1-1-2011

Boutique Cinderella

M. M. Dimovska

Sibelan E.S. Forrester , translator
Swarthmore College, sforres1@swarthmore.edu

Boutique Cinderella

Magazine

from the January 2011 issue

Fiction by Milica Miçiç Dimovska

Translated from Serbian by Sibelan Forrester

“Boutique Cinderella” had a stuffed pigeon in the window with its beak stuck into a pile of grain on the windowsill, and a female torso wrapped in a silk Dior peignoir; the designer could be read on the label sewn on the hem of the discreetly opened skirt. With its lace insets, the peignoir looked like a wedding gown. There was nothing on it that would make you conclude that it was used clothing, though a cardboard sign in the lower left corner of the display announced, “Secondhand Clothing, by the Kilogram.”

Perhaps a certain slackness of the fabric gave away that it was worn, though all peignoirs are a bit slack, or the color, faded with age, with its patina barely visible to be sure.

The boutique was located in a so-called “room off the street,” in a humble two-story building not far from the house-museum of a famous poet, long dead, which was a two-story building too but somewhat more imposing than the building with that display window, standing out like a bay window, while its door had been broken through the wall later on, with three steps added at its base, like a sort of slipper on a coach.

In the same street, and in many other streets not only in Kamenica but elsewhere too, that transformation of ordinary, private rooms into studios, cigar shops, all sorts of salons and boutiques (out of poverty and the need for an additional source of income in order to survive), was an entirely ordinary phenomenon these days, provided that the rooms were located on the ground floor, on the street side of the building, and in neighborhoods that were not entirely deserted.

“Cinderella,” witty, witty, Marina admitted to herself. Though it had taken her a while to get to that name. She’d tried on various names for size, she remembered, beginning with hers and her mother’s. Marina, well, perhaps, but her mother’s name, Sofija!? Unless wisdom means choosing secondhand clothes instead of new ones. But finally: “Boutique Cinderella.” She

was proud of her inventiveness, her sense of irony. With that name she mocked herself, her mother, and their customers. Or else, in a way, she was currying favor with herself and others. She was feeding hope. To turn an ordinary rag into a ball gown. Her mother had a knack for doing that.

The alarm clock went off at seven thirty in the morning. Marina was awake already and just waiting for it to ring. Her room was on the courtyard side (her mother slept on the ottoman, arranged in the dining section of the kitchen; that morning she had left the house at seven).

Looking through the window, Marina gave a sigh. I hate, I hate, and I will always hate that toad's-eye view, she thought. What could she see? The lopped and already-wilted tomato stems with a few yellow shriveled fruit that would never ripen, and knock-kneed grape vines, tired out like old folks, who could barely climb up that hill near the house.

A hill like a bear, and their little house, which she'd compare, oh yes, to a mushroom, a grayish-white mushroom grown up out of a rotten stump. A house with no view. What irony and what a utopia! Irony with reference to me, she thought. She hated villages and low buildings. Utopia for her mother, who believed salvation lay in that house in the village suburb, and in that stunted garden. "We'll have potatoes, beans, onions. We can raise pigs too. Fortunately, that's not necessary yet," she said. It's not necessary because she had become a true hawker and dreamed that their secondhand boutique would have more and more customers. "The people are done for," she stated, as an expert in the market, like a kind of Darwinist liberal in England, say.

Done buzzing, the alarm clock stopped in place. Marina jumped out of bed. She was taking the afternoon shift and now had the job of minding the boutique until her mother came back.

On the door of their boutique it said, "Open from 8 to 8." If she had to go out for a moment, she'd hang up a note, "Back in a moment," although that was most often unnecessary since customers rarely stopped by.

Once she was dressed and washed up, she went into the shop through the door from the corridor and found herself right behind a counter where she put her breakfast and two textbooks, one for philosophy and one for biology. An electric scale stood on the counter. Marina put her transistor radio down beside the scale. On the left was a dressing room defined by a plush curtain, like some kind of miniature theater. Intimate, for one person alone. Inside was a mirror, and a narrow part of it now peered between the edges of the curtain, reflecting one very faraway sleeve that Marina searched for all over the shop. Where are you, where are you, blue sleeve? It was hard for her to find it; on a dress, such a sad one, a blue dress that must have belonged to some old maid. With white cuffs, edges battered with wearing. She pulled on it playfully and it stirred there in the mirror, as if twitching with fright. Which was of course a delusion, for a dress feels nothing. A dress *is*, but it does not *exist*. Marina played with what she had learned from philosophy. A dress is, but it has no idea. About what? About battle, about being . . .

It needs to be fed. She took the fried breakfast her mother had prepared before she went into the city. It was still warm. She took a bite, a bit of oil dripped out that smelled like yesterday's breakfast, then she drank a sip of yoghurt to cover the taste of the fried potato. A bite of fried potato followed by a gulp of yoghurt, and breakfast was done. She wiped a drop of yoghurt off the counter with a rag, picked up the empty plate and cup, took them out into the kitchen, then came back to the shop. She unlocked and opened the outside door so only the roll-down curtain of colorful plastic braid remained between her and the street.

Then, like a wardrobe manager in some old provincial theater that had given no shows for a long time, she went into all those dresses, skirts, blouses, pants, shirts, coats, that her mother had cleaned, mended, and ironed, and that were waiting for their new owners.

She tapped one suit jacket on the shoulder, dark blue with discreet stripes, not too tailored, relaxed. Like some kind of dog with a pedigree, she thought, it served its master well and then he, having had enough of it, gave it to a humanitarian organization—a philanthropist, you might think—and the humanitarian organization kept it in a shed, in a heap with other discarded things . . . Oh how dumb, if I started to imagine who all used to wear and who all will wear this clothing here, my head would start to spin.

She took up her position behind the counter, turned on the radio, heard the dignified, though cold, official voice of the announcer reading the official news. She immediately changed the station, twisted the knob, interrupting everyone who was gabbing and complaining in mid-sentence, until she got to a station with good music. Bingo!

She pressed her finger on the metal surface of the scale. A hundred grams. She increased the pressure to two hundred, three hundred, four hundred grams . . . Then she let the arrow go back to zero, where the effect was so stable and peaceful.

At that moment the bright braids on the door rustled. Two girls came through the curtain, moving their heads as if ducking through it.

"May we look at the skirts?" one of them asked and started to laugh for no reason.

Marina scowled. She'd already had experience with girls who came in, tried everything on and left without buying anything. And she always felt the urge to chase them out before they'd even touched any of the clothing, but then she would remind herself that she had to behave like a saleswoman. She waved toward the section where the skirts were located, without leaving the counter. She watched them as they moved the hangers, checked the cut and size of the skirts, touched the material, looking for a miracle, a prettier skirt and better quality than in the new clothes store. They chose a few and went into the changing room to try them on. She heard them whispering something inside and laughing conspiratorially. They're laughing at me, went through her head, they despise me just the way I despise them.

The curtain was only half drawn and Marina could see the girls pulling off their jeans as if they were shedding snakes' skins and then putting on the skirts, pulling them on from above, turning them around their waists, checking in the mirror to see whether they hung well on their bodies. Two dolls. Coming out of the changing room, they put the chosen skirts down on the counter. Marina moved the skirts onto the scale. They weighed two kilos.

"A hundred and fifty dinars, altogether."

"So much!"

"You have six skirts here," Marina said, picking them up one at a time. "That means, only twenty-five dinars each. Besides that, they've all been dry cleaned and ironed."

She convinced them. The girls paid and left.

She went into the changing room and picked up the dropped skirts. She felt miserable even though she had just made a hundred and fifty dinars. She carefully shook off the skirts and hung them back on the hangers, then returned them to their rack. All the clothing in the boutique gave off a heavy smell of old things and chemical formulas, denatured alcohol and naphthalene, though fresh air came through the spaces on the door.

She had just sat back down at the counter when an older woman came into the shop, diffident, with the neat look of a poor person.

"How much is that peignoir in the display?" she asked cautiously.

"The peignoir is not for sale," Marina answered her. She was proud of her arrangement in the display window, and it was out of the question for her to change it on the caprice of some aging spinster.

The woman stood there facing the counter, as if she hadn't heard the answer.

"I'm going up to the Institute, any day now, and I don't have anything to put on over my nightgown. You know how it is when you're in the hospital, you have to look decent, regardless of the surroundings," she explained humbly.

"The Institute has dressing gowns of its own, I think . . ."

"I imagine so, but this one is so pretty. You won't believe me, but I used to have a peignoir very much like it. Unfortunately, I left it behind in Mostar. I'm a refugee, and if it isn't hard for you to do this for me, I'd be very grateful to you . . ."

"That's the display window, an arrangement. I'd have to ask my mom, and she's not here."

"We could arrange something. I won't be in the Institute for long, two or three days for tests, afterwards I'll return the peignoir to you, if you wish."

“I can’t promise you anything,” Marina stayed firm.

The woman left the shop. Outside, she stood in front of the display window for a few moments and then, hesitating, she moved away down the street.

***

The medicines and secondhand clothing from humanitarian aid were delivered on Mondays to the Baptist church on the corner of Tsar Lazar Boulevard and the Street of the Circle of Serbian Sisters. Marina’s mother, Sofija Petrov, arrived early in front of the church where there was already a press of people.

“Where are you off to? The line is here . . .” some complainer grabbed her by the upper arm.

“I don’t want to join your line,” she brushed him off, shaking his hand from her disgustedly, careful not to let go the handlebars of the bicycle she was pushing.

It was a long line that began on the street, wound through the narrow passage from the gate to the steps of the building with the improvised pharmacy of humanitarian aid on the second floor, on the courtyard side. The staircase was thick with retired people, as if covered with grasshoppers. Once she too had waited in the line here for pills for high blood pressure and had argued with the pharmacist, who didn’t want to give her more than thirty pills, and wanted a payment of five dinars for that. In the end it turned out to be a good thing that she hadn’t gotten more, because the medicine was due to expire the next month.

On the street side on the ground floor were the spaces of the Baptist church she’d been peering into ever since she was sixteen, when her mother had brought her here to christen her without telling her father. Now she was fifty, but she didn’t make a point of letting everyone know that fact. She considered that she could pass for five years younger.

Pushing the bicycle toward the courtyard, she called to the retirees, “They’re poisoning you, ladies and gentlemen, those humanitarians, I’d bet that they’re poisoning you.” She enjoyed provoking them.

“We should all be poisoned, we’ve earned it,” one old woman agreed with her, self-critically. An impoverished woman, of course, and lame. A stack of prescriptions stuck out of her health record book like worthless money from a wallet. She listened to the chain reaction of reproaches and remarks.

Go ahead and amuse yourselves, you’ve got time to spare, she said to them in her thoughts as she went into the neglected courtyard, filled with rolls of rusting wire instead of grass, a cement slab of a well that was plugged, and two or three unidentified saplings with stunted foliage, their leaves stamped with the rust of autumn, like those blots on old people’s skin that some people call “grave flowers.”

At the far end of that space, along the wall of the enclosure, a porch made of tarpaper stood over the part of the humanitarian aid that was not distributed through the Red Cross but left here for various passersby, Sofija among them, “a former clerk at a failed business and former wife of a director who’s became a prophet in his retirement,” as she would introduce herself to people, but only at moments when she felt strong enough to look at herself with irony.

Two little gypsies were playing around the sealed well. Where’s their mama? Surely she’s picking through the loot. She could hardly make her out, so brightly dressed, next to the bright pile of clothes she was digging through. She already had a full basket and now, with a severe look at Sofija, her decent appearance and her well-kept bicycle, she threw the bundle on her shoulder and started to retreat from the terrain in tacit agreement. Waiting for her to move away with her kids, Sofija leaned her bicycle against a tree and locked it there with a chain. Then she went in under the cover.

That smell, she knew it. It crept into her nostrils. The smell of secondhand clothes, the stench of secondhand clothes. At first it made her want to vomit, she kept thinking it smelled like a dissection, but then, reproaching herself for her weakness, she expertly discerned the odors of naphthalene, sweat, flea powder, something at the same time both scorched and basement-damp . . .

Here too it spread from the dug-through bale she needed to dive into and to pluck from it anything that could, after laundering, mending and ironing, become a decent piece of clothing.

Like a connoisseur, she recognized spots of various ancestry on the clothing, the ones that could be cleaned and the ones that nothing could remove. She noted the unmendable wear of collars and cuffs, yellowish sweat-stains under the armpits, the larvae and silk of moths that ate woolen things, turning them into sieves and screens.

Digging through that clothing, she hoped as always that she would happen on something truly valuable, goods with a label from some well-known world designer, something elite, thrown away because of a completely benign mark that could be removed with ordinary alcohol or turpentine.

She pulled piece after piece out of the pile, spreading them out, looking them over and then separating into piles, “use” and “perhaps use, perhaps toss.”

Rooting through these thrown-out things, these things entangled in a snake’s nest of forgotten vanities, she felt as if she were making contact with the world, with people from the metropolis. Yes, yes, she could imagine them, the former owners, how they get rid of their old clothing in the name of charity, with the feeling that they’re doing a good deed, but in fact they’re just making room for new things. As if she couldn’t see through them, those philistines in front of their dressers and cupboards overfull of clothing that’s started to bore

them, how they grab with relief at the humanitarian straw of rescue from, let's say, the pangs of conscience that they are tempted, irresistibly tempted, by what is new, new, and new again. As if she didn't know . . . As if she didn't know the meaning of the itch to buy something, and the pleasure of giving in to it. She remembered it nostalgically.

Oh, look, a perfectly good man's shirt, with blue stripes. Good as new. Perhaps even new, misplaced. She spread it out to look it over carefully. Weak places? On the chest? Does it hurt you here when you inhale? No, nothing. The curve of the collar, look here, completely healthy, not frayed anywhere, she passed her fingers expertly over its edges, along the edges of the cuffs, felt their pulse, completely normal, fortunately. Perhaps there was a tiny hole from a cigarette burn or an iron? She turned the shirt towards the sunlight—nothing, nothing, except one spot by the bottom button. From what? She thought, maybe from semen. And she laughed. That's easy to clean off. She had experience with that.

She turned it inside out to find the label. Look, look, it was sewn inside along the seam. A very prestigious brand. She read with pleasure:

"St. Michael

Marks & Spencer

Baker Street London"

Red double-decker buses and Big Ben rose in a mirage before her eyes. Big Ben, that tower with the clock that counts off, probably in English. *One, two, three, out falls me*. No, no, it only rings, of course, of course, *For whom the bell tolls*, what nonsense would pop into her thoughts. She looked for the tag with the size of the shirt. She found it inside, sewn along the hem: 42. Just the right size for her ex-husband, for his neck, on the thin side. He lived near the Baptist church, in a tall building that towered over all the others in the area. Even from where she was now, squatting by the mound of old clothes, she could see the windows of his apartment, windows without curtains. "I have no one to hide from, only the birds visit me," he boasted. She imagined him as he had been looking lately. Balding, with a graying lumpy beard that continued his mustache, he looked to her like a defrocked priest. His beard a few years old. He started to grow it after he was fired from his position, after they got divorced. Oh, once I'd gotten free of him, she thought. And the shirt, once I clean it, maybe I'll give it to him, she even felt an impulse of generosity.

Read more from the January 2011 issue

Donate

Milica Miçiç Dimovska

Milica Mićić Dimovska was born in Novi Sad in 1947. She received a degree in Literature and Literary Theory from the University of Belgrade and worked for many years at Matica srpska and as an editor of Letopis Matice srpske. She has published collections of short stories (*Priče oženi* [Stories about a Woman], 1972; *Poznanici* [Acquaintances], 1980; Odmrzavanje [Defrosting], 1991; *U Procepu* [In the Cleft], 1999), the travelogues in Putopisi (1999), and four novels (*Utvare* [Phantoms], 1987; *Poslednji zanosi MSS* [The Last Ecstasies of MSS], 1996; *Mrena* [The Cataract], 2002; *Utoči…te* [Refuge], 2005). Her works have won numerous literary prizes and are translated into English, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, Slovak and Swedish. She lives and writes in Novi Sad.

» More about Milica Miçiç Dimovska

Translated from Serbian by Sibelan Forrester

Sibelan Forrester is Professor of Russian at Swarthmore College and currently chair of the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures there. She has published numerous translations from Croatian, Russian and Serbian, including stories by Milica Mićić Dimovska, and she is now working on a translation of her novel, *Mrena* (The Cataract).

» More about Sibelan Forrester