10. The Skrup Shoe

You are being provided with a book chapter by chapter. I will request you to read the book for me after each chapter. After reading the chapter, 1. shorten the chapter to no less than 300 words and no more than 400 words. 2. Do not change the name, address, or any important nouns in the chapter. 3. Do not translate the original language. 4. Keep the same style as the original chapter, keep it consistent throughout the chapter. Your reply must comply with all four requirements, or it’s invalid.
I will provide the chapter now.

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The Skrup Shoe

arl Roberts, known in Pottstown as Doc, had long heard the rumors of the Jewess in Chicken Hill hiding the Negro child from the state illegally. He had learned about it from his distant cousin Carl Boydkins. Carl worked for the state welfare office. The two men were not close. They had grown up on neighboring farms as boys. Both families were said to go back ten generations to the Blessington family, said to have arrived on the Mayflower all the way back in 1620. It was a point of pride for both families, although, as it turned out, neither was tied to the Mayflower at all. The family was actually tied to an Irish sailor named Ed Bole, a distant relative who worked as a manservant for Chinese emperor Chaing Kai Wu in Monashu Province in 1774. Bole, an English seaman and a drunk, had been tossed from the English freighter Maiden that year after the captain grew tired of his drunken shenanigans and left him at the port of Shanghai. He was picked up by Chinese authorities and dragged before the emperor, who found the idea of a white man serving him tea and Chinese crumpets, known as mantou, wonderfully satisfying. After three years, Bole escaped

and made his way back to England, announced himself as Lord Earl Blessington of Sussex, and with his newfound knowledge of the Chinese language and China teas talked his way into a job at a British shipping company, where he eventually made a fortune in salt and Chinese medicine, marrying the daughter of an English trader in London. In 1784, when a distant cousin of Bole's in Ireland showed up in London and started asking questions, Bole hastily packed his wife and four young children onto a ship called the Peanut and sent them off to America, a land where nobody asked questions about white people's pasts. Three days after the Peanut sailed, Bole choked to death on a char siu bao pork bun, for which he'd developed an affinity while living in the Land of Wonder. Luckily, he'd sent his wife and children abroad with a tidy sum of four thousand dollars, a fortune in those days, plus a nanny to help them, with the idea that it would be some months before he would join them—an idea that ended, unfortunately, when that char siu bao pork bun slid down his windpipe.

When news of the death of Lord Blessington, née Bole, reached his widow in America, it prompted the usual hand-wringing, howling, and hairpulling, after which she collapsed in tears and into the arms of her faithful nanny. The nanny hugged her tightly. Sparks flew. The two women promptly fell in love, decided to live together, pulled out a map, saw a creek near Pottstown, Pa., far from the prying eyes of New York society—which regarded the widow with suspicion anyway, since she seemed to eye the male species with neither contempt nor scorn but with total disinterest instead—and moved to Pottstown as the Blessington sisters, buying a huge tract of land off Manatawny Creek. They raised the children, with the help of local servants and farmers, and split the tracts among the four children after the women died.

Neither Doc nor Carl had interest in questioning their family lineage, for their childhoods were as full of as much happiness as any descendant of the Mayflower might enjoy. They were white Christian men born in an America

seemingly ready-made for them. The two families, now splintered off and bearing different last names, were happily ensconced on neighboring farms at Pine Forge on wonderful acreage bordering Manatawny Creek, full of sunflowers and pastures and rich soil. The two families lived across the creek from one another: Doc's family, the Robertses, on one side; Carl's family, the Boydkinses, on the other. The two families often traveled to church together on Sundays by carriage—Presbyterian, of course. The civilized services filled the sanctuary to the brim with good white people. Those were wonderful days, Doc's childhood, full of strong men whose handshake was their bond and women who knew how to cook and raise children. Nice, clean families. This was before the "new people"—the Jews, the Negroes, the Greeks, the Mennonites, the Russian Orthodox—arrived. The two families lived peacefully until just before the Great Crash, when Doc's father saw the future and sold out, thank God. But the Boydkins family stayed, and they suffered, for the new owner of the Roberts tract was a good Christian man who forged iron bits and steel parts, which produced smelly garbage and black runoff from dyes even though he promised the Boydkinses he would bury his garbage rather than pour the muck from his forge into the beautiful creek. They were pleased when he made that promise and believed him. He was, after all, a good Christian.

Shortly after, he was joined by a second man, another good Christian, who also kept his word. Then a third partner came, another good Christian . . . who, well, he was said to want to be a good Christian, which counted for something, though he left his wife for a fifteen-year-old girl named Uma who had boobs the size of cantaloupes and was said to have spent time in the Muncy penitentiary. The fellow eventually moved to New Orleans with his new wife and was replaced by a new man, an Irishman named Fitz-Hugh who was said to have made his fortune in opium. Fitz-Hugh bought out the original owners and thereupon the small one-man mill became two mills with four workers apiece. Then three mills, then four tiny

mills. The Boydkins clan soon found themselves waking up and peering out their kitchen window to see eight workers slogging back and forth to the bank of the Manatawny, dumping buckets of sludge into the creek all day long. In six months the eight workers became nine, then twelve, then nineteen. The four mills became seven, then eight, splitting like amoebas, dotting the hillside above until the mills were replaced by small factories that made pipe nipples and tiny bolts and iron pieces, belching smoke from small chimneys into the clear Pennsylvania sky. The small factories then split into bigger factories that crafted iron pipes, steel fittings, and glass bottles for whiskey distilleries, followed by bigger factories that crafted eight-foot iron beams, joists, barrels, pipe fittings, castings, signs, entire window frames, and steel girders. In eight short years, the tiny mill was gone and in its place was a rambling, rumbling, half-mile-long gray factory-fortress that thrust a hundred-foot smokestack into the sky that belched gray fumes twenty-four hours a day. The crews of workers who tossed black muck to the Manatawny were gone, replaced by three six-inch pipes that vomited churning, filthy sludge into the once beautiful streams that fed the Boydkinses' cows and watered the crops. By the time the Boydkinses cried foul, three one-hundred-foot chimneys churned black smoke into the sky; 225 cursing, laughing workers speaking every language under God's sun trooped in and out of the buildings in three different shifts; and the work whistle shrieked three times a day including Sundays—all within 150 feet of their kitchen window.

The Boydkins family protested, saying that the unholy cursing of the workers within earshot of their kitchen table and children was outrageous and the sludge was ruining their land and making their cows sick. But it was 1932, and by then, Flagg, Bethlehem Steel, and Jacobs Aircraft Engine Company had arrived—along with their smooth lawyers in starched collars and shiny Packards. And the lawyers were firm: We have to make engines for the mighty American airplanes that will carry freedom across the world,

they said. We have to make the great steel girders for the Golden Gate Bridge that will allow wonderful automobiles to cross. We need gunpowder and shell casings and steel for the war that is coming. In desperation, the Boydkinses approached the city fathers of Pottstown, who laid down the law: The war is coming. You have to move. So the Boydkins family was forced to sell their 147 acres bordering the creek for pennies on the dollar to keep America free. It had to be done.

It was a bad decision to remain on the Manatawny back in 1929, and Doc was grateful for his father's foresight.

He and Carl were not especially close in high school, in part because Carl was tall and a good athlete and all the girls loved him, whereas Doc was a bookworm who'd had polio, which affected his left foot. The foot curled oddly and bore a cleft in the middle where toes two and three should have been. It ached from the time he was aware of it. When he was a child, his mother instructed him to always keep it covered, but it ached so much and no shoe fit well so he ignored her orders as much as possible. He secretly felt his left foot didn't look that different from his right, but he learned a painful lesson in first grade when he slipped his sock off in gym class. The boys saw his foot and howled, calling him Hoof. From then on, he never bared his foot in public again.

But that didn't prevent Doc from enjoying high school. He loved biology, was voted president of the school debating team, and despite having what girls called a walnut nose—it protruded from his face like a bumpy walnut—he discovered that girls liked guys who were clever. He read books on comedy, love, biology, and sex, the latter revealing all kinds of secrets about what girls liked, including special go-to secret places where wiggly fingers doing feathery work could make girls do anything a guy wanted. He memorized a few of these tricks and tried them out junior year on Della Burnheimer, a bouncy blonde cheerleader who felt sorry for him, agreeing to picnic with him at the creek in nearby Saratoga Park. As they

lay on a blanket after lunch, Doc confessed to her that he'd never kissed a girl and would like to try. Della, a generous soul, glanced at Doc's funny shoe, felt even more sorry for him, and agreed. Doc proved to be an enthusiastic kisser, leaping in and giving her full-on mouth-to-mouth resuscitation as his hands slid into her underwear, where he made good use of the wiggly-fingered techniques he'd read about. To his surprise and hers, Della moaned her approval. But in a burst of self-control, she suddenly sat up and suggested they wade into the nearby creek and hold hands like a real couple instead of doing things that would get them in trouble in the church they both attended. Doc agreed, a decision he would later regret, for when he removed his sock and Della's blue eyes took in his cleft foot, she declared that she wanted to go home. No more action for you, buddy.

Doc was not a particularly sensitive soul, but his mother was, and when he confessed to her what had happened with Della Burnheimer—leaving out the steamier details of the wiggly-fingered, warmy-swarmy, kissy-kissy part—she marched him up to Chicken Hill, where the town's best shoemaker, Norman Skrupskelis, lived. Everyone in town dreaded Norman, a grim, cigar-chomping Jew who rarely spoke and was rumored to wander Chicken Hill's muddy roads at night like a hunchback, terrorizing the town's Negroes and taking their money. But he was a shoe-crafting genius, for his glistening shoes adorned the windows of all three shoe shops in Pottstown.

When they knocked, Norman led them to a dark basement workshop—no cage in sight, Doc's mother noticed. He sat at a stool before a cluttered worktable and didn't look at Doc's face once. Instead, he glanced at Doc's disabled foot clad in a shoe made by a shoemaker in Philadelphia—a shoe his parents had paid dearly for—and pointed to a chair next to his worktable and barked in a thick accent, "Shoe off." Doc sat and complied, handing him the shoe.

The old man tossed Doc's old shoe aside like it was an empty bottle and

clasped Doc’s aching, throbbing foot in his rough hand. His hand resembled a claw, the hard fingers feeling like sandpaper turning the foot this way and that, as if it were a pound of old beef, carefully examining it, twisting it from side to side in his hard palms. When that was finished, he dropped the foot as if it were yesterday’s paper and turned to his worktable, pulling leather and supplies off racks above him.

He didn’t say a word, so after a few moments, Doc’s mother, standing nearby and blinking in embarrassment, said, “Aren’t you going to measure it?”

The old man simply waved his hand at her over his shoulder. “Come back in a week,” he said.

“What about the price?”

“We’ll talk about it then.”

A week later they returned and the shoe was magical. It was an extraordinary work of art, gleaming black leather, beautifully stitched, perfectly matched to the arch of Doc’s foot, with an insole that was carefully crafted to give him comfort and support while the outer appearance was close to that of his existing shoe. The old bugger even added an inch to the sole and sloped it carefully, which made Doc’s limp less noticeable and brought almost instant relief to his aching foot and even his back. All this for a surprisingly low price. Doc’s mother was ecstatic. While Doc was grateful, he was also humiliated. The old man never said a word to him. Not even hello. But he made a wonderful shoe, and each year Doc was obliged to return to have the shoe replaced. Doc dreaded the visits to Norman’s basement, for despite Norman’s gifts, he found the shoemaker’s arrogance unacceptable. Didn’t he know who he was dealing with? Didn’t he know respect?

The resentment stayed with Doc for years, and after Norman died and his sons Irv and Marvin took over the business, Doc avoided them, paying three times what they charged to have his special shoe made in

Philadelphia. Who cared that the Skrupskelis twins were as talented as their father and made some of the finest shoes in the state and were recommended by doctors all around? He knew them back when! They were just like their father: arrogant. How dare they! Doc bought his shoes from an American shoe store in Philadelphia, not from immigrant Chicken Hill Jews who didn't know their place.

After his disastrous date with Della, Doc quit his dating adventures. Still, it was not lost on him during those high school years that there was one other student at Pottstown High who shared his fate with shoes and old man Skrup: the Jewess Chona. She was a year behind him in school, but when she limped past him that first day of class, he noticed her immediately, for the limp was familiar. He looked down at her feet and saw it right away: the Skrup Shoe. She vanished down the hallway and he was glad. He avoided her at first, which was not hard, as most of those Chicken Hill Jews stayed together and avoided glee club, class trips, and after-school activities. But he noticed the Jewess was often shadowed by a willowy black girl from the Hill.

She morphed out of his sight that year and the next, but in his senior year, the two were assigned lockers on the same corridor, and on the first day of school, he spotted her from behind, fumbling with something inside her locker. When she closed the locker door and turned to face the hallway, he took one look and suddenly saw a haze of stars and heard the sound of a thousand jazz trumpets blowing on New Year's Eve. The gimpy, mousy girl had morphed into a gorgeous, matter-of-fact, nonchalant, straight-up-and-down beauty. A proud straight-backed teenager with black curly hair, bouncing boobs, beautiful hips, lovely ankles, the legs hidden by a simple woolen dress, and a light shining in her dark eyes that seemed to illuminate the entire hallway. Staring at her from his locker, Doc forgot all about Della Burnheimer. Chona was gorgeous. How come he hadn't noticed that before?

He eyed her in awed silence as she vanished down the hallway. He watched her clandestinely that first week. He imagined working up the nerve to take her out. What would other students say? What would his mother say? His father? So what if she was Jewish? She was beautiful. He imagined the two of them walking along Manatawny Creek talking about big things, maybe him becoming a doctor one day; telling her about his family, their great history, the great Blessingtons of Pottstown who arrived on the Mayflower, and how the Manatawny was so beautiful before the factories came, the Sundays going to church and getting ice cream after. Maybe she could convert. She could be flexible, couldn't she? He was sure she could. She knew what it was like to be on the outside, with her foot. They had that in common at least. She could convert, of course she could! The feelings built up in him week after week then receded, then returned month after month and receded again; then one afternoon in the spring, nearing graduation, he finally drummed up the nerve to invite her to join the debate team, of which he was president.

He was clumsy and nervous—he was not accustomed to talking to Jews—and the moment went badly, for he had seen a Dana Andrews film recently and had taken to talking boldly the way he'd seen the actor do. Chona was standing at her locker when he approached, and when she turned around to see him standing close, she seemed startled. He managed to mumble his invitation and then watched her beautiful eyes dance over his shoulder down the hall, then back to him, his heart pounding.

She chuckled nervously and said, "Oh no, I can't do that," and slipped off down the hallway, followed by the tall, slim Negro girl who shadowed her everywhere.

He watched her back, feeling destroyed. A day later, his desolation gave way to indignation and finally to outrage. He had done the Christian thing. He'd reached out to haul her up to his level and she was too blind to see it. She lived on Chicken Hill, for God's sake! Her father ran a grocery store

that served niggers, whereas his father was a city councilman and a Presbyterian associate pastor. He was a man of importance. He had reached down to pull her to his level and she had shunned him. Imagine. She was just like the old Jew shoemaker Norman, with his mean, arrogant self. The whole business disgusted him. Jews. She and old Norman probably made fun of him when he wasn't around.

The sting of it disappeared when he left for college and medical school at Penn State, falling into a whirr of biology, cadavers, and clinical studies, standing shoulder to shoulder with students from well-to-do families in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and even New York. And while his fellow medical students had big plans to move back to their big cities after medical school, he couldn't imagine being anywhere other than his hometown. He'd dreamed of moving to the big city at one time, working at a large hospital, living in an apartment in a high-rise with a Negro maid and a glamorous blonde wife. But who would look out for him in those places? There were too many strange people—Italians and coloreds, big markets and fancy cars and families whose money went back generations. The idea frightened him. It was safer to stay home, to return to his hometown to heal the sick. Even his snide medical school professors, two of them German and one of them Jewish, respected him for his commitment.

But the hometown he returned to after medical school, where decent white people knew each other by name and attended the same Presbyterian church and ate ice cream at Bristol Ice House after service, had become a town of immigrants. Greeks who drove trucks, Jews who owned buildings, Negroes who walked Main Street like they owned it, Russians, Mennonites, Hungarians, Italians, and Irish. The quaint horses and buggies of his childhood were replaced by tractor trailers hauling steel, the dairy farms replaced by oily, grim factories that belched smoke. Main Street was now filled with cars on Saturdays, and not one but two traffic lights and a trolley. His lovely Pottstown had become a city where no one seemed to know

anyone else. Still, when he chose for his wife someone his father approved of, a simple farm girl from nearby Fagleysville, the wedding made the front page of the Pottstown Mercury. That was a big deal and a good thing.

But the years of tending broken legs and sewing fingers back onto the broken hands of factory workers chipped away at him, and his disappointments grew. More factories belched more smoke and more foreigners came. And when the simple farm girl he married turned out to be a lazy, dull soul who lived for bingo nights, cheap novels, and blueberry pie, which added to her burgeoning waistline as she proudly drove around town with their four children in the brand-new Chevrolet she insisted he buy every two years, he lost interest in her. He'd seen his youth vanish, his town crumble, the blood of its proud white fathers diluted by invaders: Jews, Italians, even niggers who wandered Chicken Hill selling ice cream and shoes to one another while decent white people fought off the Jewish merchants and Italian immigrants who seemed to be buying everything. Not to mention the Mennonites in town with their horses and buggies. And the Irish at the fire company. And Greeks mumbling their business at diners. And Italians kicking ass at the dairy. And niggers from the Hill wanting factory jobs instead of being maids and janitors like they were supposed to. Now Jews were buying homes on Beech Street, making plans to build a bigger Jewish synagogue, and what's more, they were polluting the town's good white Christian teenagers with Negro music—jazz—brought to town by none other than Chona's husband, yet another Jew who owned not one but two theaters. Where was America in all this? Pottstown was for Americans. God had predestined it. The Constitution guaranteed it. The Bible had said it. Jesus! Where was Jesus in all this? Doc felt his world was falling apart.

So a few years after medical school when friends approached him about attending a meeting of the Knights of Pottstown to spread good Christian values, he agreed. And when that Knights of Pottstown meeting actually

turned out to be the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan instead, he saw no difference. The men were like him. They wanted to preserve America. This country was woods before the white man came. It needed to be saved. The town, the children, the women, they needed to be rescued from those who wanted to pollute the pure white race with ignorance and dirt, fouling things up by mixing the pure WASP heritage with the Greeks, the Italians, the Jews who had murdered their precious Jesus Christ, and the niggers who dreamed of raping white women and whose lustful black women were a danger to every decent, God-fearing white man. Not all of them were bad, of course. The White Knights would decide who were the good ones. There were a few good ones. Doc knew several.

The meetings were more like hobby-club gatherings than actual fire-and-brimstone events. The men talked of farming and lost property, the challenges of growing and seeding crops in bad weather, the cost of cattle and transport, and rising prices. Many were former farmers, others were factory workers and bankers. Good people. Pottstown people. People Doc had known all his life. So when Carl approached him one afternoon after a White Knights meeting about the problem of the Jewess holding the deaf Negro child illegally, forcing him to work in her store, and keeping him out of school when a good school was ready to take him, Doc had an interest. He told Carl to come by his office the following week.

He knew Chona, of course. She had come once to see him about her fainting when he first set up practice. At that visit, neither acknowledged he'd actually tried to befriend her in high school years before. He suspected, even hoped, that she'd forgotten it. He'd not forgotten it, and when she walked into his office, he still felt the pounding of a thousand drums in his heart, for she had aged well. The beautiful breasts, the slim hips, the bright, shining eyes were still there, along with the Skrup Shoe on her foot. The Skrup Shoe styling, he noted, had evolved into a lean and handsome number, head and shoulders better than the expensive bricklike

box that adorned his foot and hurt at that moment, and for which he'd paid top dollar. But that was the cost of principle, which he was happy to pay.
He kept matters professional at that visit, prescribed a few pain pills, and told her to call again if the spells continued, hoping she would. But she never did, and again he was offended. Did she think that just because he was a small-town doctor, he didn't understand her case? He had friends in the medical field in Reading and Philadelphia. He read all the latest medical journals. In fact, two doctors called him from Philadelphia not two weeks after she left, asking his opinion about her puzzling fainting spells. What had he found? they asked. They respected him more than she did.
He followed her case when she nearly died, felt strangely relieved when she recovered, then was outraged when she had the nerve to write to the newspaper complaining about him marching as a White Knight in the annual parade. How dare she! Their parades weren't hurting anybody. They were a celebration of the real America.
The whole business riled him. But when Carl appeared at his office to discuss her hiding a twelve-year-old Negro boy, Doc was careful to maintain his professional distance, for he wasn't fond of his cousin. Carl had been a bit of a rooster back in high school, but now his firm football player stomach hung over his belt. His sculpted shoulders sagged. His once-clear face bore the trace of whiskers from a bad shave. His fedora was worn, his cheap tie spotted. Still, Carl delivered a hanging curveball that Doc found impossible to resist.
"The state will pay you to examine the Negro kid," Carl said. He sat on the edge of Doc's desk as he delivered this news, pulling out a pack of cigarettes. Doc was behind his desk as they spoke.
"Why do they need an exam in the first place?" Doc asked. "Is he sick?"
"Deaf and maybe dumb," Carl said, extracting a cigarette and firing it. "The state wants to send him to a special school. They need a doctor to sign off on it. Simple as that."

“Which school?”

“Pennhurst. They got a school in there.”

Doc had seen Pennhurst State School and Hospital. Just down the road in Spring City. It was a horrible, overcrowded nightmare, but he checked his tongue. “They take Negroes?” he asked.

“They take anyone who’s insane.”

“Deaf and maybe dumb’s not insane, Carl.”

“Do I look like a Ouija board, Earl?” Carl said, using Doc’s real name, a sign of familiarity and, Doc thought grimly, disrespect. “The boy’s twelve. Hasn’t been to school in a long time. They have special things for kids like him there. It’s better than what he’s got now, living on the Hill and running around for them Jews up there. The state wants him. They’re burning precious dollars having me run up and down there looking for him. Every time I go up there, nobody knows nothing. I even sent a colored up there who couldn’t shake him loose. The niggers are hiding him up there. And she’s in cahoots with ’em.”

“Is it her child?” Doc asked.

Carl looked at Doc blankly a moment, then sputtered, “Her what? She’s married, Doc.”

“So?”

“Whatever you’re thinking, Doc, I don’t wanna know it.” Carl sucked his cigarette thoughtfully, then said, “Now that you mention it, there’s a lot of tipping going on in this town. Especially on the Hill. Could be.”

Doc’s face reddened. These kinds of conversations made him uncomfortable. He felt like a fool. He didn’t know why he’d even brought it up.

“I’ve never seen the kid, to be honest,” Carl said. “But from what I heard, he’s a pure colored nigger. No father. His mother died not too long ago.”

“From what?”

“You’re the doc,” Carl said. “All’s I know is the kid’s hiding at the store someplace behind the Jewess and her husband, the All-American Dance Hall and Theater guy. The husband finances the whole racket. I can have the cops go up there with you if you want.”

“Let them do it and keep me out of it.”

Carl frowned. “It’s not smart to rile up those Chicken Hill niggers. She got a lot of sway with ’em. She was nearly dead this time last year, sick from something or other, and the coloreds got stirred up about it. She’s the one who wrote the letter about our parade, remember?”