

Broken Spell

A Short Story by Anna Mioduchowska

Curling her shoulders and turning her back to the wind, Yola looked at the masked sky reproachfully. Magda had not told her about the dark. The cold yes, her sister had stressed the long, cold winters in several letters and she had come well prepared. The fabric for her coat alone had cost her a month's earnings, many hours in a line-up and two pairs of French pantyhose for the sales clerk. It had been well worth it; there was nowhere to hide on this bus stop.

The long street, running along the railroad tracks from east to west, had given her a chance for a while to watch sunsets. She had never paid much attention to sunsets before, had never lived high enough to see them. Here, right in the city centre almost, the sun performed its farewell ceremony for her every night for several weeks just when she came out of the factory. There were no tall buildings towards the west and she watched with disbelief at first as the clouds caught fire and the dirty brick warehouses around her disappeared in a sea of pink. Turning her head, she saw the pantomime reflected in the multi-hued glass towers of the downtown. She had come to depend on this moment, waiting for it all day with impatience as she fed the brown, black and grey pants to the forever hungry sewing machine.

But the days grew shorter and she had started working overtime. It was dark when she left the house in the mornings;

ten hours later the city lay flattened again under the yellowish glow of street lights.

Yola tightened her scarf. The old man, who pushed a cart full of cans and empty bottles every evening, she did not know where, must have gone by already. She squinted in an effort to see under the huddled train cars, hoping for a glimpse of the white rabbit that sometimes hopped along the tracks. Nothing moved and she sighed. There was nothing tonight to make her forget the body that had turned numb after all day of bending over the machine. She was so tired the very bones in her legs felt swollen.

The bright blue letters spelling out Don Caruso's Slacks flickered at her flirtatiously from across the street. She turned her head away. It was exactly two months today since she had started working. There was a new pay-check in her purse, but even that did not ease the pain in her spine. At the beginning, when she had stood all day at the giant stapler, the women consoled her that soon maybe someone would quit and she would be moved to the cutting room, or better still, to a sewing machine. And then she would be all set up. As long as she did not agree to ironing. Yola stared bitterly at her own tracks in the soft, freshly fallen snow. Didn't they know that to her making the same seam on a pair of pants, hour after hour, day after day, was not a vision of salvation? Agnes and Tanya, her best friends at the factory now, had been with the company for over ten years. Their stoicism filled Yola with

despair. If they had ever dreamt of anything else, there seemed no trace of it left. They were the fastest seamstresses at Don Caruso's and very proud of their ability to earn more than any of the other women.

"Where you going to find that millionaire?" Tanya had laughed during lunch today after listening to Yola's earnest voice. "Who's going to give you the money for that business? It's every body for herself, and even better for himself in this world." Yola cringed at the memory of the not unkindly meant words. They brought to mind Magda's awkward matchmaking attempts on her behalf. Not particularly pretty or young anymore, she had no illusions. But she was deeply insulted by the cast-offs that Magda had produced so far. Most of them were looking for housekeepers. Although they did not mind an extra paycheque either, they had kindly told her.

Why hadn't Magda written her the truth? It was not right to have played such a nasty trick on her own sister. Yola shivered and stamped her cold feet. The bus was late again. Magda shouldn't have asked her to come, even if she had been as sick as she claimed. She could have... No, she did not want to go home tonight. It was late; they will have eaten their supper without her anyway. Her stomach contracted at the thought of the house where she had outstayed her welcome and Yola crossed the street.

Fifteen minutes later, out of breath, she stood in front of the large, newly reno-

vated shopping centre. Her heart pounded heavily after the brisk walk, she pushed the massive doors and, wiping her feet carefully, walked onto the marble floors. Cleaned several times daily by shadowy figures, who moved about unobtrusively with small carts full of mops and sponges, they glistened coolly. A moment of deliberation, and Yola turned towards the escalator. Today she would visit Clarissa's.

She had discovered Clarissa's, a small store that specialized in imported women's fashions, soon after her arrival in the city, and came to visit often, especially on days when depression threatened to move in and envelop her in its gray, clammy robes.

It was to boutiques like this one that Yola used to sell her creations. She had become a good seamstress over the years, with regular customers for whom she both designed and made clothes. Magda sent her fashion magazines from time to time — *Burda* and *Vogue* were the best ones — and she used them to keep her women up to date. She could copy anything they wanted. Or make her own. In return for her good services the women brought her gifts that she could use for barter; she was quite comfortable. Once a month she delivered a few pieces to the two stores that had asked for her work. How disappointed they all were when she had informed them of her decision to leave! Although they did understand and even envy her. Envy! Yola's fingers clutched the railing of the escalator harder. Why hadn't Magda told her that here women bought all their clothes from the store racks? That stores imported their merchandise from Pakistan, Italy, Macao — what was Macao? Even her two nieces laughed when she offered to make something for them.

Stumbling on the last step, Yola threw a quick, self-conscious glance around her before turning to the right. Warm now, she unbuttoned her coat and loosened her scarf. It was true that in the last few years, as prices soared and the store shelves often stared empty at the weary shoppers, her work had become tedious. More and more often time was spent on repairs. Coats had to be ripped and turned inside out to look new again, frayed cuffs trimmed, adult garments cut up and made into clothes for children. Although these tasks often demanded all of Yola's ingenuity, they gave her little satisfaction. She dreamed of making dresses and ele-

gant suits with every detail perfectly finished, beautiful in their simplicity and good workmanship. The poorly made button holes in the cheap, mass-produced clothes offended her. Visions of fat bales of linens, wools, silks, and occasional velvet or taffeta, new fabrics waiting to take shape under the caressing touch of her knowing fingers paved her road to Canada.

Tiny lights encircled Clarissa's window. Two mannequins, dressed in black and silver, shimmered at each other. Yola tried to focus her eyes.

It was too hot. He neck was beginning to burn and she could not concentrate. As soon as she gathered her scattering thoughts, they were gone again. She was back with Magda, who was excited that an interview had been arranged by one of her friends for Yola. Wandering around the kitchen she talked fast, painting a glorious picture of the job. "You'll be doing what you like, Yola. And the money is not too bad. Women who don't speak English usually end up cleaning hotels or scrubbing pots in dingy restaurants. You're really lucky, you know."

Lucky. Magda was well again and Guido wanted to bring his newly widowed mother to live with them. He wanted his children to learn Italian, to be brought up properly. Yola had to go.

She understood Magda's predicament; she could even bring herself to sympathize with her. She could not forgive the lies. The first stream had come in letters.

Consistently proud, Magda had never gone into the details of her life abroad. There were humorous anecdotes of getting lost, of language problems. She described stores overflowing with merchandise. Everyone drove a car and owned a colour T.V. There was fresh lettuce and radishes in the middle of winter. One could buy a fridge or a washing machine on the spot, with no line, no years of waiting, no bribes. In passing only did she mention her feelings of homesickness. But what was a little bit of homesickness in comparison with the wonders of which she spoke, with the freedoms she enjoyed — she could travel anywhere in the world, she had written, at any time she wanted. She looked healthy and happy on the photographs she sometimes included. Then, there were the parcels with coffee, good tea, raisins and chocolate, sometimes money, with never a mention of how she

had earned it. Now Yola knew that before marrying, Magda had at first cleaned private homes, then she got a cleaning job in a large hospital. After several months of being encased in rubber gloves, she had told Yola one day, the skin on her hands started blistering. The blisters burst, peeled off and healed only to blister again a few days later. It was like watching a horror movie. A form of eczema, the doctor had said. She was to keep her hands dry, avoid contact with rubber and harsh chemicals. Soon after that she married Guido.

"He's a good husband, I suppose," Yola told the mannequin. "But an exacting one. Magda dresses in the best stores, has her hair done regularly and they eat well. But she doesn't drive their car. He chooses the restaurants they go to. And she was always the most daring one of us all. She was brave enough to strike out on her own half-way around the world. Now even her daughters barely speak to her because her English is still so poor."

Leaning lightly on the pillar behind her to ease the pain in her back, Yola stared at her hands. The skin on them was dry from the cold and from constant rubbing against cloth, but it was nothing a little bit of cream would not ease. "I guess I'm just lucky," she thought, then frowned. "Soon I'll be thanking Magda. That should clear her conscience."

She did not want to feel sorry for Magda. The feeling of responsibility for her younger sister had caused her nothing but trouble. She had not come here tonight to worry about Magda. Magda was doing fine. She had waved her hands excitedly, her long, freshly painted sculptured nails flashing alluringly that evening before the interview. Sculptured nails indeed. It was to stop her from biting them, she had told Yola with an embarrassed smile. With an electric dishwasher and a cleaning woman she certainly did have time to bite her nails now.

Yola felt blood rushing to her cheeks. She had stayed up most of that night two months ago, preparing answers for imagined questions and picking samples of her work. None had mentioned to bring them but it seemed to her the logical thing to do. Her final choice had been a lined dress and her winter coat. Next morning she had arrived at the factory well ahead of time, nervously shaking and angry at being reduced to that state, with the wrapped samples under her arm. The bald man in

the office did not ask many questions. He was satisfied with her scant knowledge of English, glanced briefly at the coat and dress, and asked her to start the next day.

Happy with anticipation in spite of herself, starved for the comforting purr of the sewing machine, she had enjoyed rising early and riding the bus that Tuesday. The forelady, Maria, welcomed her warmly, showed her where to store her jacket and lunchbag, then led her to the large hall full of women bent over ironing boards, cutting tables and sewing machines. She started stapling zippers.

It took only a few minutes to master the task. "They could train a monkey to do a job like that," she told her silent audience, "but cruelty to animals is against the law." She had stood tense at the stapler for several days, afraid of stapling her fingers. Maria had warned her to be careful. At night, she slept fitfully, waking up suddenly, cold, her jaws clamped together, the dream forgotten.

When the first fear subsided, a new one was born. The monotony of the job, which consisted of pulling two pant legs together, the two halves of the zipper flush, and joining them by pressing a pedal with her foot, acted like a drug. She was afraid of falling into a coma, as day after day, hours stretched into eternity in her dazed mind, with the only measure of time the sharp click made by the hated instrument. She had tried racing against the clock, beating her own records and those of Gisela, who had been stapling for a year now. But the little excitement that these activities generated died quickly and after a few days she was back to the minimum rate, despising the dull fabric she had to handle and wondering whether she had not stumbled into hell by accident.

Every night she left her post exhausted, went home to eat something, then sat and stared at the yellow walls of her basement room. Blank sheets of paper, pushed to the side of the table, collected dust. There were no new sketches; the cold and darkness seeped through the windows right into her veins.

Even when the tiny Ramona left to have her baby and she was graduated onto a sewing machine, her depression did not lift. Today, for the first time since joining Don Caruso's, she had broken the pattern of her days.

"So how long is it going to take me to save enough money to buy my freedom,

what do you think?" she asked the mannequins, irony twisting her tired face. "You know what Magda hinted when I asked her that? If I was not happy I could go back! I suppose that's Guido's idea. She couldn't have forgotten. They have three telephones in their house. Do you know how many years I had to wait for just one? Not to mention the "little something" to make sure? My apartment is gone. How could she forget? You're right, other people's misery spoils the scenery. Especially if you feel guilty."

Someone brushed against her and Yola shrank back impatiently. There were too many people here tonight. She could not concentrate. She had not come here to remember, to think bitter thoughts. This was her place to dream, to forget. She had always managed somehow in her life before, why not this time? All she wanted tonight was a little magic.

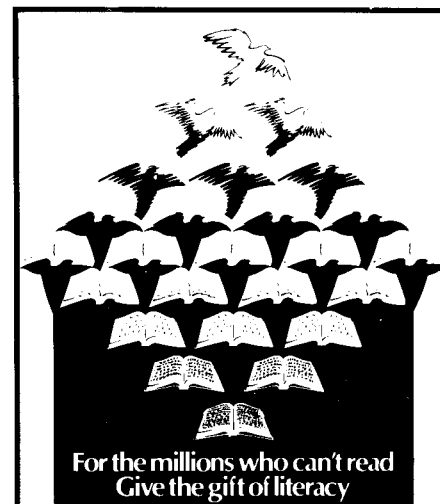
She closed her eyes and thought of the snow outside. Fields and fields of snow, coming down from milky skies. The whole world wrapped in softly billowing tulle. White. When she saw nothing but white, she opened her eyes again and fastened them onto the mannequins. Would they cooperate tonight? One never knew. It was December, Christmas was coming, that's why so much black and silver. But there was black and silver everywhere, how monotonous. Why not sunflower yellow, to bring thoughts of summer. Or cranberry. Yola swayed in concentration, willing the mannequins to obey.

The two figures, frozen in their seductive poses, were not interested. "Please, just raise your arms and let me slip on the yellow silk," she enticed. "For just a few moments." No response. "For one moment then," she pleaded, her lips moving now." The shining eyes stared dumbly past her, not hearing as she tried once more, this time offering the very best of her repertoire. A long evening gown, green, with the green of spring grass, and soft, with the softness of caterpillar skin. Velvet, snugly fitting, with a low neckline and narrow sleeves, she had made it for the most beautiful woman in the world, who did not live long enough to wear it. She had kept it, not sure why, even though the woman's family had wanted to pay for it, and she had packed it along with her own clothes. Still nothing happened. In a movement of supplication she leaned forward, stretching her arms towards the

mannequins, straining with her whole body to breathe life into the faithless dolls. The cold surface of the window pane struck hard at the tips of her taut fingers and she reeled back with a cry.

"Are you OK?" Yola raised her hands to her mouth, staring. There was a young woman in front of her. What had she done? The mannequins... The woman had heard. Waves of panic rose in her stomach and she looked around for a way to escape. Curious eyes bloomed everywhere. She had to sit down. The young woman repeated her question and Yola, her weakness suddenly gone, turned and ran towards the escalator, then down and through the door into the festively lit street.

She walked fast, looking straight ahead. There was no wind now and the air was full of tiny, densely packed snow flakes that formed a cold, moist compress on her face. Her breath came more evenly and she slowed down, thinking calmly. The desire to cry had dissipated. She had made a fool of herself in the shopping centre, in front of strangers. It could never happen again if she was to survive here. There was no one to write home for help.



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