

Marcin Szczygielski, *True Friends*

Translation: Zofia Sochańska



“December’s just around the corner,” Janka sighed. “Fourth month is coming, Christmas is drawing near... the war was supposed to be over by Christmas.”

“Really?” I’m surprised to hear that. “Who told you that?”

“Everybody did.”

She puts the basket in the other hand and plods along the edge of the park alley, scuffing her shoes in the piles of leaves. Today, she is as gloomy as the November skies above.

Janka is our maid. She is seventeen, has brown hair and lots of freckles which bother her a lot. Each month, she spends most of her salary on new lotions that, supposedly, would make her complexion “as flawless and luminous as a water lily”. That’s what an ad of the product she purchased in August read. Once she applied it, all the skin peeled off her nose, and when it finally healed, the freckles reappeared. And twice as many, as our cook Pela wouldn’t fail to notice. Mum says Pela is not a very suave person because of her bony figure. Janka, who is not terribly fond of Pela, agrees with Mum on that.

“Show me a good cook who’s not plump,” she says. “The only skinny ones are those who don’t like to eat. And if someone doesn’t like to eat, how can they cook well?”

In my personal opinion, Pela is quite a good cook, even if it is by no means easy to like her as a person, due to her sharp tongue and spitefulness.

It’s barely past 2PM, but the muggy, grey dusk is falling over Skaryszak. I look at the stumps of burnt trees behind the pond.

“Do you see those trees, Janka?” I ask.

“Why should I not see them? I do!” she replies.

“Look at them closely,” I say quietly, and then I continue in an ominous voice: “Look as they stretch their black, burnt boughs up towards the sky, like the claws of a dead man lurking at a heedless victim...”

“Oh!” Janka’s face turns white. She stops and turns towards me angrily.

“Maciek! I swear, one day I will give you an earful! Where do you get these ideas from, I have no clue! It’s not enough that I have to take the long way to the store, via Lubelska Street, after you told me this nonsense about Jańczak’s empty house? Now you want me to stay clear from Paderewski Park, really?”

“Oh, c’mon, Janeczka...,” I take on a friendly tone. “You know very well I’m only pulling your

leg.”

“Watch out, cause one day I’m going to pull your leg! You just wait!” she points her finger at me, and then she sets off briskly, casting nervous glances at the burnt trees behind the pond.

Even though I do feel a pang of guilt, I can barely keep a straight face. Janka believes in everything you tell her, so she’s simply asking for trouble herself! True, too—I love coming up with stories like that.

Only last week, I came up with such a brilliant idea that I felt the most urgent need to share it with someone. Alas, neither Mietek nor my parents were home, and Janka had an evening off. I went down to the kitchen, sat on a stool by the white cupboard and told Pela a story about the three hangmen in our attic. She didn’t say a word, just kept kneading the dough for bread. The story was simply flowing—all I had to do was to open my mouth, and the words just poured out in a torrent. I listened to myself with great interest. Suddenly, I felt such a sense of dread that my hair stood on end and I screamed, pressing the palm of my hand against my mouth. Pela looked at me, wiped her hands with a kitchen cloth and spoke in an icy tone:

“There’s clearly something off with your head, Maciuś. Go to your room, read a book or listen to the gramophone, because you’re just being a nuisance here.”

I couldn’t sleep that night, I was so spooked out. I was lying under the duvet soaked in sweat, while the three hangmen—a figment of my own imagination—danced in the dark right in front of my eyes. When the clock in the living room stroke midnight I couldn’t take it any longer. I jumped out of bed and ran to sleep in Mietek’s room. He wasn’t particularly happy to see me, but he is my elder brother, after all, so he couldn’t simply throw me out.

Of course, I do have many friends and sometimes I do tell them my scary stories. Henryś, Fredek, Maniuś and Ignaś are my closest friends this year. We all go to the same class and we all live on Grochowska Street. The problem is that we usually see one another during the

day, or in a large group, and this doesn't help me build the necessary tension. Such a story requires a special *entourage*, as our Great Auntie likes to say. It needs tranquillity, dusk and silence. The Great Auntie loves to listen to my stories. Alas, she lives on the other side of the Vistula River, on Wielka Street, right behind the Main Railway Station, and we do not pay her visits very often.

Two young German soldiers pass us by. I'm no longer amused, my stomach clenches with fear and my jaws with hatred. One of them jabbars something to Janka. She hunches over, grips the basket tighter and quickens her step.

"What did he want?" I ask when we're out of the park, on Stanisław August Street. I've been studying German only since the summer holidays and, so far, I haven't made much progress.

"Nothing," Janka shrugs. "He said I was pretty."

"Huh! See? You say that, because of your freckles, not even a dog would ever get interested in you. And there you go!"

"I'd rather it was a dog! I don't need such compliments! Surely not from them," she snaps.

We cross the courtyard and we climb the narrow, winding staircase for the service up to the second floor. I like taking the service stairs. They're made of timber and they creak plangently with each step we take. The walls have not been painted for a long time and the narrow windows are covered with cobwebs. It would take me no time to come up with some really scary story taking place in this staircase, and yet I don't do that, out of mercy for Janka. If I scare her with a staircase story, how would she ever come back home? She couldn't take the front staircase, cause it's not to be used by maids.

We enter the apartment through the kitchen door. Janka puts the basket on the table.

"Sugar was in stock. I took a kilo. And I got almonds, what a miracle! Why is Pela so quiet?"

The cook is leaning against the sink and looking at me without uttering a word.

“Is something wrong?” I ask and begin to wonder if I haven’t done anything to cross her. No, I don’t think so... No! I haven’t even been to the kitchen today. We went shopping right after school.

Janka doesn’t pay attention to Pela. She continues to unpack the basket, and when it’s done, she reaches for a small jar hidden away at the very bottom.

“Halina Cream!” she announces with awe. “I saw an ad in *Kino* magazine. They’d never advertise a poor product, it’s a very respectable publication. It cost a fortune, but I’m sure this time it will work—my freckles will finally disappear!”

“Yeah, together with your brain,” Pela mutters, looking at me with an impenetrable gaze.

“What brain?” shrieks Janka.

“I’m beginning to wonder myself...”

“Phew! With Pela, all one may ever wanna do is to hang oneself. Pela knows how to kill the last flicker of joy,” Janka huffs.

“Go to your room, Maciek,” Pela turns to me directly.

“But why?” I ask with a slight alarm in my voice.

“Off you go. Everybody’s waiting.”

Everybody? I am getting really worried now. I take off my coat and cap and hand them to Janka. I wipe my shoes carefully and I head down the corridor towards the living room. Everybody? Who exactly? If we have company, why is it so quiet? I stop in the doorway and look around, dumbfounded. Mum is sitting at the table, Father right next to her. There’s also Great Auntie and Uncle Staszek, a confirmed bachelor. Mietek is standing next to a tall pedestal with an alabaster bust of Mickiewicz. There is also Aunt Rena with her son Robert, whom I frankly loathe because he once said I had teeth like a nutria. It was a whooping great lie, of course, but it’s been hard for me to forget his words. Since then, I smile widely much less often.

“Hello,” I say.

Nobody answers. Great Auntie squints at me from under her black lacy cap, and then she reverts her gaze to the table. I come closer.

On a glass-covered round table top, next to a bulgy vase with a bouquet of wax flowers, lie white rectangular pieces of linen. There are blue intersecting lines embroidered on each one of them. Crossed triangles. I know it—it’s a Jewish symbol, the Star of David. I don’t understand any of it.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“Armbands,” Aunt Rena’s voice sounds hollow.

“Armbands? What armbands? For what?”

“Not for what, but for whom. For us,” Mietek smiles wryly, and even though his tone may seem brisk and matter-of-fact, I can tell he’s extremely upset.

“For us? How come—for us? Why for us?” I enquire, unable to take my eyes off the armbands.

There are eight of them.

“Germans’ orders. From now on, everyone in the Warsaw District must wear armbands with the Star of David,” Father explains.

“Jews,” Mum adds.

“What?” Father looks at her, frowning.

“Every Jew,” Mum.

“Ahhh, yes, that’s right, of course. Every... Jew.”

“Sweet Lord Jesus!” Aunt Rena wails and begins to weep.

“Reni, I beg of you, calm down,” Uncle Staszek addresses her gently. “This is indeed not a good time for a fit of hysteria.”

“Hysteria!” Aunt Rena stops weeping and looks offended.

“So what do we have to do?” I enquire. “With these armbands, I mean.”

„We must wear them, Maciuś. Wear them,” Great Auntie groans. “Horse cart rests in the winter, sleigh in the summer. A horse will never rest. Even if it pretends to be a deer.”

“Dear Auntie, please!” Mum sighs.

“But...,” I stutter. “If these are for Jews, why do we... We’re Poles, aren’t we?!”

“That’s correct. We’re Poles—Poles of Jewish origin,” Uncle Staszek is more precise.

Aunt Rena is sobbing again. Robert is sitting next to her, his face red as a beetroot.

“But we’re going to church!” I exclaim in bewilderment. “We have Christmas tree! I received the Holy Communion! Our entire family was present.”

“Not the entire family,” Great Auntie remarks. “We have many more relatives whom you don’t know.”

“Did you know about all that?” I ask Mietek in an accusatory tone, but all he does is shrug.

I feel betrayed. Why nobody told me? They lied to me! I am... Am I Jewish? Are we all Jewish?

I come up to the table. I reach for one armband and I look at it from up close. The embroidery is very neat. Who has done it? It must have been Great Auntie.

“It’s just a piece of canvas, after all,” I say after a long while. “Just a piece of cloth.”

I put my hand inside it and pull it up my arm.

“What does such a little thing change? Nothing!” I declare.

“You’re wrong, my son,” Father retorts. “This little thing changes all.”

“Germans wear armbands, too. Only theirs have a red swastika on.”

“Correct,” Great Auntie nods her head. “Only their armbands are for you to know whom to bow to. These are for them to know whom to spit at.”

Robert jumps up from his chair which falls to the ground with a thump. He looks around with a terrifying expression on his face and hisses:

“I’m no Kike...”

Mum gets up instantly and slaps him in the face. The slap sounds like a gunshot. Robert opens his mouth wide, his eyes—round with bewilderment—fill up with tears.

“This was totally uncalled for, Niusiu,” Aunt Rena’s voice is cold as ice.

“C’mon, dear,” Great Auntie pats her on the hand, and then she reaches out for one of the armbands.

Mum takes another one and passes it on to Father.

“We don’t have to wear them at home, do we?” I ask.

“No, of course not. But I suppose it’s better to start getting used to it,” Mum replies and she energetically pulls the armband up the sleeve of her navy silk dress.

Great Auntie follows suit. Uncle Staszek, Mietek and Father do the same; finally, Aunt Rena hands the last armband to Robert.

“There you go, son,” she says. “Take it.”

My cousin takes the armband from her reluctantly. Tears are streaming down his face. Oh well, perhaps I have teeth like a nutria, but he surely cries like a baby.

“Get a grip on yourself,” Mietek growls at him.

Suddenly, there is a loud clatter of footsteps in the corridor, then a sound of opening locks and finally a bang of the front door being slamming shut, so loud that it makes the china cabinet’s glass door vibrate. The last time it vibrated like that was in September, when Warsaw was bombed.

“What’s going on there now?” Mum mutters and rises from her chair.

Pela appears in the doorway. Her red, work-worn hands folded on her lap, she purses her lips and looks at us with a poise.

“What’s the matter, Pelasiu?” Mum asks.

“Janka’s gone” the cook replies after a while.



“Gone? What do you mean, gone? I haven’t paid her yet. She’s just left, without a word of explanation?” Mum sounds resigned.

“She said she’d send her uncle to pick up her salary and belongings.”

“Did she say anything else?”

“Yes, she did.”

“What did she say?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“Pelasia, please, stop playing cat and mouse with me! Just say it!” Mum is losing her patience.

“She said she’d never agreed to work for Jews. Had she known from the start...”

“That’s enough!” Mum interrupts.

She breathes deeply, straightens up and lifts her chin up high. She looks at the cook with pride. She seems to me more beautiful now than ever before.

“If Pelasia is willing, I can pay her right now. It’s the end of the month anyway, but I can pay her upfront, to be fair. I shall write references, too, of course, I mean if...”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Pelasia interrupts Mum calmly.

“Pela doesn’t want to quit?” Mum asks.

“Why would I want to quit? I have a good job at a solicitor’s home, I’m working for a decent folk. Why would I want to leave?”

“Well, in this situation... I thought that since Janeczka... Pela would want to go, too.”

Mum’s shoulders drop and she falls back onto her chair with a sigh.

“I might not be the most pleasant person to be around, and I tend to be harsh with words at times, but that does not mean that I have no heart or brain. Whether you’re all Jewish or not, I don’t have another family beside you,” Pela says and adds: “I was going to ask, would anyone like some tea?”

Mum wants to answer, but her voice falters.

“Of course, dear Pela,” Great Auntie butts in. “We shall all have tea. Preferably with preserve, if there is any left.”

“Yes, there is. Raspberry preserve. I’ve put aside one jar for a special occasion. Shall I serve it?”

“By all means, yes! I think raspberry preserve is exactly what we all need today.”

“Janka’s gone...” I mumble. “She didn’t even say good-bye. I thought she was my friend. She used to say she liked me.”

“Oh, Maciuś!” Great Auntie smiles at me with sadness. “If words were a bridge, I would be afraid to walk on it.”

“And my other friends? Ignas, Henryś? Fredek, Maniek? What will they say when they see me with the armband?”

“They will show you who your real friend is. Indeed, we will all soon find out if have any at all,” Father declares.

“Of course we do, Adasiu!” Great Auntie asserts. Then, pointing her head towards the corridor where Pela has just disappeared, she adds: “As we’ve just seen, often the people we would least expect turn out to be our true friends.”