

The Red Boots

It was so cosy under the goose-feather perina...was it really time to get up? But the smell of baking bread meant that my mother had already been up for at least an hour. I poked my head out and felt a shock of icy bedroom air. Through the darkness, I could see that my brother's bed was empty. Morning had arrived. And today was a very special day!

I hopped out of bed, keeping warm by running on the spot. Without removing my bed-time attire of white long-johns and heavy woollen socks, I quickly pulled on a heavy woollen sweater. I was sure to freeze in the outhouse, so I made do with the pee pot under the bed, then stepped into my overalls and ran downstairs.

"Good morning Slavko," greeted my mother, smiling, as she cut sowbelly into thin strips. I splashed warm water on my face and hands from the reservoir in the massive Roger McLarey stove, savouring the intense smell of baking bread. This wood stove was my mother's pride and joy - it was a four burner with a double oven. The front and sides were finished in creamy coloured enamel with red trim. It was the only stove I had ever seen that wasn't completely black. But then again, everything in our Innisfree house was so much nicer than what we had on the homestead in Lake Eliza. I looked at the white plastered walls in this kitchen and remembered the old walls that were made of shaped logs fitted and nailed together with hand-carved wooden pegs. The cracks had been filled in with a plaster made of mud, cow dung, and straw. The floor had been hard packed dirt. I gazed down at the gleaming red and white checkered linoleum I was standing on now.

The old homestead could have fit into this kitchen. I looked up at my mother who was busy at her modern stove and remembered the oven in Lake Eliza. It was made of mud. On top of the oven was a warm sodded area where we children used to sleep. My parents slept on a home-made wooden bed with a horsehair mattress an arm's length away.

"Slavko, you're asleep standing up," chuckled mother, interrupting my reveries. "Hurry with the chores. You don't want to get your father angry. Not today."

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I looked up at the clock on the wall. Already 5:30! There was no time to waste. I walked out the kitchen door to the cold room. This was a narrow storage area that was as long as the house. We used this room to hang up our winter clothing. It always smelled faintly of cow manure. There was a narrow eighty foot deep pit with a trap door at one end of the room. We would throw ice down the pit all winter so that it could be used as a food freezer in the winter and a food cooler in the summer. Just last week, old Sam the Metis had brought our order of frozen fish. Old Sam was a fixture in the area, driving his sleigh from farm to farm all winter with fish, frozen solid, piled high.

The trap door was open, so I looked down. There was my little sister Jean, blue lipped and shivering, struggling up the makeshift steps with a pailful of frozen fish. She was almost at the top, so I reached down and grabbed the pail from her.

"Does Mother know you were down there?" I asked her sternly.

"No," she replied, still shivering violently, "but I know she's pickling some of the fish today, and I don't want to waste any time. Not today!"

I helped her close the trap door, and then she hurried into the kitchen, pulling the pail of frozen fish behind her.

I got my working coat off its hook and did up the buttons with numb fingers. My boots were nowhere to be seen, so I forced my feet into Jean's workboots. I found my own hat and gloves, and walked out the back door.

Valdimir and Stefan were already heating up the water trough for the livestock. The winter nights were so cold that the water trough froze solid in a matter of hours. Stoking up the fire under the trough was the last thing we did each night and the first thing we did each morning because the cows would hurt their teeth if they tried to get a drink through ice.

"So sleeping beauty decided to wake up," said Valdimir, giving me a dirty look.

"Why didn't you wake me when you got up?" I asked defensively.

"I tried. But you were dead to the world."

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As I helped crack ice on top of the trough, Stefan piled wood underneath the trough. Valdimir was heating dippers full of water one by one for the two newborn calves and their mothers in the barn. It was far too cold for the fragile creatures to risk going outside.

Father and Mother had already milked the cows, so once all of the ice in the trough was broken up, I went over to help father separate the milk from the cream.

"The snow's not bad today," I commented to my father with forced casualness. "Maybe we'll be able to take the car in to the hall tonight."

"Don't count on it Slavko," replied my father, looking out of the barn at the still black sky. "The wind these last few days has drifted snow over the roads. It wouldn't be safe to take the car."

I continued to help my father in silent frustration. Why, for once, couldn't he see that getting to the hall early was important? All winter, the children from the neighbouring farms would meet at our place on Sundays to practice the skits, dancing, mandolins and balalaikas. Father would remove the doors separating the living room and dining room so a practising space could be provided. Each Sunday during the winter, our house was the centre of activity for the whole Ukrainian community. But the actual concert was to be held tonight at Miroslavna Hall, and our farm was the furthest, a full twelve miles away.

Last Sunday night was dress rehearsal. We were the last family to arrive. As one of the youngest dancers, I always got stuck wearing a plain outfit. How I admired the older boys' fancy costumes, with red leather boots, flowing blue pants, embroidered blouses and red sashes. The younger boys had to make do with plain white pants and their own socks pulled up to the knee as imitation boots. The shirts had almost no embroidery, and our belts were sometimes mere binder twine. I desperately wanted to wear a fancy costume like the older boys.

Last week, in preparation for the dress rehearsal, I had fashioned a pair of Cossack boots out of tar paper - not red, but at least black boots were better than plain white socks! But I had barely started my dance when the tar paper boots began to tear apart. By the end of my first dance, bits of tar paper littered the stage. Nestor

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Chynasyk, the oldest boy in the little boys' group, resplendent in a pair of oversized red boots and a housecoat belt as a sash, looked at me pityingly.

"Forget it, Slavko. Little boys are supposed to be in white."

Slowly, the performers and their parents put away the costumes and instruments for the night. Ivanko Chenyk had put out the fire in the big pot bellied heating stove and put out all the lights. My father was getting the horses and sleigh ready, and my mother was talking to Nestor's mother. As I took off the plain shirt and pants, I noticed that Nestor had left his fancy outfit carelessly piled on top of a wooden chest. The rule was first come first serve. I knew that the night of the performance Nestor would get here before me. He lived two miles closer. But what if I could find a hiding place for my coveted outfit now? I looked around. The other children were either riding home already, or out on the stage horsing around, waiting for their parents to stop chatting.

Where was a secure hiding spot? Behind the chest? Too obvious. Underneath? I strained, but couldn't lift it up.

What about underneath everything in the girls' chest? Nestor would never think of looking for his special outfit there! I carefully wrapped the red boots inside the blouse and pants and tied the whole bundle securely with the housecoat sash. Shivering with satisfaction, I buried the package deep within the mound of girls' costumes.

"Slavko, hurry up!" It was my mother calling. I scampered down the stairs, trying hard to keep my face from grinning. And we started on our long journey home.

That was last week. Would the special outfit still be hidden? Would we get there tonight before Nestor? I could only hope!

"Slavko," my father said sharply, breaking me from my day dreaming, "please answer me when I ask you something. How much wood do we have in the cellar?"

"We filled it up before supper last night," I answered.

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"Good," he replied. "Go get your brothers and you can all shovel out the barn now."

Stefan had just finished making swill for the pigs - mixing skim milk with chopped oats in the trough. Valdimir led the cows out to eat and drink and we all hurried into the barn to clean the manure out of the stables. We had to work fast so the cows' udders wouldn't freeze.

Once we cleaned out the barn and got the cows back in, we all headed to the house for breakfast. Olga was outside shovelling off the last bits of snow from the porch. She followed us in.

As we removed our outer clothes in the cold room, steam smelling of cow manure rose in wisps. My father held the kitchen door open and we all filed in. All at once, my nostrils were filled with kitchen smells - fried sowbelly, warm bread, and fish being pickled.

Jean had covered the table with an oilcloth and set out bowls and plates for each of us. We had a hearty breakfast of Sunny Boy cereal, bread, jam, and sowbelly.

As I wiped up the last bit of grease from my plate with a crust of bread, I thought back to all the breakfasts we had at our homestead back in Lake Eliza. Even during the Depression we had a good breakfast each day. But I had been acutely aware of how little others had....

Rafts carrying starving children and their parents would float listlessly down the North Saskatchewan River past our homestead. The sight of these poor beings was a torture to my mother, so she set up a stand with eggs and curdled milk at the edge of the river. We painted a sign that stated, in several languages, "Take what you need, but save some for the next person." We would fill the stand twice a day.

Homeless men would wander from farm to farm looking for a bit of work in exchange for food and a warm place to sleep. We always had two or three of them living in our barn, doing whatever odd jobs Mother could find for them.

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As I swallowed the rest of my fat drenched bread, I looked up at the kitchen clock. It was already 7 o'clock! But there were so many chores yet to do.

My brothers and sisters and I scurried around the farm, getting each chore done as quickly as possible. But we always had that sinking feeling, that no matter how fast we were, we would still be the last ones to the concert. You see, my father did not believe in milking the cows too early. "It upsets their routine," he would say sternly. So even when all the work was done and supper eaten, we still had to wait until at least 4 o'clock to milk the cows and let them out for more water.

There was a knock on the door a few minutes after four o'clock. It was Victor, Nestor Rhynasyk's older brother. He had come to drive Olga to the hall,

"Can I please come with you?" I begged.

"No," replied Olga. "If I let you come, then Jean will want to come, and so will Stefan and Valdimir. You can drive with Mother and Father. They'll be leaving pretty soon anyway!" And with that, she left, a satisfied look on her face.

While the others milked the cows, Valdimir and I got the horses and sleigh out of the stable. The sleigh was made of a twelve foot long grain box bolted onto sleigh runners. We piled oats into the sleigh.

Then we waited, and waited, and waited.

What was taking them so long with the milking? I ran into the house to check the clock. Five o'clock already! The concert started at 8 sharp. Miroslavna Hall was 12 miles away, a good three hour drive. Even if we left this minute we might be late.

I ran into the barn to see how much was left to do. The cows were all watered and milked and back in their stalls.

"Hurry up slowpoke!" I heard my father call from outside. I hurried out of the barn to the sight of everyone loaded into the sleigh and ready to go. Maybe we wouldn't be late after all.

Mother and Father sat up front with Jean between them. They were bundled in blankets. My brothers and I sat on top of the oats piled up in the sleigh. It was a cosy ride there, all bundled up in blankets and cushioned with oats.

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Miroslavna Hall gleamed like a beacon in the darkness as we approached. There were so many sleighs already that the barn was full. Our poor horses were going to have to wait for us in the bitter cold. We rubbed them dry so their sweat wouldn't freeze, and then draped our blankets over top of them. Father put down a big bundle of oats in front of each horse to munch on while we were inside for the concert.

The heat and light of Miroslavna Hall burst upon us as we entered. The warm air smelled of manure, wet wool, and sweat. The room was gigantic. There were enough benches set up for a hundred or more people. The stage, draped with elegant gold and crimson curtains, looked like something out of a book. On the walls portraits of famous Ukrainians stared sternly down at me.

I hurried up to the change room, peeling off my coat and hat as I ran. Would the outfit still be hidden?

Olga was there, helping the dance teacher organize the younger children into their groups. She looked like a princess in her embroidered blouse and red skirt. Someone had braided her hair and wrapped it into a thick coil on the top of her head. Surrounding this was a crown of paper flowers.

"Slavko," she said, "hurry up and get dressed. Your group is going on first."

I dashed over to where the two wardrobe boxes were standing. Looking over my shoulder to make sure I wasn't being watched, I quickly rooted through the remaining girls' costumes in search of the precious bundle. It wasn't there!

"Slavko, put these on fast. There's no time to lose." Olga tossed me a plain white shirt without even a stitch of embroidery and a plain white pair of pants. "I went through the boy's wardrobe box as soon as I got here," she said. "I know how particular you are about your costume. That is the newest little boy's costume in the whole wardrobe. Not a tear, or stain, or anything."

Olga looked so proud of herself, I thought as I sullenly dressed myself in the pure white outfit. If only I had thought to ask her to get my bundle out of the girls' wardrobe.

Just then, Nestor walked into the change room, resplendent in my outfit -- red boots, wide pants, embroidered shirt, and the beautiful bathrobe sash.

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"Slavko," he said. "Shouldn't you change out of your long-johns? We're just about to go on the stage." I looked down at my pure white costume. It did look like long-johns. The older dancers chuckled at his cruel joke.

Swallowing back tears of humiliation, I ran out of the room and searched the hall for my father.

"I am not going to dance tonight," I announced in a trembling voice.

"Nonsense. You've looked forward to this night all winter," he said to me sternly, holding my chin in his hand so I had to look up at his eyes. "Besides, it would break your mother's heart if you didn't dance. Now go."

Just then, the musicians took their places in front of the stage. "Go. Get up there," urged my father. Through angry tears, I could see the blur of little boys all dressed in white as they lined up to get to the back of the stage. Nestor, resplendent in his colourful finery, was last in line. I fell in behind him and sullenly walked to my position on the stage.

The curtains opened and the musicians played our dance. I was in misery, but I went through the dance as if in a trance, not looking left or right. The audience was a blur. I couldn't even tell where my parents were sitting. Maybe they weren't even there.

The few minutes of the dance seemed like hours, but finally it was over. We all took our bows and listened to the thunderous applause of parents and relatives. Through the corner of my eye, I noticed that Nestor had stepped into the middle and did an extra little bow. I guess that's who they were all really clapping for.

As soon as the curtains closed, I ran off the stage and back up to the change room. I tore off that horrible white outfit and threw it into the boys' box. I pulled on my own clothing and got out of that room before Nestor and the other boys were even off the stage.

The older girls were dancing now. Olga looked beautiful, her finery flowing with each graceful movement. But I just wasn't in the mood to watch dancing any more. So I snuck out the back door of the hall and went to visit our horses. They were stomping the snow to keep their feet warm, and the blankets had fallen off.

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I carefully shook the snow out of each blanket and one by one placed them back on the horses. Then I got them some water.

The stillness of the frigid outdoors had a settling effect on me. I inhaled a deep breath and let it out slowly, watching the mist rise in the darkness. Then I walked back inside. Why should I let Nestor get the satisfaction of spoiling this evening? I pasted a smile on my face and walked right up the middle aisle, taking an empty seat in the front row.

I concentrated on looking like I was enjoying myself, even clapping to the music of the chaika. With a start, I noticed that sitting right beside me was the new girl from school. Her name was Nataalka, and she was very pretty. As the chaika ended, I looked over and gave her a timid smile.

"I saw you dancing up there," she said loud enough to be heard over the applause. "You're a good dancer."

"Thank you," I replied, blushing.

"You were lucky too," she continued. "I felt embarrassed for that poor Nestor."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he must have arrived late. He was the only one who didn't get the proper outfit."