

### 3. The Vest

by Carla Zaccagnini



Pictures from the Zaccagnini family archives

In the 1980s, it was fashionable to wear puffy jackets that looked like they were inflated. Sometimes they were stuffed with feathers or artificial substitutes, but they could also be filled with nothing, and just have air between the skin and the nylon. My mother had one—a light one—without a filling or lining, I think. It had three wide horizontal stripes in the colors of the French flag: liberty, equality, and fraternity. She liked it, as she did with everything that had to do with that country: Charles Aznavour, the *nouvelle vague*, chicken à la crème, duck à l'orange, rabbit à la mode de Dijon, and Lacan's seminars.

The days before the trip were hectic. My grandmother had installed herself with her sewing machine in the kitchen of our house, already getting used to occupying the spaces she would later inhabit. You could hear the rhythm of the needle when she pushed down the pedal. And when she didn't, you could hear her voice commenting, giving advice, or reciting rhymes. It was the same constant tone in the voice as in the machine.

I would walk along the lines that the sea-green tiles drew on the floor—or rather, along the lines that were drawn on the floor between the sea-green tiles—insisting on the thought that I would like to have a sister. Sometimes I said it and repeated it out loud, which filled the atmosphere with a certain discomfort that I, without fully understanding, was drawn to explore. I also spoke of numbers, made additions, and imagined being older.

My mother would come in and out, passing fluidly from one environment to another, not in a rush but in

continuous movement. She went down the white marble stairs, her arms full of clean laundry, too dry and a little rough because of long exposure to the sun on the roof terrace. She opened the fridge, filled a glass of water, answered my grandmother, closed the fridge. She searched in drawers, she packed the suitcase. She crossed the hallway, opened my closet, crossed the hallway, packed the suitcase. The glass was sweating.

Every once in a while, almost without entering the kitchen, she would try on the vest. The paper pattern. The necessary adjustments. The cut of the back in the lining fabric—in a neutral shade called “skin color.” The back, the double fabric. The pins. The chest. The necessary adjustments. The double fabric. The stitching drew lines like the tiles on the floor. Or rather: it was the opposite of the tiles, which leave empty lines where there are none. The stitches drew lines in the path where the needle would fixate the thread, separating empty spaces between the double fabric.

It was in those pockets—closed on four sides and evenly sized like the tiles—that the filling would go. In each partition 30 bills of 100. Enough money to pay for the second half of the house with a pool, a condition imposed by my mother in order to move to the tropics.

On top of the vest, a dark t-shirt; on top of the t-shirt, the nylon jacket in the colors of France. On top of everything, silence. The secret. Few things could not be told: the story of the burned newspapers and the story of the vest.

In her left hand, our suitcase; in the right hand, my left hand. In my right hand, my carry-on luggage. In her purse, the tickets, the passports, the wallet, the cigarettes. In the doorway, the goodbyes. Afterwards, the queue, the tickets, the fear of flying. The boarding call, the queue, passport control, the metal detector, the fear of flying. In my left hand, her hand was sweating.