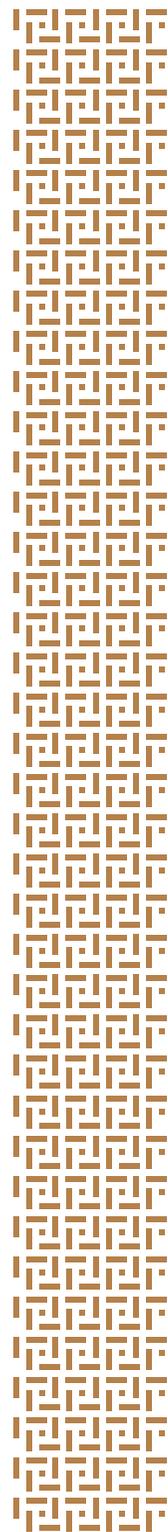




Sally Franco

Sally Franco is a writer and editor who lives in Vermont and whose short fiction has appeared in *The Legacy* and *The North Texas Review*. Sally has an M.A. in creative writing from the University of North Texas and has traveled extensively throughout Western and Eastern Europe, walking the paths of her characters.



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A story inspired by



The Gift

by Sally Franco

A story written for
Hotel Nemzeti

The Gift

FANTASY • 5-MINUTE READING TIME

"See to her then, Etel."
"The old crone," Etel spat. She turned to Marianna. "I'm so glad you're here!"
Etel deposited some of the dresses into Marianna's arms, and Marianna tamped down the layers of chiffon to read an advertisement poster on the wall:

June 5-7, 1953
The Moon Rose
Rozsa & Nadir
Nightly Performances, 19:30

Marianna lay in bed dumfounded that for the last two days she'd been at the beck and call of a 1953 stage actress called Rozsa. During errands, Marianna had desperately pressed her fingers against the copper markings in the tunnel to no avail.

She pulled the bedcovers to her chin. Would she be trapped here forever?
"Are you crying?" Etel asked.
The two women shared a small room.
"I shouldn't be here."
"Don't you like it? I do. But I think I'm going to get the sack."
"Why do you think that?"
"I'm supposed to fill out some work papers, but I'm not able to read or write."
Etel sniffed.

"Don't worry. I'll help you, Etel."
They sat at a table filling out forms by lamplight, and Marianna confided to Etel about her journey through the mirror.

"I've tried to find the way back."
"Well," Etel said. "Let's see. Should we find a wizard?"
"Very funny."
"I'm sorry," Etel suppressed a laugh.
"It's okay. I don't really believe it myself."
Thunder rolled in the distance, and Etel yawned. "Let's go back to bed."

Etel's snores soon filled the room, but sleep eluded Marianna, and when the rain drummed harder against the roof, she bolted upright. *The storm must be the catalyst!* She dressed quickly and made her way through the tunnel to the copper markings. As she pressed her fingers to the wall, a translucent glow spread to reveal her hotel room. She stepped through and collapsed to her knees, tears of gratitude springing to her eyes.

"You disappeared for two days!" Edvard said. "With no explanation?"
"You'd never believe me," Marianna said.
Edvard sat on the edge of the bed and crossed his arms.
Marianna sighed.
"Edvard, what I'm about to tell you is going to sound crazy. It is crazy."
After Marianna had finished her story, Edvard stood up and left the room without a word.

Marianna walked in the honeyed morning light wondering if everything was ruined now. A breeze pushed ripples along the Danube's surface, and the squeaking wheels of a cart approached. It was the homeless woman. Something in her limp caught Marianna's attention. *Could it be?*

"Etel?"
The woman stopped. "Marianna."
Marianna looked at Etel's wrinkled face and her ragged clothing.
"It is you," Etel said. "You really did move through time."
"Oh, Etel!"
The women embraced.
"How did this happen?"

"Not long after you'd gone, Rozsa fired me because I couldn't read lines to help her practice."

"But surely you had other jobs."
"I married. And when my János died, I couldn't begin again."
"Etel, let me help you."
"I have my life," Etel said. "I'm accustomed." Etel walked away, the wheels of her cart chirping behind her.

Was it really Etel, the vibrant young woman from only two days ago?
Clouds began to darken and gather, and Marianna hurried to a nearby bookstore. The idea she had sent chills down her spine. "Have you any books for beginning readers?" she asked the clerk.

The storm raged, and Marianna stood before the mirror once again. It began to glow and reveal the tunnel beyond. She clutched the books and stepped through, running through the old corridors like a woman pursued. With no idea how long the storm would last, the risk was incalculable. She pounded at Etel's door.

"Marianna? But—where have you been?"
"I'm sorry. Believe me, I am. But there's no time to explain."
"What's going on?"

Marianna explained to Etel the urgency of her situation. And although Etel giggled, she also frowned with concern. Marianna pressed the books into Etel's hands. "Promise me you'll study."

"I promise."
As Marianna hurried back through the tunnel, Izsak, a stage hand, blocked her way. "Where are you off to, pretty lady?"

"Let me pass, Izsak!"
"What's your hurry?" Izsak backed Marianna against the cold brick. "A kiss, just one."

Marianna was frantic.
Izsak sniffed at her hair. But suddenly he dropped to the floor, her pendant clutched in his fist, and Etel stood behind him with a stool raised in the air.

"Etel!" Marianna hugged her and then rushed to the copper markings in the wall.

Edvard was in Marianna's room when she emerged from the mirror. He fell back into a chair, stunned.

"The story, it was all true?" he stammered.
"Yes. All true."

She pressed her palm to her throat. "Edvard, the engagement pendant, I've lost it."

He seemed not to hear. He got up and touched the mirror's surface and looked at Marianna with wonder.

Marianna stood at the top of the stairs holding a bouquet, and the wedding guests quieted as the music began.

An attendant whispered in Marianna's ear. "A woman no one seems to know just arrived."

Marianna met the smiling eyes of an elderly woman seated below. She wore a beautiful blue dress and ruby pendant.

"She says her name is Etel, and she's brought a gift."

This story was brought to you by


HOTEL NEMZETI
BUDAPEST

Distant thunder warned of an approaching storm as the wedding party strolled along the Danube. Budapest's new National Theatre had indeed been a lavish affair.

"I like that Cyrano only imagined having a big nose," Gisele said.

Peter spoke up. "My favorite part was seeing Roxane played by six different women."

Edvard agreed, and Marianna gave him a playful shove. She'd linked arms with him, her gown glittering in the lamplight, when an old woman in ragged clothing shuffled past, pushing a cart. "I don't understand how people end up like that," Marianna whispered.

Rain began to fall, and Marianna was glad to see Hotel Nemzeti aglow just ahead. Once safely inside, all said their goodnights and climbed the grand staircase to their rooms.

Rain pelted the windows, and lightning flashed through the room as Marianna sat at the dressing table. She was admiring the ruby engagement pendant Edvard had given her when she noticed the armoire.

She was delighted to find it filled with theatre costumes and began trying them on, looking at herself this way and that in the full-length mirror, when a strange shimmer began to play along its surface, and the mirror transformed itself into a doorway. The sight was terrifying and wondrous.

She trembled as she reached out to test the glass. As if in a dream, she stepped through into a lighted tunnel and turned to find that the portal to her room had hardened into solid brick, marked only by a trace of imbedded copper.

The tunnel connected to a building where people milled about in some common effort. She explored farther and walked onto a wooden stage in front of a grand auditorium.

"Hey, you!" a man called out.
Marianna turned in surprise.
"Yes. You, girl. You're late."
"Excuse me, Sir. But, where am I?"
"It's easy to get lost at first. Go back to the hotel and find Rozsa."

The man turned to shout at some workers busy with riggings and pulleys.

Marianna found her way to the lobby and stepped out onto the street to discover that she stood in front of the palatial People's Theatre. Impossible! Hadn't it been demolished in the 1960s?

She entered Hotel Nemzeti and noticed that everyone was dressed in vintage clothing. Could they be actors?

"When will you girls learn to use the tunnel entrance!" a uniformed matron shouted.

A young woman with a limp came around carrying a stack of dresses.

"Sorry, miss. This is our new girl."