Title: I am a Communion Dress
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Deep within Coli Frozionone Italy, inside the Nicoletti Butegga, a seamstress was sewing Anne Maria Nicoletti's communion dress.¹ That's me, and this is where my story begins. Lace, satin, cotton. All being tugged together and sewed until I was made. The dressmaker, Angela who was Anna Maria's mother, created me to be worn on the communion to signify her transition into the Roman Catholic faith. I was beautiful. My voluptuous hoop skirt and sparkly crystal bodice were statement pieces. Following my creation, I was steamed and hung up, waiting to be taken to my new home. The excitement of being worn when I saw Anna Maria come to claim me was overshadowed when I was stuffed violently into a bag and hung in a dark closet for an eternity until it was finally time to shine.

Anna Maria was showered on her First Holy Communion with prayers and well wishes. She had taken part in a rite of passage in the Catholic church and was welcomed in the community as a person of reason. But what was most important to me was to hear the praises and admirations of her dress. I was a symbol of elegance and grace. The dazzling sparkles and glittering crystals glimmered in the cathedrals lighting. My hoop skirt commanded ostentatious extravagance, making it look like Anna Maria was floating in a sea of cotton. My admirers were staring at me with adoration. As Anna Maria was taking pictures with everyone I heard the comments “Such a beautiful dress for such an important day,” said one woman. “Yes, the beauty matches the beholder, a true image of purity on such a holy day,” said another. Anna Maria spun round and round, my hoop skirt flowing in the wind. She screamed with excitement, and I was glad to be the center of everyone’s attention. I wanted this day to continue on forever, but I did not. All too soon Anna Maria took me off, stuffed me into a bag, then into a small, dark, musty smelling chest at the foot of her bed.

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It could have been in there for days, weeks, months or years. I had no sense of time in that chest, but I knew my time to shine was over. My life was short-lived, or so I thought. After what felt like decades, the chest was opened, and a new face looked down upon me excitement. An older Anna Maria looked to what I learned to be daughter Giovanna, and told her, “This was my communion dress, and now it is yours. Do whatever you want to it”.

I had been granted a second chance at existence! I was so excited about being worn I disregarded the fact that I was being transported to a sewing table. Giovanna took a moment to admire my graceful silhouette and luxurious materials. I was then placed delicately onto the sewing table, and then with a thick black marker, a line was drawn to split where my bodice and hoop skirt met. As quick as a lightning bolt I was cut in half. My bodice was carelessly thrown aside as if it was a piece of garbage. What had I done to deserve such a malicious dissection? Was I pretty enough to be left alone? I then undertook the heart-wrenching process of being devised into a new bodice. I was fitted with a hideous new skirt made from cheap tulle. I felt like an ugly monster, having been cut apart and sewn put back together. I was then hung in Giovanna’s closet to wait until it was time to be worn.

Much like Anna Maria’s communion, Giovanna was showered on her First Holy Communion with gifts, prayers and well wishes. As per the tradition of a First Holy Communion, family and friends gathered around the recipient of the Holy Communion and marveled at her extravagant dress. I learned just how important a communion dress is to a girl. There is an aspect of honour that comes with wearing a garment passed down from a mother to a daughter. It is essential to incorporate the previous generation into the new one’s celebration. I was praised for the fact that I had included the first dress’s skirt, in the new dress’s bodice. Unfortunately, it was not long before the celebration was over and, I was stuffed into a bag, then back into the chest. How many times would I follow the same routine over and over again?

I accepted the fact that I had been forgotten and I embraced the loneliness. After a long time, the chest opened. I was getting another chance! I was removed by Giovanna from the chest, pulled from the
bag and brought back into the light. Just the thought of being worn and admired again erased the sadness of being stored away. I realized I was being carried to another sewing machine. I was stretched out and pinned down to the table. Once again, I was cut up into smaller and smaller pieces. I was distraught. Pieces and scraps were then sewn together to make what I am now. “Bianca, I’ve made you a purse out of my dress. I hope you think of how this was once your grandmothers dress and has gone through 3 generations of our family” said Giovanna as I was laid out on the table. A purse. A once beautiful communion dress passed down from generation to generation, was gone. Now, all that I had left was to be a purse. At this point, I would have rather been thrown out.

The day of communion came and went just like the last two I had been a part of. I did not care enough to pay attention to any of the festivities since I was too preoccupied about being swung and tossed around like a toy. At one-point, Bianca dropped me onto a table and abandoned for the rest of the day. Thankfully the day came to an end, but instead of being shoved into a bag and stored away, I was put out on display in Bianca’s house with the Bible that I held.

I then realized how important I was as a purse. Throughout the communion celebrations, it was my job to safe keep the Bible I was holding. Although the dress was a key feature of a communion because it identifies the first communicant from everyone else, the purse with the Bible contains the holy scripture which the communicant recites on their communion. I understood how I was still of service to the communicant, even in my new form. Set out on this table I had time to reflect upon the three generations of women I had come to serve. From my original form as a full dress to only a bodice, to now a purse, I had still been used is just as equally as important ways. Hopefully, I would be used again as a purse for the upcoming generation, but if not, I would be content with sitting here on this table being admired by anyone that came over and had the chance to look at me.
Bibliography

Nicoletti- Volpe, Anna Maria. Personal Interview. 28 Sept. 2018

I conducted an interview with my grandmother to learn the origins of the boutique her grandmother owned in Italy. From this interview I learned how she, Angela, was the head seamstress and sewed the original communion dress that this story is based around.


I conducted an interview with my mother to learn about the alternations that she gave my grandmothers dress. I also ask her questions about the importance of a communion dress. Although it held no spiritual value, I learned that it held a value within the family of the person receiving their First Holy Communion.