

Beyond Poland

BY ROSALIND GOLDSMITH

Her body can't escape the cold but her mind can. It casts up through the night, scattering itself into the sky over the Atlantic Ocean. It leaves her here – on this bench in the park – shivering, hugging her coat tight round her chest.

She came here when the last of her ran out: laid off, out of cash – and now, evicted. In all her life, she never imagined this could happen – no warning, no hearing, no chance to explain.

The landlord – thumped on the door til it rattled, then shoved his way in with two policemen. Told her she was trespassing – in her own home – she'd lived in this apartment for twelve years.

“I'm not leaving,” she said.

They gave her enough time to pack a knapsack. Then the two officers grabbed her and held her arms above the elbow. Gripped so tight. Dragged her down and out onto the street. The street that was dark and led nowhere.

They threw her clothes out the window. She stood by and watched as they fell like empty bodies from the third floor to the ground, no resistance. No substance. Limp.

She watched until the last of them – a red shirt she used to like – twisted and fluttered its way down to the sidewalk and lay there, dead. She picked it up. Dropped it. Walked away.

Alone.

Nothing. Only her knapsack and eighteen dollars cash in her pocket. She was hungry, found a variety store. Walked the aisles. Inspected and chose: Three bags of sour cream and onion potato chips, four Mars bars – calculated – put one back. Three Mars bars and three cans of Coke.

She carried the items to the counter and laid them out in a neat line. Order here at least, in the shape and pattern of these things. “Is that all?” the cashier said.

It was bright in the store.

This man. He looked like a good man. Kind eyes.

The man said again: "Is that all?"

And she said: "Yes, that's all. Thanks."

It was a good, deep feeling to have this little exchange. Just like that. Meant nothing – this man didn't care – didn't know a thing about her or what just happened to her. The man uttered a few words, a simple question. But –

The words stayed with her, settled soft in her mind.

He had a warm, deep voice that seemed to come out of some distant place – to comfort her, to let her know – that – yes, there were good people out here, and yes, they did speak in a decent and good way.

Not all people were out to take away her job. Not all wanted to abandon her, evict her – throw her out onto the street. The dark street that led nowhere.

Those few words – they shone – beads of glass in a desert, scoured brilliant by the wind that blew the sand away – the wind that washed the words and left the words shining in the sun.

And yes!

She was young! Forty-three wasn't old. She could go on. This wasn't the end, was it? Couldn't possibly be.

She could take action: look for a new job. Find a place to live. Of course – but not a horrible shelter – a nice apartment, maybe smaller, yes, but that would be ok. Would be fine. Even just a room. She didn't need much. Didn't need anything.

She paid for the chips and the Mars bars and the Cokes and took her change: eighty-nine cents, put it in her pocket. Tied the shopping bag to her knapsack. Before she left, she said, "Thank-you" and smiled as a gesture of hope and good will toward the cashier man behind the counter.

Silently, she wished him a good life, cradled and held fast by kind people who loved him. She wished him a life with a solid home, a level foundation and windows that brought in true light.

The man behind the counter didn't look at her again. But the kindness in his brown eyes was glorious and warm, insistent – like a memory of summer.

The door swung closed behind her. A soft little bell rang. And now: The street. The street that was dark and led nowhere. But: wait.

Human beings had long been nomads, and that's what she was now: Linny, the Wanderer. A survivor in these cold, dark streets. Ok, this was – new – a tough break – but she could adapt. Adjust. Get strong. Begin again. Of course.

She was, after all, a creature of ingenuity. Resilient. Resourceful. She – as this creature – could find a way to go on. She'd scabble in the dust if she had to, scavenge in the dead fields, unearth black roots and husks of seeds. Hunt rabbits, moles, even pigeons. Pursue. Kill. Live.

She'd start by finding a place to rest tonight. Sleep and dream hopeful. And tomorrow, the world would look different. Shock had cauterized her vision, that was all. In the morning, she would see clear and new and apply herself to the situation. First: look for a job.

And so, as darkness settled in, Linny found this bench in the park. She sat on its green metal back, ate a few potato chips and drank a can of coke. The sweetness on her tongue. Oh.

She retied the bag to her knapsack and put them both underneath the bench.

She swept the bench with her hand to clean it, wrapped her coat around her body against the cold. Lay down on her side, bent her knees fetal. The bench was hard. Hurt her bones – her hip and her shoulder.

Closed her eyes. But sleep was nowhere. Sleep was back in her apartment, in her home that was taken away from her. She'd left sleep there, curled up cozy on her soft bed.

Now she was as cold as a fish on a stone. Knife poised above her gut. Cold as death. Gasping air. Glass eye of a dying fish.

She thought of the landlord and the two policemen who threw her out that afternoon. Felt again the shock of it in her stomach: swift plunge, hollowing out – the dread of losing her place under the sun. The dark street calling to her but leading nowhere.

And the cops had said: “You’re being evicted” in their cold, hard voices – evicted – and the word measured her failure and redefined her in an instant as an unwanted thing – as useless, as unbelonged.

Severed. Evicted.

She threw up when they grabbed her. Her stomach betrayed her as it always did when she was anxious. Vomit down her coat. Humiliated. They took her down to the street – held her by her arms – above the elbow – gripped hard, dragged her out of her own apartment – a criminal. For God’s sake. She’d done nothing wrong. For God’s – a scruffy old neighbour was watching out her window, peeking out from behind her curtains. In her witnessing face, the glee.

People on the street watched as her clothes – her own clothes – tumbled out the window and twirled like shot birds down to the street. Her red shirt lying there – the one she used to wear when she went dancing at the Copa. What did her neighbours think of her? That old woman – everyone knew now. She was evicted – an evict – like a convict. Or a derelict – she belonged nowhere.

Only the street. The dark street.

She tried to wipe the vomit off her coat. But it stained yellow. Stamp of disapproval. Stamp of the reject. Mark of disdain.

On the bench, reliving all this, she turned herself over so as to put the pressure on the other side of her body. Her back ached and her right hip hurt. Her hair felt dirty, greasy. She pulled her coat up to her chin, the smell of it made her feel sick, but she dozed off for a few moments and saw – a vision – the moving, variegated silhouette of a crowd moving into a massive stadium for a concert.

An opening and then a bright flood of light.

The people – their shadows – were opening their arms wide for her. The shadows held her close and she felt herself rising.

They lifted her high and she surfed the crowd, laughing, floating forward on thousands of hands. They carried her to the front of the arena, cheering. Then they laid her down on a flat stone. She opened her mouth to plead with them to lift her up again.

But the crowd dissolved into a dark blur.

She opened her eyes, conscious of where she was – on this hard bench in the park at 2:00 in the morning. And it was cold so cold, and her back and neck hurt her. She was hungry. She looked down under the bench. No oh no. Her knapsack her bag the chips and chocolate bars and cokes – gone!

She sat up. Stood. Peered round in the grubby lamplight. Pulled her coat round her and began to run – first one way, then another – shifting shadows of trees chased her – she had to find her knapsack and her bag of chips and chocolate bars and cokes.

The thieves – it must have been a few minutes ago – she only just dozed off – why didn't she hear them?

She ran, rushed all around the park through patches of darkness, pools of light, back and forth down the street. Saw no one. Nothing.

Day broke cold.

She was limp with fatigue and sat down on the sidewalk outside a grocery store. A man walked by. "Do you have any change?" she said to him as he passed.

Linn had never said these words before in her life. They came out of her mouth like cockroaches she'd swallowed in the night.

The man didn't even look at her.

The stink of shame was all that was left of her now, the stain on her coat.

She gagged, she cried. Her mind shivered, dissolved into droplets and scattered over the sidewalk in front of her. Tiny globes of quicksilver were spilling onto the tarmac of the street. The dark street that led nowhere.

Her body sobbed and shook. It rattled the loose change in her pocket. Rattled the loose thoughts in her head. Cut free and drifting away.

She knew she could never say those words again. And if not? Then what. What would it be like to starve? She'd lived her life belly full til this day. But even now an alien bitterness scraped at her guts. From the marrow out cold.

And tomorrow?

She started to yell as people walked by her on their way to work. She bellowed out from the pit of her hunger and from a slaughterhouse of fury.

If anyone heard her, they didn't show it. They walked by. She had no money and no place to live. She didn't exist any more. Yelling, she made no sound. She was a stain on the sidewalk. A mark on the cement.

A security guard was standing in front of her. "You can't stay here," the guard said. "You're trespassing." He picked her up off the sidewalk and held her arm above the elbow.

She tried to shake herself free, but the guard gripped her arm hard – as if she was a criminal. As if she never had a mother and a father, never wrote a story when she was six about a bear on water skis, never got an 88% on a math test in Grade 10. She was society's garbage. An evict. Nothing more.

The guard dragged her down the street. Loosened his grip as they came to the corner. "Don't let me see you again," he said.

She walked away, fast, trying to think. Looked in shop windows for Help Wanted signs. Nothing. Picked up a discarded half apple. Rotten. A crust of bread with a thin line of mayonnaise along the edge. She ate that. Sat down at a picnic table and rested her head on her arms. What could she buy with eighteen cents? She walked again and walked the hollow darkness in.

And here she is now, back on the same bench in the park, this iron bed. This unforgiving cold. Lying here in the night. Shivering. Knees curled up. Dozing in and out.

And it is now – this second night – that her mind lifts up. It casts wide over the Baltic Sea and beyond Poland. She feels the cold like rivers of ice flowing over her – but she breaks off from the pain, and flies with her mind to wherever it might go.

It sails free and skyward far away to an Ultima Thule, where fields of ice and blown snow wait for her.

The cold now is colder than any she's known – even worse than last night. Her skin shivers, her bones shake and her lips turn blue – but the sweetness is, here in this place, in these fields of snow, she can't feel the shame any more, nor the fear. And now she can no longer even feel the cold.

Through drifts of snow, she sees a man approaching her. He's walking on snowshoes, using poles to pull himself forward. His head is down against the wind and he's moving

slowly through swirls of white. Appearing then disappearing. Treading the flat round nets of his shoes on the sweeping drifts of snow.

The man comes up close. He stands above her and looks down at her. He's wearing a heavy coat with a fur-lined hood, and icicles hang from his eyebrows. His breath puffs up – clouds of white against the dazzle of white snow.

The ice man leans down low over her, and says: “Is that all?”

Oh! She feels the warmth of that voice and knows it instantly! And she sees the kind brown eyes too. The man is here to rescue her! “Thank you,” she says. “I’ll go with you.” But the man turns his back, lifts his poles and walks away from her, disappearing into the blind drifts of snow.

She feels cold again, sheets of ice on her flesh.

Now, a lamp glows in the distance. In its dim light, Linny can see her red shirt flying up into the sky, winging its way down the street, carried off by the wind. She watches until it disappears, until the thieving night snatches it away, until all that’s left is the long, dark street, calling to her. □