

# The White Man

by Claire Morris

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Here in Kraków, I've laid claim to a corner. Where the street winding around St. Mary's opens into the market square, I stand on a box, painted white, and balance still as a cadaver.

Tourists wander out the cathedral's south door, and gape at my white shroud, my powdered hair, my face and hands smeared with white paint. They congregate, waiting for me to act. But I test their patience, recalling red-coats outside Buckingham Palace. Only when they're distracted by the country people selling walking sticks or amber beneath the cathedral's eaves do I dance, turn cartwheels, and mimic the musicians who flock to Kraków to play for tourists on the square.

Usually my audience drops pocket change into my white plastic bucket. When they don't, I head to the train station and beg the vendors to spare me old bread or brown bananas.

I never planned to entertain people. But in Vienna I watched crowds seduced by silver men and green men and one who lacquered his naked body gold. None of those performers looked like they missed many meals. When I arrived in Kraków, I remembered them and made my choice. Because I could not return to London.

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Behind my corner stands a cafe. It refuses to join its trendy neighbours by investing in an English sign, and its Polish one's unreadable. As I trudge past its umbrellaed tables and potted plants, I catch sight of a certain woman, relaxing at a pavement-side table, a bottle of Żywiec before her. When our eyes meet, she smiles.

"Join me for a drink?" she calls in atrocious Polish.

I'd always guessed she wasn't European, all those times I glimpsed her in the crowd circling my white box. I hesitate. I can't afford a drink, but maybe she'll pay. She wears an embroidered linen shirt, and emerald earrings hang into her curling black hair.

I sidestep a waiter balancing *bigos* on a tray, and drop into the empty chair at her table. I open my mouth to say hello, but it's been so long, the word won't come out.

"Cześć," she says.

Her pronunciation tells me she's American, or more likely Canadian. "English," I mouth, needing to rescue her.

She smiles in relief. "Would you like a beer?"

I'd prefer a flavoured vodka, but can't bring myself to tell her that. I nod at the waiter when he points at her Żywiec.

"I love your act," she tells me, leaning forward on the table. "How long have you been doing it?"

I search my memory. Half a year? "What's the month?" I ask.

She looks taken aback. "September. Today's the 23<sup>rd</sup>. Don't you have a calendar?"

I recognize concern in her face. It has been so long. But she exudes self-assurance, from her noticeable-but-only-just makeup to the way she snaps open her handbag. She'd never understand.

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The dream visits whenever something out of the ordinary happens. And she, naturally, is anything but ordinary. An author. Writing a novel on Polish partition, she told me, unprompted. Staying long-term at the Europejski, confirming my suspicions about her bank account. As I wrap my shroud tightly about me and snuggle up to the tunnel wall, I wonder what she wants from me. What she may become to me.

Because she is in the dream this time. Holding my hand while busloads of tourists shuffle through barracks which are now a museum. Gazing at mementos of horrors which are past.

Photographs of victims.

Suitcases and shoes.

A cross scratched in stone by the martyr Maximilian Kolbe.

The dream ends the way it has on all other nights. I stand in Kraków's market square, safe in my white get-up. The place is unusually deserted. A leaflet blows in my direction, and I stoop to pick it up.

*Auschwitz, it reads across the top. Only sixty kilometres away! Bus and tour, seventy zlotys . . .*

And a phone number I know I'll never ring.

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I meet her again in *Farewell to Africa*, Kraków's celebrated coffee house. She's with a friend, who's extraordinarily petite, and a grey-haired artist I've seen displaying paintings inside the market hall. Since I'm out of my get-up, I doubt any of them will recognize me.

And the place is lit for romance; faces look shadowy, hard to identify. But she meets my eyes and smiles, as she did at the unnamed cafe. I touch my face and understand. Traces of white makeup upon my cheeks are like evidence to a crime.

She nudges her friend, whose light-coloured eyes consider me over the rim of a yellow coffee cup. Those eyes make it plain I'm found wanting. But the friend's opinion isn't important. Nor is the grey-haired artist's.

She leaves them to navigate tables to my side. As I watch her cross the coffee house, I remember the dream, her hand in mine.

I yearn to ask her name, but know that if she offers it, I'll have to surrender my own. I picture myself searching the fiction shelves

someday in the future. Seeking that novel on Polish partition, uncertain who wrote it. But perhaps she'll use a pseudonym. Perhaps I should use one now.

"Hello again," she says, and perches on the chair across from me.

Her eyes question—a little. She's probably weighing a busker's earnings against the price of an espresso. I hope she'll offer to buy me one.

She doesn't. Instead she says, "How long are you going to go on this way?"

I stick a cigarette in my mouth and light it with an unpractised hand. I haven't smoked regularly since I left England, but today a passer-by tossed a pack into my collection bucket. Cancer sticks, isn't that what the doctors call them? They won't feed me. But they might focus my thoughts.

"Which way?" I ask.

Through the smoke, she eyes me intently. "You know what I mean."

Fear grips me. I've said nothing to her; am I that transparent?

"Oh, what a tangled web we weave . . ." My voice dies as my brain forgets the rest. A quote I fancied in university, now trapped inside my white-man persona.

She smiles again, and seems less intense. Approachable.

Suddenly I'm telling her about my dream, speaking so rapidly I know she'll lose half my words in the coffee-house chatter. But she hears enough to give up her smile.

"Let me take you to Auschwitz," she says once I've finished.

The cigarette spins out of my hand to smoulder on the floor beside another table. I shuffle to my feet, snuff out the cancer stick with one of my white-dusted boots, then run out of the coffee house.

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She finds me meandering along Florianska early the next morning. The shops are not yet open; only an old man sucking cancer from a pipe is anywhere nearby. Planting herself before me, she jangles a

set of keys somewhere level with my chin.

"Asia lent me her car," she explains. "I've got it for the day."

I allow her to lead me up to Rynek Glówny, where cabbies ready their horses and carriages for the morning's first customers. Pigeons scatter as we head toward the square's northwest side. There she takes me to a parking lot, and a rickety Trabant.

I consider the car dubiously, causing her to laugh. As I squeeze into the passenger seat, I receive a flashback: me on a train in the Czech Republic, dressed in dark shirt and jeans. My grandfather's last photograph between my thumb and forefinger. A white Trabant beside a patch of cabbages visible through the scratched plastic window.

We leave Kraków in brilliant sunshine, and putter along the road to Oświęcim. I decide that's the name I'll use from now on, inject into my dreams. No one recognizes it. No one associates, as they do with Auschwitz.

She drives erratically, and I can't decide if it's the car or just her way. I study her sidelong, decide I like the shape of her hands. I'm glad she intercepted me before I put on my white get-up. A woman like her doesn't deserve a freak for a companion.

Before I know it, we're there. *Birkenau*, the sign says, but I've read it's known as Auschwitz II. As I look at the gatehouse I've seen in films, my feet take root in the dusty ground beside the sign. Train tracks pass beneath the gatehouse tower, stretching to the far end of the camp, where gas chambers and crematoria . . .

Beckon.

I unroot my feet and follow those tracks beneath the gatehouse tower. I stare at ruined barracks, brick chimneys pointing accusingly heavenward. The place is deserted, except for an old couple embracing just inside the barbed-wire perimeter.

Except for her.

I turn slightly, to find her waiting, head bowed as if in prayer. With one hand, I reach for hers. The other I sink into my trouser

pocket, where my grandfather's creased photo waits. I hesitate only a moment, before pulling it out and showing it to her.

Suddenly I drop her hand, drop my hold on the photo too. I dance, turn cartwheels, and mimic the musicians who flock to Kraków to play for tourists on the square.

Only this time not for money.

And no longer as the white man.