

Or perhaps it started when they cut me in half?

I remember I was only able to move my head. Next to me lay Magda, whom I didn't know at the time, but had heard about from Grandmother Sarecka (who had already left me her estate by then). Above my head I could see the dado of the sports hall, the dirty ceiling, the tissue paper rosettes, the letters cut out of styrofoam. Somewhere at the back there was a screen covered with navy blue fabric with silver foil stars all over it. They looked like yellow splotches. The PE teacher Baniowski's board with exercise instructions filled with figures halted mid-mechanical-move. The man who was cutting us, panting, as if it really was a gruelling job. His breath smelled foul. He touched my head before he started sawing. He was holding a toothed saw. My father was in the audience, he had taken time off work especially for this, and was clapping in delight. I tried to look down, I wanted to see what the saw was doing to my body, but the view was obstructed by the edge of the wooden box from which only my head was sticking out. The rest was kind of not there.

When the man finished, he took a piece of paper – a regular sheet of paper – and slipped it into the slit, into the incision mark, and this sheet – I could distinctly feel it – flitted straight through me, dropped to the floor and skidded across the parquet as far as the audience's feet.

When it was all over I found out that we were chosen because of our shoes: Magda and I both had the same green plimsolls which, for some reason, mattered in the trick presented in our primary school by the travelling magician, who was performing in provincial educational establishments to make some money.

My father, when I was telling him the day before that I needed money for the ticket, had become strangely excited. At that time, he was still hoping to find an opportunity to experience a real miracle.

So I wasn't surprised when the following day I saw him nudging his way forward through a crowd of small kids. Clearly thrilled, he sat on a bench that was too low for him. His knees went all the way up to his chin. He had lied at work that I was unwell and he needed to take me to the doctor's.

The magician was wearing a tailcoat made of shiny fabric and a lopsided top hat. When he announced the most important trick in the programme – cutting a person in half – and asked for “willing volunteers”, almost all hands shot up. Today I can't remember any more if I did volunteer, I don't think I did, because I was staring in embarrassment at my father, who was also waving his hand in the air, with some peculiar tenacity on his face, as if he really cared deeply about being chosen by the magician.

One of the teachers pushed an anxious pupil forward, but the magician shook his head and shouted, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, dear audience, this time I would like

to invite some girls to come forward! Two brave girls!’ This was embraced by the audience, because at the time they were showing Copperfield's shows on TV, and indeed, it was always women who were cut in half. The magician looked keenly around, as if searching for something or somebody specific, and then, before I knew what was going on, he grabbed me by the hand and pulled me into the centre of the room.

I like to think that it started with being cut in half.

I had watched Magda for a long time in the school corridors, but she didn't seem to notice it at all. I think I was most fascinated by her thin, cotton gloves, which she never took off.

The Dygnar girl was in a different class than me. She probably didn't even remember me. After all, when she was being cut in half, she wasn't even looking in my direction.

But still, when we met a few months later in front of the school nurse's room, she looked at me with such attention, that I blushed. [...]

I was surprised to find Magda there with me. We were waiting for our Year 10 health check-ups, but Magda was a year above us. Only later did I find out that the Dygnar girl had started school a year early.

Excerpt translated by Anna Błasiak



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bolinska@znak.com.pl

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