

## **The Gift**

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When humans took to wearing an outer skin and became aware that they looked more attractive fully dressed, the fashion industry was born. The fact that men and women take their clothes seriously is vouched for by my neighbour's rags to riches story. Call her what you will - fashion designer, cat-walk connoisseur, dresser of celebrities, college students and beauty queens... She is a tailor and can work magic with a pair of scissors, measuring tape and fabric. And her customers usually had no words to describe the flawlessness of her necklines, the perfect alignment of sleeves and the exquisite contours of the clothes she made for them. They paid willingly through their noses and left in pure ecstasy to indulge in the fabulous outer skins she had created for them. Her telephone rang all day, appointment books were full and customers kept coming. As for her, work was pure pleasure. She took pride in personally cutting every garment that was tailored at her outlet.

I watched her at work one day, wielding her scissors with expertise and confidence and turning out yet another impeccable neckline. I turned my gaze from her skilful hands to her face and caught a snapshot of absolute satisfaction.

"You do enjoy your work, don't you?" I said rather unnecessarily.

She smiled, putting down her scissors, and sat down as though she could see the questions lurking in my mind. I was flattered and pleased by her unhurried and relaxed setting aside of deadlines and her spontaneous giving of her time for me. I decided to make the most of it.

"You must have trained under an expert.... Who taught you to cut like that?"

"It's a gift ....." she began.

"From God?" I intercepted.

"From a customer ..." Her eyes softened as she remembered.

"Oh?!"

"Twenty years ago, " she began, and I listened in wonder, drawing from her story more inspiration and enlightenment than I had received from any sermon I had heard preached on mercy and the beatitudes.

"Twenty years ago, when I finished school, my mother couldn't afford to send me to college. So, I enrolled myself as an apprentice in a local private tailoring institute, just walking distance from my house. It was a charitable organisation run by some affluent ladies who owned a garment exporting business. I didn't have to pay and I was learning a trade. Of course, the charitable ladies got their labour force free of charge! But the benefits were mutual and no one complained. The working hours were long but that solved my mother's problem of having to keep me out of mischief. Besides mass-producing garments for export, the institute also made garments for an exclusive local clientele. Our boutique provided the ultimate in glamour for the glitterati in town. Our clients paid handsomely and their deadlines were taken seriously. At the institute they kept high standards of quality control. There was zero tolerance for sloppy, slipshod work. Anyone who turned in careless work or did not work fast enough was kicked out before you could thread a needle. We knew we could be rejected as callously as an export-reject garment. Under the eagle eyes of supervisors, hundreds of pairs of hands neatly sewed endless quantities of necklines, hemlines darts and buttonholes for long monotonous hours. With fear and trembling I had worked earnestly and moved upwards and out of the sewing room into the cutting

room – into the very battle frontlines. A pair of scissors could now make or mar my life...”

“Excuse me, ma’am ...” I sighed, as the call of duty interrupted my neighbour’s story. “The Chief Minister’s daughter is here for the final fitting.”

She rose at once. “I’m sorry I have to leave you now. Deadline ... Wedding’s next week.”

“I know... I’m invited. The whole town is!”

“Well, I have to go now and work my magic on the bride’s outfit. But I did enjoy talking to you. Why don’t you join me for lunch at one? At my place, at one.”

“Thanks I’d love to. I’m dying to hear the rest of the story.”

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I caught up with her at lunchtime. She lived in a flat just above her workshop. We ate a simple vegetarian meal in her kitchen and retired to the living room. I glanced appreciatively at the simple yet tastefully decorated living room. Nothing was out of place. The total effect was harmonious. Her creative touch was evident in her home too.

She accepted my compliments graciously. “I usually sit here and put my feet up, reading or listening to music before I get back to work at four. Yes, it’s a very restful and pleasant room. Thanks.”

We sat down. It was then that I noticed on the wall opposite me a strange piece of wall decoration. In a glass frame was mounted a peacock-blue silk blouse. Its neckline was lopsided and beyond repair. One didn’t need an experienced eye to tell that its sleeves had been aligned by a novice. I walked over, examined it closely and looked at my companion in bewilderment.

“That’s my talisman! My good luck charm! My inspiration!” She laughed at the disbelief in my eyes. “That’s the first blouse I ever cut! Remember? I was telling you that I had just been promoted to the cutting room... There, we trainees, used to watch as the master tailor marked fabric with her tailor’s chalk and then, with a decisive manoeuvre of her wrist, fingers and scissors created necklines and contours with fascinating ease. During our training sessions, we were somewhat like interns in an operating theatre. The silence could be heard and the tension would rise to boiling point. A rip or tear or false move would mean disgrace. The institute’s pristine reputation had to be maintained. The trainees didn’t matter so much. They could be replaced cheaply and easily.

“One morning, we got an express order. The garment had to be stitched in three hours. The client was desperate and prepared to pay three times more. Measurements were taken and the fabric examined. The full payment was made in advance. The master tailor was naturally curious. *‘It must be a very special occasion, madam,’* she pried. *‘This fabric is very expensive... it must have cost you a fortune.... Where did you buy...’* The customer cut in impatiently. *‘Yes! Yes! very expensive. Very urgent. I expect excellent work. I am very particular about the neckline. I mean to wear a diamond necklace with the gown. Very important event.’* And she was gone...

“We could have handled this. We had the expertise. It was right up our alley. But then pandemonium broke loose that day. There were frantic announcements over the radio and TV. A general strike was being announced. Roads would be blocked. There would be no public transport for twelve hours. Shops and institutions had to be closed as rioting was expected.

“The rich customer and her urgency were forgotten. All the staff were in a hurry to close shop and get home. As she was about to step outside, the master tailor

remembered the 3-hour job. And she spotted me. *'You live practically next door. Stay and do the job. And take care your career depends on it.'*

"In a few moments, we were alone in the cutting room – the peacock-blue fabric and I. Summoning up all my courage, determination, ambitious hopes and dreams, I began to work. The crucial moment arrived – cutting the neckline..."

She stopped, closed her eyes, took a deep breath and leaned back against the sofa. I waited for her to continue... Then it slowly began to dawn on me. My gaze travelled from the pale face next to me to that appalling specimen of the worst tailor's nightmare framed and hanging on the wall. Its crooked lopsided neckline told me the rest of the story.

Eventually, she opened her eyes and smiled ruefully at me. "Were you fired?" I managed to ask.

"Would you believe it? No!!" she laughed. "I tried to correct my mistake," she continued, "but the more I worked on it, the worse it got. I managed to finish the gown. In fact, I managed to work all my fear and nervous tension into it!

"In three hours' time, the client arrived. When she saw it, she didn't speak. She couldn't! I thought she was going to kill me with her bare hands. I will never forget the look in her eyes. *'I'm sorry madam. I'm new. I should never have tried. Nobody else is here. They made me. I live next door, you see...'* A stream of words and tears ending with a hopelessly resigned *'When you complain, they'll send me away.'*

"She took the dress and left in her chauffeur driven limousine.

"The next day, at the institute, I was applauded and praised for doing a satisfactory job on time. It was assumed so, because they never heard from the client again. There was a lot of speculation about who she was. No one seemed to know her. They reckoned she was probably a visitor to the town, someone passing by. No one bothered to solve the mystery of the mysterious gown. But I was miserable all day.

"When I went home that night, my mother handed me a parcel. It was the bodice of the gown with the lopsided neck. There was a brief, unsigned note for me. It simply said: **You'll do better next time.**"