The Garmento and the Movie Star

Dark City Lights:
New York Stories

by Jonathan Santlofer, 1946–

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IT WAS THE SUMMER OF ’62. I was twelve and working for my father, a tough boy from Queens, who’d earned a business degree from CCNY at night while apprenticing in the garment industry by day before opening his own company specializing in cocktail dresses that often graced the covers of fashion magazines like *Mademoiselle* and *Harper’s Bazaar*. My father was the owner not designer, the nuts and bolts guy, the production man who made sure everything ran smoothly.

The shop, as it was called, was on Seventh Avenue—then the heart of Manhattan's garment industry—a quarter-floor in a prestigious *schmatta* building, famous designers of the era, Oleg Cassini (who was dressing Jackie Kennedy) and Norman Norell (née Norman Levinson) each with their own shop one floor above or below.

A year earlier my parents had moved us out of the city to a split-level on Long Island, their idea of the American dream, which meant it was now an hour-and-a-half commute via the 7:06 from Hicksville to Penn Station every morning.

The train rides were tense. My father rarely spoke. He'd sit across from me reading the Post (a respectable newspaper back then), or *Women's Wear Daily*, the trade paper for his industry, while I daydreamed or stared at passengers trying to imagine their lives.

Our first item of business was always the same, a shoeshine in Penn Station, a ritual I didn't understand or enjoy, perched on a throne-like chair while an elderly black man buffed and shined my Thom McAns to a high gloss.

From there we'd make our way north among the throng of commuters and workers, a crowded and noisy trek, fire engine sirens, taxis blaring horns, buses spewing exhaust into hot summer air already heavy with ambition, resignation, and smog.

Back then the garment center was a small strip of Manhattan real estate on Seventh Avenue between Thirty-fourth and Forty-second Streets teeming with guys pushing racks of colorful gowns along gray concrete streets crowded with hot dog and pretzel vendors, newspaper and magazine kiosks.

We were always the first to arrive, so my father had time to arrange and rearrange his little empire, test the alarm, inspect the showroom, turn on the three air conditioners—showroom, designer's workroom, his office (the rest of the place was sweltering)—before he would settle behind his desk to review the same orders and bills he'd looked at the night before. The routine never varied.

My job was errands, picking up packets of sequins or beads for the seamstresses, delivering bills or swatches of fabric, but mainly fetching coffee and tea for everyone, the specifics forever etched on my brain: Andrea, the receptionist, light with one packet of saccharine; Izzy, the designer, Sanka with three sugars; Arthur, my father's partner, a slick handsome man who handled sales, tea with saccharine; his wife, Vera, an anorexic gorgon, sent me out for three or four black coffees a day; the two in-house models, Terri and Suzi, who alternated days though occasionally overlapped, both black coffee with saccharine and both starving themselves to maintain their model-size figures. Pretty and fun, they treated me like a pet and I'd do anything they asked, my favorite request, "Can you zip me up?" a coy tease they enjoyed.

Suzi, button-nosed, blonde and nineteen was cute in a Christie Brinkley way with small breasts and surprisingly large nipples (yes, I saw them; lots of times). Terri, a dark Italian beauty, was twenty-five or -six, divorced with a two-year-old son and hazel eyes that went black when a buyer would accidentally-on-purpose feel her up as he examined a dress, something the models endured on a daily, sometimes hourly basis, over-groomed old men in pinstripes and pinky rings turning up hems of dresses for a better look at the stitching while they slid a hand against the girl's thigh.

I'd watch Terri's or Suzi's face turn to stone while they stood there quietly, later calling the guys pigs and leches and horny bastards, and when it happened with a woman, as it did with the tough blonde Neiman Marcus buyer from Texas, that "bull dyke" or "butch" bitch, new words for me. My father always said modeling was no job for a nice girl, but was very protective of his girls and always a gentleman, which made him beloved by the models, if no one else.

How to describe him? A Pit Bull in *garmento* garb: expensive Italian suit, Brylcreemed black hair, gold ID bracelet on his wrist, star sapphire ring on his pinky. A short, stocky, dandified tyrant, who could change the air in the room in a matter of seconds, who killed with a look and ruled by fear. Behind his back his employees called him "Little Napoleon," which my father knew. He liked that he was feared by his employees—all but Vera, the partner's wife, who was even scarier than my father and who my mother later blamed for my father's massive heart attack at age forty-two (that summer he was thirty-eight, hard for me to imagine).

It took the staff some time to relax around me, the boss's son, to see that I was just as scared of my father as they were. Like them, I avoided him as much as possible, maybe more (they didn't have to live with him) running errands and keeping out of his way.

The dressmaking business was different back then, no shows in tents or galleries or Lincoln Center for fashion week. Instead, the buyers came directly to the showroom five times a year—fall, winter, spring, summer, and "cruise wear"—a few at a time or individually, and the models would change clothes, over and over, to show the new line. For each of these seasons my father hired more models, which meant I got to see lots of beautiful girls in their underwear, though my father tried to keep me away from them in the same way he tried to keep me away from the designer, Izzy the Fag, my father's full name for him, a hilariously funny guy with bleached blonde hair and wild print shirts opened to the navel exposing gold chains and chest hair, and who I will always picture with a cigarette hanging out of one side of his mouth, a bunch of pins in the other, creating a dress (usually on a form, sometimes on Terri or Suzi) a fascinating process of layering, pinning, cutting, twisting, belting, and gathering. Watching him, I understood the beauty and intensity of the creative process for the first time, the man totally lost in his work, grimacing and cursing.

My father tolerated Izzy because he was talented (years later he became famous), though his flamboyant gayness was in direct contrast to my father's Napoleonic machismo. Despite the garmento costume, my father was a man's man with no time for small talk or gossip, which Izzy relished and I enjoyed ("Oleg says Jackie Kennedy is a total ice queen, no wonder Jack fucks around").

I got to see my father at a distance that summer, though I understood him no better. His parents had lost most of their relatives to the Nazis, and his mother, at eighteen, had gone back to Europe and rescued her own mother and one sister from pre-war Poland. She was a cold, tough woman who, according to my mother, never showed her children any kind of affection, which I could imagine as she showed none toward me.

My father, her second son, was born in Poland and brought to this country at age two. He had an older brother, Max (called Mac), and a younger one, Murray, both of whom my father took care of for as long as he lived.

That summer Mac was working in the shop as a pattern-maker. My father had paid for his training, his union dues, and his salary, which he monitored, as Mac spent most of his money on the horses. A lifelong gambler, Mac was often beaten up and left for dead, bookies and loan sharks threatening to kill him and his family—a wife and two sons, who would once or twice a year hide out with us on Long Island.

Mac was a tall, skinny guy who wore wife-beater tees and had longish dirty nails and thin greasy hair. He was the complete opposite of my neat-as-a-pin father, who had total disdain for him but protected him until he no longer could.

But Mac had a sweet side (something I rarely saw in my father) encouraging me to go to college and make something of myself, though he countered that advice by bragging about his association with the Gambino crime family. Even as a kid I could see that he was just trying to be somebody, which he never was. When he got older and life had beaten him down (he was a two-time Gamblers Anonymous dropout whose wife finally left him and kids stopped talking to him) he became the saddest man I ever knew.

My father was dead by the time Mac was found shot to death in a Manhattan transient hotel, a crime the police never bothered to pursue.

But that summer, Mac, who was probably forty or forty-one, still a young man (though he'd already had his teeth kicked out and wore dentures), was making all of the shop's dress patterns and displayed a deft hand for drawing huge freehand arcs and dotted lines on heavy, buff-colored paper, an artistic feat that impressed me.

THE SHOP HAD SEVERAL FAMOUS customers who would come in to buy wholesale. Among them, Polly Bergen, a beautiful actress with a smoky voice and dark blue eyes who was in the original *Cape Fear*, and Bess Myerson, a former Miss America (the only Jewish Miss America, idolized by my mother and every other Jewish woman, all of whom failed to note that Bess was the country's post-war way of saying Jews were okay—sort of). A tall girl, Bess would swoop in like a condor, blowing air kisses and openly flirting with my father. Izzy called her "that horsey tramp" and years later when she was arrested for shoplifting and involved with a gangster and city shenanigans in what the newspapers referred to as "the Bess Mess," I was sure he must have been thrilled.

Izzy, always a star-fucker (a term he may have invented; at least it was the first time I'd ever heard it), was friendly with the designer Norman Norell, who was "remaking Marilyn Monroe and giving her some class," and he convinced Norell that Monroe needed to have at least one of *his* dresses. And so it was sometime in late July, about three weeks after I'd started working, that Izzy broke the news Marilyn Monroe would be coming into the shop with "intent to buy."

My father tried to act nonchalant, but the day before her visit he insisted we both get haircuts. (He also got a manicure and wanted me to get one, but I refused.) That morning he changed his suit three or four times while my mother reminded him that she wanted a full report—what Marilyn was wearing, how she

acted, what she said. While he attended to my tie I could smell that he'd put on his expensive floral-smelling cologne rather than his usual Mennen Skin Bracer, and his hands were clumsy as he tied and retied my Windsor knot.

Everyone showed up early that day. Andrea, the receptionist, had her hair teased into a high lacquered beehive; the salespeople were all at their desks rather than out courting buyers. Both Terri and Suzi came in, though it was only Terri's day to work, and they too had had their hair done and were wearing skirts rather than slacks, and Suzi was upset because she'd smudged the nail polish she'd put on while riding the subway. Even Mac was wearing a real shirt, light blue, though ruined by semi-circle sweat stains.

Izzy sent me out twice, once to buy cigarettes, then aspirin. He was chain smoking and popping pills (not just aspirin, but small blue pills), straightening and re-straightening his workroom, moving stacks of designs from one spot to another, pinning up magazine covers that featured his dresses, opening his shirt buttons, then closing them and spraying his blonde hair into place. He'd bought two bottles of Dom Perignon because "that's all she drinks, you know, the best and most expensive champagne, the spoiled little bitch," though according to Norman Norell by way of Izzy, "she's a doll, an absolute doll but a little crazy," and had been recently fired from a movie because "she never showed up, I mean *never*," and was addicted to pills, "uppers *and* downers, and everyone knows she's having an affair with JFK and maybe his brother Bobby, too," which I didn't believe because Kennedy was my hero and I said so. "Darling," said Izzy, "it's common knowledge. Where the fuck have you been?"

"In junior high," I said.

"That's no excuse," Izzy said, exhaling a long plume of gray smoke for emphasis.

Marilyn's appointment was set for one.

At two, there was still no sign of her.

By three, people were getting annoyed, and hungry, as no one had gone out for lunch, but Izzy kept reassuring them, "Don't worry, she's notoriously late, she'll be here," though I could see the strain in his manic smile.

By four, everyone but Izzy was losing faith.

At five, the seamstresses left, muttering in Spanish.

By six, the sales team left.

By six-thirty, Andrea and Uncle Mac gave up.

At six-forty-five, Izzy huffed into the showroom. "Maybe she's OD'd and I fucking hope so!" his final words before slamming the shop door.

My father told him to watch his language, too late, then packed his briefcase and turned out the lights. He set the alarm and when he opened the door to test it as he always did, she was standing there, a kind of ghostly apparition.

"Ohhh," she cooed softly. "Am I too late?"

"Of course not!" my father boomed, turning off the alarm and flipping on lights.

I don't know what I had expected. The big celluloid star I'd seen on the movie screen, I guess, but she was a normal-sized woman. When we stood side by side I was aware that we were about the same height, 5'6". She was thin and somewhat fragile-looking, wearing big sunglasses and a scarf over her hair. Her pale, luminous face had a sprinkling of freckles across her nose and there was soft but noticeable down on her cheeks. She was wearing tight, lime-green pants with a

zipper up the back and a striped, sleeveless blouse, nothing special, but I took note so I could give my mother and sister a report in case my father forgot, and I could see he was nervous, talking too much, guiding Marilyn around the showroom by the elbow, pointing out magazine covers and industry awards while I hung back.

Was she pretty?

I'm trying to remember what I really thought, and I'd say yes. But not especially so. Not dramatically so. I'd seen "The Seven Year Itch" and the girl standing in front of me (that's what she seemed like, a *girl*) was nothing like her, though she emitted a kind of light and it wasn't just the pale skin and mostly hidden white hair.

When my father finally stopped leading her around, she focused on me, took off her shades, and beamed a glittery, jittery smile, then asked me a string of questions: My age, likes and dislikes, what I wanted to be when I grew up?

Before I could answer my father indicated a few of my sketches, which he'd framed and hung on a narrow strip of wall near the fire door. "He wants to be an artist," he said, underscoring the word with sarcasm, but Marilyn said, "How wonderful!" and took her time looking at them, commenting and asking more questions: "The girl in this one looks sad. Are there people living in this house? Do you always use charcoal? Why not some color, color is so happy…" After a few minutes she said, very seriously, "I think… they… are… very… good," slowly enunciating each word as if rehearsing for a play.

I didn't know what to say—I was embarrassed, and proud—but it was one of those defining moments, something in my mind that I could not yet grasp, an inchoate longing to be appreciated, noticed by people, people who mattered—and to be famous one day.

Marilyn said she had a cold and kept dabbing at her nose with a tissue and my father said, "I know what will make you feel better," then disappeared and reappeared with Izzy's champagne and Marilyn made a Lorelei Lee sort of "Ooooh" as he opened a bottle and poured her a glass and she kicked off her shoes and tucked her bare feet under her and settled onto the couch. She downed a glass or two and then, for the next few hours, with my father's assistance, tried on dresses.

"Try this one, dah-ling," he'd say in his Jewish-garmento way, not Izzy-darling way, handing her a dress.

Marilyn would go behind the changing screen, unzip her pants and slip off her blouse—and she was naked, no underwear, no nothing. She didn't parade around, but the mirrors broadcast her refection in multiple CinemaScope views and I caught glimpses of her breasts (smaller than I'd imagined), and flashes of blond pubic hair, and it was startling, like trying to hold onto lightning, exciting and dangerous.

Marilyn would emerge hugging a dress to her body so that she was covered but half exposed, study herself in the floor-to-ceiling mirrors that lined two of the showroom walls, lost and dreamy for several minutes, fluffing her white-blonde hair, trying on a variety of expressions and staring hard as if she were looking for someone or something, then duck behind the screen and come back with another dress, this one slipped over her head, zipper open, and she'd turn to my father and ask in her small soft voice, "Lou, do you mind?"

Lou?

He'd zip her up and she'd trill a laugh and he'd throw me a look, once even a wink (a first) and later made a point of saying, "Your mother need not know about the zip."

The whole time I sat on one of the showroom's two couches and watched, hands tucked under my thighs. Each time Marilyn emerged from behind the screen it was a little vignette though pretty much the same. She would stare in the mirror turning this way and that, fluff her hair, smile, frown, lick her lips, occasionally cup her naked breasts under the dress, then turn around to assess her rear end. Her expressions changed often but in slow motion: happy to sad to mad to determined or lost. A couple of times she turned to me and asked my opinion about a dress and I always said she looked beautiful.

"Really?" she'd say, as if no one had ever said that to her before and I'd bob my head up and down like a puppy and say, "*Really*," and she'd throw me a smile like a bunch of wild flowers tossed into the air.

A couple of times she called my father over and cupped a hand to his ear and whispered like a child would, and when I think about it now that's exactly how she seemed: childlike.

At one point she sagged onto the couch beside me in a half-unzipped dress and sipped champagne and asked me more questions—if I liked school, if I had siblings, what I liked to read (I could not come up with a single title, not even one of my Hardy Boys books or Classic Comics), so I turned it around and asked her, "What's your favorite movie you ever made?" and she thought a while before saying, "*Bus Stop*, because… Cherie was a… *real* girl, you know, sad but… trying to be happy," her pale face inches from mine, and I said, "Oh, you were great in that," though I hadn't seen it and again she said "*Really?*" as if my opinion mattered, and I said, "Yes!" and she smiled and asked me if I got along with my sister and I said "sort of," and I asked her if she had any kids and she blinked and pulled back as if slapped and her eyes welled up with tears and in a quivering whisper said, "I… have not been… lucky," and my father cut in and said, "Kids? Who need kids? Brats, all of 'em!" and swatted me on the head a little too hard and forced a laugh, then quickly fetched a new dress. Marilyn dashed behind the screen looking as though she might shatter to pieces but emerged in less than a minute in a white satin dress with a tight bodice of white lace and the same lace trim along the bottom, all smiles and absolutely radiant, the movie star, Marilyn Monroe.

After the usual posing she asked, "How about some color, Lou? Or a pattern?"

"No patterns," my father said shaking his head, "We make only white, black, or red cocktail dresses. It's about elegance, darling. This isn't Hollywood."

"Well," she said, "Hollywood is *anything* but elegant," and sounded tough for the first time, though she followed it up with a high-pitched laugh.

"With your coloring you should only be in black or white," my father said, and he was right, I could see it, her white hair, skin, the dress, her reflection in the showroom mirrors shimmering like a ghost, there and not there, like something imagined or remembered.

He brought her a black dress next with thin straps and a snug torso, the bottom edged with black ostrich feathers, and the contrast was startling, her face and arms and legs like an alabaster statue against all that black.

Marilyn seemed to know it, too. She stood perfectly still, her finger slowly tracing the edge of the black neckline over and over and over.

She bought that dress and three others, gave my father a check and asked that he send them to her home in California, which she said was her first and explained how she was decorating it Mexican-style and asked my father if he'd ever been to Mexico and he said no but he'd been to Cuba and she talked more about the house, obviously proud, though her voice sounded nervous, edgy.

"Nothing like a new home to cheer you up," my father said as if he'd bought dozens of homes in his lifetime, and she said, "Thank you, Lou," with so much emotion it was almost embarrassing, then hugged him.

She wrote her address on a piece of paper after making my father promise never to divulge it to anyone and he crossed his heart, a meaningless gesture for a Jew. He told her he would have the dresses altered to her "specifics" and she said that she'd recently lost a lot of weight and asked how he knew her size and he said, "Darling, I've been in the *schmatta* business since I was sixteen, I know exactly what needs to be done," and she trilled another laugh and kissed his cheek and said, "Oh, I shouldn't have done that—my cold," and he swatted her sentence away and it was the only time I ever saw him blush.

Marilyn changed back into her green pants and sleeveless blouse, then stopped to look at my sketches again.

"They're really… *good*," she said. "You must promise me that you will keep making them." I nodded and meant it and she said, "And you'll let me see them, won't you?" and I said, "Sure!" and she kissed my cheek, got her sunglasses in place and hugged my father once more. At the door she turned back and said, "Don't forget, I want to see those new sketches," and I nodded and smiled and bobbed my head up and down and she gave a little girl wave and I waved back and then she was gone, taking all of the light with her.

My father pinned some notes to the dresses she'd chosen, put them aside, then locked up, and we walked to Penn Station in our usual silence. The city streets were less crowded now, the air sticky hot, the top of the Empire State Building dissolving into a fuzzy pewter sky.

On the train, we sat opposite one another, my father behind the *Post*, me replaying everything Marilyn had said and daydreaming about the new drawings I would make and show Marilyn and how one day I was going to be a famous artist.

Halfway home, my father lowered his paper and said, "Nice girl," and I said, "Really nice." A moment later I asked, "What did she whisper to you, Dad?" and he said, "I can't remember," and that was all we said until we got home where my mother and sister were waiting, fidgety with questions.

"Was she beautiful?" my sister asked.

"Kind of," I said. Then corrected myself, "Sometimes."

"What does that mean?" my sister asked.

"She changed a lot," I said.

"You mean her clothes?" she asked.

"Yes," my father said.

“That’s not what I meant,” I said, seeing Marilyn’s face in my mind morph from happy to sad, from plain to beautiful.

“She tried on lots of dresses,” my father said, “and is buying four.”

“How exciting,” my mother said. “Did you think she was pretty?”

“Sure,” my father said, “but not nearly as pretty you.”

My mother waved a hand at him, but smiled.

“Was she nice?” my sister asked.

“Yes,” my father said. “A sweet girl. Without airs.”

Then he told them how Marilyn had admired my artwork and had kissed my cheek (neglecting to tell them she’d kissed and hugged him several times or that he’d zipped her up more than once) and after that my mother and sister teased me by referring to Marilyn as my “girlfriend.” But not for long.

It was only two or three weeks later that my mother awakened me with the words, “I’ve got bad news. Your girlfriend died.”

“*What?*” I said, still groggy.

“Marilyn,” she said, and I could see she regretted the flip remark and was struggling to figure out what to say next. “It’s—all over the news. She was so young. Only thirty-six.”

“Really?” I said, images of the freckled, fuzzy-cheeked blonde hugging dresses to her naked body playing in my halfasleep mind. “I thought she was a lot younger.”

“Thirty-six *is* young,” my mother said, and I realize now that at the time my mother was thirty-seven. “It’s so sad,” she said.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Sleeping pills,” my mother said. “She overdosed.” She sighed and I pictured Marilyn staring into the showroom mirrors looking for something or someone, and her eyes filling with tears.

It was a weekend and my father was off playing golf and I wondered if he had heard the news and was thinking of the nice girl who didn’t put on airs, who had called him Lou and kissed his cheek. He never said a word, but that Monday I saw him looking at the dresses Marilyn had bought. The alterations had been finished but they were never shipped and he never cashed her check.