his salon. Then again, he was surprised to have remembered anything at all. He had scarcely thought of insects since his entry forty years before into the world of fashion. He had scarcely thought of his father, either, preferring the memory of his mother, Anna, his mother the caregiver, the seamstress, for whom he had named his first shop and his most famous dress. But his mother was not here, and the wasp most unmistakably was. Linderstadt finished his glass of water and pulled the bridal train like a shawl over his shoulders. Then he walked over to have a look.

The wasp stood chest high and about eight feet long. Linderstadt recognized the short hairs on its legs that used to remind him of the stubble on his father's chin, and he remembered, too, the forward palps by which the insect centered its jaws to tear off food. Its waist was pencil-thin, its wings translucent. Its exoskeleton, what Linderstadt thought of as its coat, was blacker than his blackest faille, blacker than coal. It seemed to absorb light, creating a small pocket of cold night right where it stood. *Nigricans*. He remembered the wasp's name. *Ammophila nigricans*. He was tempted to touch it, to feel the quality of its life. Instinctively, his eyes drifted down its belly to the pointed sting that extruded like a sword from its rear. He recalled that the sting was actually a hollow tube through which the female deposited eggs into its prey, where they would hatch into larvae and eat their way out. Males possessed the same tube but did not sting. As a boy he had always had trouble telling the sexes apart, and examining the creature now in the pale light, he wondered which it was. He felt a little feverish, which he attributed to the aftereffects of the alcohol. His mouth remained parched, but he was reluctant to leave the salon for more water for fear the wasp would be gone when he returned. So he stayed, shivering and thirsty. The hours passed, and the room did not heat up. The wasp did not move. It was stiller than Martine, his stillest and most patient model. Stiller in the windless salon than the jeweled chandelier and the damask curtains that led to the dressing rooms. Linderstadt himself was the only moving object. He paced to stay warm. He swallowed his own saliva to slake his thirst, but ultimately the need for water drove him out. He returned as quickly as possible, wearing shoes and sweater, carrying pencils, a pad of paper, and a large pitcher of water. The wasp was as he had left it. Had Linderstadt not known something of insect physiology, he might have thought the animal was carved in stone.

By the fading light he began to draw, quickly, deftly, using broad, determined strokes. He worked from different angles, sketching the wasp's neck, its shoulders and waist. He imagined the creature in flight, its wings stiff and finely veined. He drew it feeding, resting, poised to sting. He experimented with different designs, some stately and elegant, others pure whimsy. He found that he had already assumed the wasp was female. His subjects had never been otherwise. He remembered Anouk, his first model, the scoliotic girl his mother had brought home to test her adolescent son's fledgling talent. He felt as supple as he had then, his mind as inventive and free-spirited as ever.

He worked into the small hours of the morning, then rested briefly before being woken by church bells. In his youth he had been devout, and religious allusions were common in his early collections. But sanctimony had given way to secularity, and it had been thirty years since he had set foot in a church. What remained were the Sunday bells, which Linderstadt savored for the sake of nostalgia and a lingering guilt. It was a habit of his, and he was a man who held to habit.

The morning brought no visitors, and he had the store to himself. It was even colder than the day before. The wasp remained inert, and when the temperature hadn't climbed by noon, Linderstadt felt secure in leaving. His drawings were done, and his next task was to locate a suitable form on which to realize them. He owned

hundreds of torsos of every conceivable shape, some bearing the name of a specific patron, others simply marked with a number. He had other shapes as well, baskets, cylinders, mushrooms, triangles, all of which had found their way at one point or another into a collection. As long as an object had dimension, Linderstadt could imagine it on a woman. Or rather, he could imagine the woman in the object, in residence, giving it her own distinctive form and substance, imbuing each tangent and intersect with female spirit. He was a pantheist at heart and expected to have no trouble finding something suitable to the wasp. Yet nothing caught his eye; not a single object in his vast collection seemed remotely to approach the creature in composition or character. It was enigmatic. He would have to work directly on the animal itself.

He returned to the salon and approached his subject. To a man so accustomed to the divine plasticity of flesh, the armor-like hardness and inflexibility of the wasp's exoskeleton presented challenges. Each cut would have to be perfect, each seam precise. There was no bosom to softly fill a swale of fabric, no hip to give shape to a gentle waist. It would be like working with bone itself, like clothing a skeleton. Linderstadt was intrigued. He stepped up and touched the wasp's body. It was cold and hard as metal. He ran a finger along one of its wings, half expecting that his own nervous energy would bring it to life. Touch for him had always evoked the strongest emotions, which is why he used a pointing stick with his models. He might have done well to use the same stick with the wasp, for his skin tingled from the contact, momentarily clouding his senses. His hand fell to one of the wasp's legs. It was not so different from a human leg. The hairs were soft like human hairs, hairs that his models assiduously bleached, or waxed or shaved. The knee and ankle were similarly jointed, the claw as pointed and bony as a foot. His attention shifted to the animal's waist, in a human the pivot point between leg and torso. In the wasp it was lower and far narrower than anything human. It was as thin as a pipestem, a marvel of invention he was easily able to encircle between thumb and forefinger.

From a pocket he took out a tape and began to make his measurements, elbow to shoulder, shoulder to wing tip, hip to claw, jotting each down in a notebook. From time to time he would pause, stepping back to imagine a detail, a particular look, a melon sleeve, a fringed collar, a flounce. Sometimes he would make a notation; other times, a quick sketch. When it came time to measure the chest, he had to lie on his back underneath the wasp. From that vantage he had a good view of its hairless and plated torso, as well as its sting, which was poised like a pike and pointed directly between his legs. After a moment's hesitation, he rolled over and took its measure, too, wondering casually if this was one of those wasps that died after stinging, and if so, was there some way he could memorialize such a sacrifice in a dress. Then he crawled out and looked at his numbers.

The wasp was symmetrical, almost perfectly so. Throughout his long career Linderstadt had always sought to thwart such symmetry, focusing instead on the subtle variations in the human body, the natural differences between left and right. There was always something to emphasize, a hip that was higher, a shoulder, a breast. Even an eye, whose iris might be flecked a slightly different shade of blue

than its neighbor, could trigger a report somewhere in the color of the dress below. Linderstadt's success to a large degree rested on his uncanny ability to uncover such asymmetries, but the wasp presented difficulties. There was nothing that distinguished one side from the other, almost as if the animal were mocking the idea of asymmetry, of individuality, and, by inference, the whole of Linderstadt's career. It occurred to him that he had been wrong, that perhaps the true search was not for singularity but for constancy of form, for repetition and preservation. Perhaps what abided was commonality; what endured, the very proportions he held in his hand.

Linderstadt took his notebook to the main atelier to begin work on the first dress. He had decided to start with something simple, a velvet sheath with narrow apertures for wing and leg and a white flounce of tulle at the bottom to hide the sting. With no time for a muslin fitting, he worked directly with the fabric itself. It was a job normally handled by assistants, but the master had not lost his skill with scissors and thread. The work went fast, and partway through the sewing, he remembered the name of the order to which his wasp belonged. Hymenoptera, after *ptera*, for wing, and *hymeno*, for the Greek god of marriage, referring to the union of the wasp's front and hind wings. He himself had never married, had never touched a woman outside his profession, certainly not intimately. Some suggested that he feared intimacy, but more likely what he feared was a test of the purity of his vision. His women were jewels, precious stones to be admired like anything beautiful and splendid. He clothed them to adore them. He clothed them to keep them in the palace of his dreams. Yet now, having touched the wasp's body, having been inspired by a creature as unlike himself as woman to man, he wondered if perhaps he had not missed something along the way. Flesh begged flesh. Could such a lifelong loss be rectified?

He finished the dress and hurried to the salon. The wasp offered no resistance as he lifted its claws and pulled the dark sheath into place. The image of his father came to mind, deftly unfolding a butterfly's wing and pinning it to his velvet display board. The Linderstadt men, it seemed, had a way with animals. He straightened the bodice and zipped up the back of the gown, then stepped back for a look. The waist, as he expected, needed taking in, and one of the shoulders needed to be realigned. The choice of color and fabric, however, was excellent. Black on black, night against night. It was a good beginning.

Linderstadt did the alterations, then hung the gown in one of the dressing rooms and returned to the workshop. His next outfit was a broad cape of lemon guipure with a gold chain fastener, striking in its contrast to the wasp's jet-black exterior. He made a matching toque to which he attached lacquered sticks to echo the wasp's antennae. The atelier was as cold as the salon, and he worked in overcoat, scarf, and kid gloves whose fingertips he had snipped off with a scissors. His face was bare, and the bracing chill against his cheek recalled the freezing winters of his childhood when he had been forced to stand stock still for what seemed hours on end while his mother used him as a form for the clothes she was making. They had had no money for heat, and Linderstadt had developed a stoical attitude toward the elements. The cold reminded him of the value of discipline and self-control. But more than that, it

reminded him how he had come to love the feel of the outfits being fitted and fastened against his skin. He had loved it when his mother tightened a waist or took in a sleeve. The feeling of confinement evoked a certain wild power of imagination, as though he were being simultaneously nurtured and freed. What he remembered of the cold was not the numbness in his fingers, the misting of his breath, the goose bumps on his arms. It was the power, pure and simple, so that now, even though he had money aplenty to fire his boilers and make his rooms hot as jungles, Linderstadt kept the heat off. The cold was his pleasure. It was fire enough.

He worked through the night to finish the cape. When Monday morning arrived, he locked the doors of the salon, turning away the seamstresses, stockroom clerks, salesgirls, and models who had come to work. He held the door against Camille and even Broussard, his lifelong friend and adviser. Hidden by the curtain that was strung across the door's glass panes, he announced that the collection was complete, the final alterations to be done in private by himself. He went to his strongbox and brought back bundles of cash, which he passed through the mail slot for Broussard to distribute to the employees. He assured everyone that the house of Linderstadt was intact and invited them all to return in a week for the opening of the collection. Then he left.

Back in the workshop he started on his next creation, an off-the-shoulder blue moiri gown with a voluminous skirt festooned with bows. He sewed what he could by machine, but the bows had to be done by hand. He sewed like his mother, one knee crossed over the other, head bent, pinkie ringer crooked out as though he were sipping a cup of tea. The skirt took a full day, during which he broke only once, to relieve himself. Food did not enter his mind, and in that he seemed in tune with the wasp. The animal signaled neither hunger nor thirst. On occasion one of its antennae would twitch, but Linderstadt attributed this to subtle changes in the turgor of the insect's blood. He assumed the wasp remained gripped by the cold, though he couldn't help but wonder if its preternatural stillness sprang from some deeper design. He thought of his father, so ordinary on the surface, so unfathomable beneath. Given the chance, the man would spend days with his insects, meticulously arranging his boards, printing the tiny specimen labels, taking inventory. Linderstadt could never quite grasp his father's patience and devotion. His mother claimed her husband was in hiding, but what did a child know of that? By the time it occurred to him to ask for himself, his father had been dead for years.

The weather held, and on Wednesday Linderstadt wheeled one of the sewing machines from the atelier to the salon so that he could work without leaving the wasp's side. Voices drifted in from the street, curiosity seekers making gossip, trying in vain to get a glimpse inside. The phone rang incessantly, message after message from concerned friends, clients, the press. M. Jesais, his personal psychic, called daily with increasingly dire prognostications. Linderstadt was unmoved. He heard but a single voice, and it kept him from distraction. He wondered why it had taken so long to hear.

He stitched a sleeve and then another. Forty years of success had brought him to this, needle, thread, tubes of fabric fashioned together like artifacts for a future

archaeology. Barely a week before, he had felt on the verge of extinction. Ghosts had begun to visit, ghosts of past models, of deceased friends, of his parents. The more he had tried to capture his vision, the more it had eluded him. Juliet in satin, Eve in furs, the Nameless Queen, arrogant and imperious in stiff brocade. Sirens of impossible beauty, triumphs of yet another man's muddled desire. Success, it seemed, rested on vanity.

Such was the sad lesson of his career. And after forty years he had tired of the pretense. He had seen too many Camilles, too many Martines and Anouks. Seen and not seen. He was better off with no one at all.

But now there was the wasp. The wasp was different. The wasp added a twist. Chitin was not flesh, six not the same as two, six legs and claws, six declinations of angle, line, and force. And wings, wings that were stronger and finer than the angel Gabriel himself, a painting of whom Linderstadt had used to model his '84 collection. Eyes too, compound eyes, able to see God knows what. And antennae, to sample the world's invisible delight. Linderstadt tried to imagine Camille as an insect, crawling down the runway, striking a pose. Camille on four legs, on six, Camille on her belly, inching along like a caterpillar. From that vantage his gowns were no more than cocoons, pallid reflections of a more vivid reality. His life's vision had suffered from being too petty. It was flawed by arrogance. His adoration of women was an insult; his lofty ideals of grace and beauty, sophistry. The way of his heart was simpler and more direct. It was rooted inside, just as the wasp was rooted there in his room.

Linderstadt thought again of his father. He was dressing for work, buttoning up his navy blue postman's jacket with the yellow piping around the cuff. He was talking about a moth he had found whose body looked exactly like a woman. Was he talking to Linderstadt's mother? Linderstadt couldn't remember. There was tension in the air, he remembered that. And something else. Rapture?

He finished the last seam and held up the dress. The shimmering moire reminded him of a sea; the six-legged gown, of a creature delectably adrift. To a lesser talent the sleeves would have been a nightmare, but in Linderstadt's hands they flowed effortlessly into the bodice. Each one sported a ruffled cap and was zippered to aid in getting it on. Once the gown was in place, Linderstadt stepped back to have a look. The fit was uncanny, as though some hidden hand were guiding his own. It had been that way from the start. There were five gowns now. Five in five days. One more, he thought, one more to complete the collection. The bridal gown, his signature piece. For forty years he had ended every show with such a gown. Brides signified life. They signified love and the power of creation. What better way to signal his own rebirth?

The dress took two days, which Linderstadt knew only because he had paused at one point to listen to the Sunday bells. He was working on the veil at the time, a gorgeous bit of organza that looked like mist, sewing and thinking what a pity it would be to cover the wasp's extraordinary face. And so he had devised an ingenious interlocking paneled design that simultaneously hid the face and revealed it.

After the veil he had started on the train, using ten feet of egg-white chiffon that he gathered in gentle waves to resemble foam. Where it attached to the skirt, he cut a hole for the sting and ringed it with flowers. The main body of the dress was made of brilliant satin with an Imperial collar and long sleeves of lace. Queen, Mother, Bride. The dress was a triumph of imagination, technique, and will.

He finished Sunday night, hung the gown in the dressing room with the others, then wrapped himself in overcoat and scarf and fell asleep on the couch. Early Monday he would get up and make the final preparations to receive his public.

That night the cold spell broke. A warm front swept in from the south, brushing away the chill like a cobweb. In his sleep Linderstadt unbuttoned his coat and pulled off his scarf. He dreamed of summer, flying a kite with his father at the beach. When he woke, it was almost noon. The room was thick with heat. A crowd had gathered outside the store for the opening. The wasp was gone.

He searched the workshops, the stockroom, the offices. He climbed to the roof and looked in the basement. Finally, he returned to the salon, bemused and somewhat dazed. Near where the wasp had stood he noticed a paper sphere the size of a small chair. One side of it was open, and inside were many tiers of hexagonal cells, all composed of the same papery material as the envelope. Linderstadt had a glimmer of understanding, and when he discovered that his gowns had vanished, he realized his mistake. The wasp was not a Sphecida at all but a Vespida, a paper wasp. Its diet consisted of wood, leaves, and other natural fibers. It had eaten its own gowns.

Linderstadt surveyed the remains of his work. The nest had a delicate beauty of its own, and briefly he considered showing it in lieu of the collection. Then he caught sight of a bit of undigested material peeking out from behind the papery sphere. It was the bridal veil, and he followed it around the nest, where it stood on the floor like a fountain of steam frozen in air, unattached to its gown but otherwise intact. Outside, the crowd clamored to be let in. Linderstadt drew back the curtains and lifted the gossamer veil. The sun seemed to set it aflame. Like the smallest fragment of a memory, it recalled every memory. He placed it on his head. A smile played across his face, the first in months. His eyes shone. With everything gone there was nothing left to hide. A single thread would have sufficed. Drawing himself up, proud and erect, Linderstadt went to open the doors.