

## The Whiter the Socks

Liana Skrzypczak

Liana Skrzypczak was signed to Harlequin's 'Digital Series First' before the imprint folded. She was the 2016 Hachette Mentoring Program recipient, and mentee to best-selling novelist, Sean Williams. Her short stories have appeared in *Meanjin Quarterly*, *Island* magazine and *The Big Issue*.

*To Babcia—thank you for sharing your story.*

Babcia has sun-splotched hands, with skin that stays peaked after it's pinched. She says it's because she's old and the skin has lost its spring. I think it's because she carries too many secrets around and they've made her hands heavy.

Today her hands are wrapped around a cappuccino. We are seated at a quaint artisan coffee shop on the German-settled main street, Hahndorf, in the Adelaide Hills. They do great coffee and even better *paćzki* doughnuts. It's a horrible day—cold, wet, grey. The kind that makes you want to wrap yourself in a blanket and sit beside a wood fire reminiscing.

Babcia faces the window, tracking couples, families and locals as they meander past with a look on her face that says she's doing just that—reminiscing. When I ask her about her week, she plays with the rim of her coffee cup and says, 'Lianka, when I was young, living in Kraków, you know, before five, I wanted to play piano...'

I smile to hide my astonishment. Not for the fact that her unsteady hands were once deft. But for the fact that she rarely talks about her childhood.

She uses my silence to go on, 'We had big, brown... what do you call, with the thing that you turn, and the holes, and you wind?'

'A pianola?'

She nods. 'A pianola. I listen to song. One for children. You wouldn't know. "Tak pan jedzie po obiedzie..." about a horse. And sometime my mother, your great babcia, hum while she clean—' Her voice wobbles as her story picks up momentum. '—and my brother, your great uncle, like too. We make horse jumping in living room. With carpet was hard, and bare feet with socks. Because our mother always tell us, "You catch a death in winter."' She wiggles her finger.

I lean forward in my chair. I know the song. She used to sing it to me when I was small enough to bounce on her knee like I was riding a horse. She also used to tell me off for running around barefoot in the house, shouting, 'You'll catch a death!' But I don't mention that now. I don't want to miss a word.

'Anyhow, I wanted lessons. So my mother use little money to buy piano lesson down road. That teacher was very grumpy old woman. You think I am grumpy, well, she would hit with a... what do you call it?'

'A ruler?'

'No. A stick which you measure the things.'

'A ruler.'

'Oh, yes. I was thinking of something else. Anyhow, I remember riding my bike home from my piano lesson on this day. My mother was at work. I remember a German army truck out the front of our apartment. I think, there must be something very bad. When I get closer, they put me on truck with many other Polish people. They say, 'Two German officers were shot. So we kill ten Polish for every German.' They take us to train station and put us on train...'

Her voice trails off. I'm holding my breath. She's never told me this version of the story. When I was younger, she'd outlined a few plot points—manipulated her limited English to bend and curve around specific detail. But now...

I wait for her to continue but she's lost in thought again, watching a small girl with pigtails across the street who's shaking her bag of Killer Pythons from the lolly shop and yelling for more. So, I prompt gently, 'Where was the train going, Babcia?'

She glances at me, then back at the girl, pursing her lips. 'I don't know. I was only eight or nine. I remember it was a train to carry... not people but maybe for animals?'

'Animals?'

She nods dismissively. 'Anyhow, all I could see was out a tiny slit at top to the sky.'

I try to imagine her as an eight-year-old, peering through a gap in a livestock train. Scared. Alone. For the first time in my life, I experience complete failure of imagination. It's hard to believe my babcia was as young as the Killer Python girl when this happened.

'Lucky I know German—I learn at school. I was very good. I told them I feel sick in the stomach. You know when you want to...' she closes her eyes as though searching for the word behind her eyelids.

'Vomit?'

‘Yes and if I get off at train stop I feel better. I thought, you know, to escape. But that German officer stood by me to watch. So I tricked him. Pointed my finger over there and say, “Look at those people! What are they doing?!”’ She points past my head.

Although I know she’s not pointing to anyone or anything in particular, I turn my head. ‘That worked?’

‘It did.’ She smiles. ‘And I run so fast to the next train. Oh, Lianka, I run so fast my shoes get caught in the tracks and come off! I think I must look like crazy person. Running with no shoes and very dirty socks.’

‘Did the officer catch you?’

‘Lucky some Polish people hide me on the next train. It was going to some work camps—farms—in Germany. But when I get off with them, another German officer see me and say, “Shoot her.” Because I was too small to go work. They think, what is she doing on this train? She is too young to do the work. But I said, ‘I can work. I am small but I am strong. You give me chance.’ I was lucky because there was another officer who was higher in charge who walk past. He say, “You can not shoot her with so many people around.” So they send me to work. I was lucky. But it was hard.’

My coffee loses steam on the table. I barely notice. I don’t look up when the waitress appears beside me and says, ‘Can I get you anything else?’ Instead, I stiffen with annoyance. I want to shoo her away, berate her for interrupting our conversation. But Babcia just smiles at the girl and says, ‘No thank you, darling. We are okay.’

The waitress walks off. I glance back at Babcia and quickly ask, ‘Did your mother know what had happened to you? After you were taken away?’

Babcia makes a waving motion with her hand and for a second my stomach drops, thinking she might not go on. Then her voice hardens. ‘I did not see my mother for two years. She did not know what happened to me. She went to the Red Cross and they got us together again at Hohenfels Stalag 383. You see, the Americans came and the war ended.’

‘Hohenfels?’

‘A camp for people with no place to live.’

I whip out my phone. She waits while I look up Hohenfels and find that it was a US Army Training Garrison in 1946—and a displacement camp after World War II.

‘You were at a displacement camp? I didn’t know—’

‘Never mind that.’ She shoots my phone a disapproving glare and I place it face down on the table. She nods. ‘Anyhow, that is where I saw the cow in socks. Did I tell you that story?’

I nod. She told it to me once when I was in primary school. I remember clearly. She’d just picked me up and we were in the car on the way home.

I was complaining about my day—friends, teachers, rules, the usual. She scolded me for being ungrateful and lectured me with the story of the cow in socks.

She's not scolding me now. I decide I want to hear the story again. 'Remind me?'

She smiles, 'It is a very funny story,' and settles back in her seat. 'I was living with my mother in the camp. It was like apartment buildings with whole families, you know, in tiny little rooms. We did not have much food. Everything was in rations. Just think, one tiny little square of butter for to last the whole week!'

'I use one square of butter on one piece of bread!'

'Oh, yes, my dear kochana. You would be shocked. And you see, because there was not much food, people had to do what they could to live. So I never forget the cow in socks.'

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The cow stood, body long to the wind, nose twitching. Dusk fell over the valley and a white frost crept up each blade of grass until the rolling green became rolling white. In the distance, a garrison of great pines stood like a woolly jumper against the worst of the incoming gale. She turned her gaze northwards to her usual night-time resting place, body yearning for the rigid comfort of the corrugated iron windbreak with a view of the open sky and stars. But something to her east had also caught her attention—a shadow moving in the dense, frost-tipped evergreen forest.

She strained to see the source of the shadow and made out the long, lanky contours of a young lad. He held a bale. There was a rope slung around his neck and his tongue made cheery whickering noises against his teeth. The cow swished her tail. She was used to bales and lads. As she watched him approach, she merely blinked. As he reached out to stroke her neck, her winter-thickened skin barely twitched.

The lad's touch was practiced despite his youth—his calloused fingers travelled from her pale neck to dark brown hide and back again, returning to the softer, fawn coloured hairs behind her ears and the itch that had been bothering her all evening. She relaxed her weight forward and bent her forehead to the bale.

The rope, worn slack, was sodden against her skin and the feel of it made her shift her weight from hoof to hoof. Still, she did not startle. The bale was good—fine, young and full of flavour. Besides, she was used to ropes.

Soon, she was walking, the rope pulling taut around her neck. Though she agitated from left to right, the lad's lead was firm, his whickering

insistent and soon she fell into an easy rhythm, her mind taken wholly by navigating the spongy path of pine needles.

As they reached the edge of the forest where the trees gave way to smaller deciduous varieties, she sensed the lad's pace become uneven, cautious. She dug her resistance into the uneven ground until the lad slowed to a stop.

'Is that you, Lech?'

There, in a break in the trees, where a fence line found a gate, was the silhouette of a stocky, grey-haired man. He rubbed his palms together and stamped his feet to keep warm. His expression was shielded by the peak of a tweed winter cap. His breath came out in white puffs as he spoke. 'Maciej,' he said, kicking at something with the toe of his boot. It made a clang. 'I brought a bucket.'

'She doesn't have much milk.'

'Anything's better than nothing.'

'It'll be heavy. And messy.'

'Leave it here until morning. In this weather, it will keep.'

The two men swapped places—the older taking the cow's rope in his teeth and bending to draw milk from her udder. The milk made a pissing noise against the metal bucket.

The younger rubbed his hands and stamped his feet to keep warm. 'Did you check what time they're changing the guards? The main road's being watched ever since those idiots left entrails at the fence of that farm.'

Nodding. 'Careless... I think we can get her through the back way. But here, just in case.' The older man wiped his hand on his overalls, which were splattered in places with dry blood, and pulled out a bundle of material from the back pocket.

The young lad raised his eyebrows as the older man tossed cloth into his hands. 'What are these?'

'Socks. To keep her hooves quiet.'

'The cow?'

'Yes. Haven't you ever put socks on a cow before?'

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The moon cast a wet streak along the salt-melted, worn-to-dust road. Apartment blocks rose on both sides, perpendicular concrete anomalies against the vast wind-rolled farmland. The two men had become one, hunched together as if to make their bodies smaller. The taller lad walked with a limp. The shorter, stockier man held a rag to his cheek, packed tight with ice from the side of the road. The cow had not taken well to the socks.

Hot white vapour bloomed from the cow's nostrils. She walked with hooves high, as though still navigating pine needles. Her feet felt tight, as though bound in clay and spongy, like she'd stepped in a fresh patch of wild mushroom *maszlakis* that appear after the first rains in autumn. Her heart beat faster and her eyes darted left to right. Still, being led was better than roaming the forest alone.

Suddenly, a window shutter flung open and clattered against the cement wall to their right. The sound echoed down the street before dispersing on a gust of wind. The men flattened themselves against the wall, shying from the light and for a few, tense seconds, they didn't move. But there was nothing to decipher behind the window except the gleaming emptiness of glass enclosing a dark room. So they resumed their walking, faster now, keeping their heads bowed. As they did, the shadow of a face appeared, a slender neck, the ghost of a hand.

They passed more identical buildings and a garrison of unserviced army tanks dusted with snow. The roads were empty. In fact, the camp might've seemed deserted to an unknowing traveller—the people tucked so deep within the surrounding buildings to keep as far away from the biting cold as possible. By the time they reached the centre of the camp, a light, feathery snow had begun to fall, obscuring the road ahead. The men had stopped rubbing and whickering to the cow. Instead, they used rough hands and brute strength to keep her moving.

Finally, after what seemed like a very long pilgrimage, they stopped beside a building and peered at the number nailed into the wall. The older man clapped the lad on the back, to a plume of powdery snow. They began pulling off their gloves and kicking their soles together.

The girl was round of face, with feather-lashed blue eyes red-ringed from lack of sleep and her fair hair fanned in a wispy array about her face as she burst from the main entrance of the building and crashed into the two men and the cow. The cow stumbled, losing a sock, its hoof making a hollow *clunk* on the compact road. Both men bit down exclamations of surprise and panic while the girl played hot potato with the smoking pot in her hands, still sticky with the blackened residue of a failed meal.

'What are you doing, girl? Get back inside!' the older man exclaimed, hand inadvertently rising to shield his newly bruised cheekbone, while the lad helped him to control the now-bucking cow.

The girl dropped the pot into the snow and stood straight to take in the two men—her tired eyes now alert and wide, her gaze coming to rest on the cow's hooves adorned with mud-clogged wool.

The older man glanced down the road, then back at the girl. 'Did you hear me? Get back inside.'

The lad grabbed his companion's arm and shook his head. Then he turned to the girl, 'You'll catch a death,' he said in a softer tone. 'The storm's coming in thick and fast.'

Still the girl didn't move, and neither did her gaze, which was still fixed on the cow. 'I burnt the kopytka dough,' she finally said. 'I used up all the potatoes, and the stock for gravy. Mama will be mad.'

'What do you want us to do about it?' The older man grunted.

The lad took a deep breath. 'Your mother wouldn't want you out on the road at this time of night. Go back inside before the military police come to check on us.'

The girl glanced at the soiled pot at her feet, which had stopped smoking and was now only letting off a slight acrid scent. She hesitated on the step, then her eyes widened and she stuck out her chin, collarbones jutting as she tried to make herself tall. 'I won't tell the MPs about the cow if you save me some meat.'

The two men glanced at each other, weighing the girl's threat.

'To make new stock,' she added, as though the men hadn't heard her before.

The older man began a string of profanities to which the lad cut him off. 'Lech, it's just a girl and her mother. What harm can it do?'

The older man threw his arms in the air. 'There's only so much cow in a cow.'

The lad nodded and considered the girl again. 'We'll do a trade.'

The girl picked up the pot, and held it out in offering. 'It's a good pot. It can be cleaned.'

The lad frowned. 'That *is* a fine pot. It can be cleaned. You should not trade the lasting for a single meal.' He glanced at Lech and shrugged. 'Laundry room. Tomorrow afternoon. Bring newspaper.'

The older man spluttered, but was cut off by the girl's exclamation of thanks. 'Ah, *gękuje* bardzo, *Pan*. *Gękuje*.'

'Nie ma za co,' the older man said gruffly, embarrassed at the respectful point of address. 'Now go. Quick.'

The girl opened her mouth as though to say something more, then closed it. Taking the steps two at a time, her pot cradled in her arms. She climbed to the landing, leaned all her weight and strength on the door to pull it open and slipped inside. The door made a fluted sound against the wind as it closed. The smell of char faded with her.

The storm broke, as though it had been waiting for the men to reach their destination and a gale-force wind ripped down the road, howling along the building fronts and rattling windows. The cow flattened her ears against the bitter chill and nosed the lad's arm in search of the bale. The

lad ignored her and bent his own head to the wind, speaking loudly into a cupped hand to be heard by his companion. 'Do you think she'll keep her mouth shut?'

'What choice do we have but to trust that she does?' the older man replied, thumping the cow's hide to start her up the steps. It was dark inside, the narrow hallway lit by a single, yellow light bulb screwed into a hole in the ceiling. The air smelled like too many people exhaling at once. But at least it was out of the biting wind.

From there, they walked in silence up a winding set of stairs, down another corridor and towards a door marked 'laundry'. The older man paused before the door and said in a low voice, 'Next time, Maciej, ask for something more useful than newspaper.'

The lad frowned. 'Like what?'

The older man tossed a bundle of material at the lad who fumbled and caught it mid air. It was the threadbare sock that had come off the cow.

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'So, I will never forget the cow in socks,' Babcia says, sliding her empty coffee cup to the centre of the table and folding her napkin on tip of the rim. She does the same with my cold, leftover latte. 'It was like, you know, a dream. You blink and it is not real...' she trails off.

I suddenly become aware of the clatter of plates, the low murmur of conversation around us. I glance at Babcia. Her cheeks are pink. She seems tired, but warm. Eventually, I say, 'The poor cow.'

She smiles. 'That is the thing, Lianka. We had good meat next day. And for many days after. When you live on plain food with no flavour for so long, fresh meat taste so good, you would not believe. I made into soup with some small amount vegetables.'

I must've made a face then, because it made Babcia chuckle. 'Life is a funny thing, Lianka,' she says. 'I lost my shoes when I run from the Germans. My socks were very dirty. I sometime think, the whiter your socks, the much lucky you be.'

The waitress clears our table. A Clydesdale clip clops down the main street, its wagon heavy with tourists returning to the Hahndorf Inn.