

*A Man Without a Watch*

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The boys had only been traveling together for a few days, but they already bickered as if married for decades.

"In this next town," said Sholem, the surly one, "we should sell your watch."

Lev, the elder of the two, balked at this suggestion. "Excuse me?"

"We need to eat."

"You can't sell my watch." Lev came from a good family, the kind of family whose men had carried around brass and even silver watches from the beginning of time. "How else will I be able to tell when class is about to start?"

"You're not at university yet. Besides, you can't eat watches for dinner."

"What do you know about watches? You're a peasant. I bet you don't even know how to tell time."

"Sure I do." Sholem took a glance at the clear blue sky. "It's noon."

"You told that by the sun."

"Is the sun not good enough for you?"

Lev could think of no clever retort, so they walked on, nearing the next town. It was a cluster of ramshackle buildings and telegraph wires strung from crooked poles. The heavens had unleashed a biblical downpour the night before, but today the sun was smiling down on the acres of mire.

As they entered town, braying beasts and rattling wagons swept them into the crowded square. They had stumbled upon the place in the throes of market day. Peasants, shopkeepers, and Jewish wives shouted in half a dozen languages. The women puffed and sweated under their scarves and wigs, bartering with farmers over cabbage, potatoes, honey and eggs. The leavings of horses and livestock,

now one with the muddy streets, created an unspeakable stench. A water carrier stumbled by, hunched beneath his heavy load. Sholem began to follow him. Lev grabbed his arm.

“Where are you going?” he shouted, straining to be heard over the noise.

“I’m going to ask this gentleman who hired him. If we carry water for a day, we’ll earn some bread.”

Lev wavered. He was a skinny young man with blond hair and a thin face, pale enough to pass for a scholar, which he was. “...I’m not built for that.”

“Then sell something.”

Lev pleaded and whined, but his words were just air to the other boy, who knew the ache of an empty stomach.

“Let me do the talking,” Sholem said.

Lev snuck a last glance at his watch. He had always liked knowing that it was there, ticking away at his side. Its quiet reliability reminded him of his father, a man who, in spite of his humble dedication, always managed to fail.

When they inquired about town where one might pawn a watch, everyone pointed them in the same direction. It was a dark little shop, or rather a house filled with saleable clutter. Home-knitted socks, bolts of cloth, and mended pots were displayed on a table. Beside that lay the heirlooms and threadbare finery—samovars, candlesticks, pearl earrings, and Shabbes kaftans, abandoned to this dank place in an hour of need.

The shopkeeper was a ruddy, clean-shaven fellow with greasy spectacles and waving hands. He greeted them in an unnecessarily loud voice and begged them to sit. Enthroned behind the counter, he turned the watch this way and that, groaning and muttering, shaking his head. There was a scratch here, a crack there; it was just brass, it ran slow.

“You know...” He looked up from the watch and leaned back in his chair, hands folded over his paunch. “You seem like nice boys—a rare commodity these days, and I should know. I have a daughter of marriageable age and there’s not a young man in this town worth the dirt under her pinky finger...”

“So what’s your offer?”

“For such nice boys, a ruble.”

Sholem let out an indignant yelp. “That’s no ordinary watch, sir. It’s an heirloom, and I happen to know it was made in the land of Shvitz. A ruble, you say? More like a slap in the face.”

As they haggled over the price, a ragged little kitten explored the counter on trembling legs. It kept wobbling toward Sholem as if entranced. Every minute or so, the pawnbroker would pick it up by the scruff of its neck and plop it back down on his side of the table.

Finally Sholem rose to his feet.

“Let’s go,” he said, putting a hand on Lev’s shoulder. “I won’t be robbed.”

“Well, boys, I can’t stop you. It’s a pity we couldn’t settle on a price.” The merchant let out a wet sigh, wiping his greasy glasses on his sleeve. “Where are you headed?”

“To Warsaw,” said Sholem.

“Of course. Every young man I meet is headed to Warsaw. And what in Warsaw do you hope to find?”

“Work, God willing.”

“Of course, work. Yes, a big strong boy like you, God willing, should find work.”

Sholem raised a hand. “Goodbye, then.”

“Go in good health.”

Lev and Sholem returned to the street. As soon as they were out of earshot, Lev glanced over at his companion, astonished.

“But what about—”

Sholem just grinned. Barely a minute passed before the pawnbroker burst out of his shop, looked both ways, and caught sight of them.

“Boys!” he called, hurrying after them.

Sholem glanced back with an expression of mock surprise.

“Now look here,” panted the man. “For such nice boys, I’m willing to take a loss.”

As soon as the deal was settled, Lev and Sholem bought themselves a feast at the local inn. They settled down at a table in the corner, wolfing down black bread and beet soup. It was their first hot meal in several days.

“My father gave me that watch,” said Lev, with a hint of melancholy.

“Men die, watches are sold.” Sholem talked with his mouth full. “The world’s Jews aren’t lining up to pity you.”

“Don’t be such a cold fish.”

But Sholem *was* cold, just like a fish can’t help being wet. There was something strange about him. He had an awkward gait, a big strong body, and a soft little face. His neck was thin, his lips pink. His black eyes had the dewiness and long lashes of a cow. If it hadn’t been for the slight shadow of dark hair on his upper lip, you might have thought him twelve instead of seventeen.

“That money’s going to feed us from here to Warsaw, as long as we spend it wisely. Just think of everything we can buy. Cheese, challah, onions...” Sholem’s eyes lit up at the thought. “Apples, even.”

The boys had met a few days before, when Sholem found Lev lost and sobbing beside a country road. Sholem preferred to travel alone, but he pitied the older boy, who seemed to know nothing about the earthly world.

“How about we stay in town for a night?” proposed Lev. “I’m sick of sleeping in barns. I smell like a horse.”

“They’ll rob us blind.”

Lev sighed. Sholem just snorted. He started scraping up the last drops of soup with the last bit of bread. Lev was watching him intently.

“Why *are* you going to Warsaw?”

“I told you. Work.”

“You don’t need to go all the way to Warsaw to find that.” Lev tilted his head slightly, examining the other boy’s face with bright green eyes. “Is there something more?”

Having done everything short of licking his bowl clean, he pushed it away. “What’s it to you?”

“I’m attempting to make conversation.”

Sholem narrowed his eyes, licked his pink lips, and leaned back in his chair. “It’s no epic poem. My father left for Warsaw to find work, and ever since—no letters, no word. That was three years ago. All our acquaintances in Warsaw say they’ve never seen him, never heard his name. My mother has her hands full with four little children, and I was sick of seeing her fret over his fate. So here I am.”

Sholem’s tale, though true, was guilty of omission. He had left home without his mother’s blessing or, indeed, her knowledge. He had asked his favorite brother to relay the message—“I have gone to Warsaw. I promise to return.” Even then, however, Sholem had known his promise was a lie.

“If I find my father, I’ll bring back a bill of divorce. If I find his corpse, I’ll drag that back instead.”

“Sha!” Lev’s eyes widened at the callous words. “Sholem, what are you saying? Don’t utter such dreadful things. They might come true.”

“And if they do?” Sholem stared back at him, thoroughly unimpressed. “What’s it to me?”

Finished with his meal, he rose to his feet. Sholem walked out of the inn, not waiting to see if Lev was behind him. He headed straight for the outskirts of town. They left the clamor of the market behind them as the road rambled away into the woods. The late summer sun shone just as brightly as before, but among the trees, its rays cast lacy shadows on the ground. The warmth brought out the

fragrance of pine needles as they crunched underfoot. Sholem had been raised in a forest. He breathed deep and smiled slightly, not at Lev, not at anyone.

“Well,” said Lev, “at least there’s peace and quiet in the country.”

“Not while you’re around.”

Before Lev could come up with a quip, he spotted a lone figure coming over the next hill. Another traveler on the road was always cause for curiosity, and he strained to see if this one was a gentile or a Jew. As the stranger approached, they saw that he was, perhaps, fifty, with a grizzled beard and a powerful build.

“Good day,” said the man in Yiddish, revealing his blackened teeth.

“Good year,” replied Lev.

The stranger stopped in the road before them. After a moment’s hesitation, they stopped too. They took in his ragged clothes and hazy eyes. He wore a badly patched coat and an unseasonable hat, lined with the scrappiest, most flea-bitten squirrel pelt that either boy had ever seen. He reminded Lev of his family’s milkman, a clownish old Jew who used to ramble endlessly at anyone who would listen.

“Do you have any money?” said the man in a hoarse voice.

Lev and Sholem exchanged a frightened glance. When neither of them answered, the stranger provided further explanation. “I ask because I’m robbing you.”

“Sorry, neighbor,” choked out Lev, with a nervous laugh. “You see, we’re as poor as you are.”

“Ah, that’s a shame.” The man pulled a pistol out of his patched coat. He turned it over in his hands, his touch as loving as a mother’s. Neither of the boys had ever seen a Jew with a gun. They drew close to each other, hearts pounding. “When I come across a Jew without money, I shoot him dead.”

“Come to think of it—” said Lev shrilly. He touched his coat pocket, as if discovering the coins there for the first time. Then he stopped. The robber stood in the road, wobbling slightly, just like the

kitten on the pawnbroker's counter. A Jew could hold a gun, and perhaps even fire it. But surely no Jew, even a crazy one, could kill another man.

Lev cleared his throat and tried to smile. "Sir, we haven't even been introduced. May a Jew rob a Jew without asking his name?"

"Look here," growled the highwayman, scowling at Lev. "You're not going to trick me out of this. Who do you think you are, Hershel of Ostropol?"

"I'm Lev," said Lev, trying to conceal the tremor in his voice. "This is Sholem."

Sholem shot the highwayman an apologetic glance, grabbed the lapels of Lev's jacket, and yanked him aside.

"What do you think you're doing?" he hissed. "That man has a *gun*."

"It's a bluff. It's got to be. He's stupid, he's drunk, and I'm not selling my watch for nothing," whispered Lev. "Let me do the talking."

Sholem cast a frightened glance over his shoulder at the thief, who was waiting impatiently, gun in hand. He turned back on Lev and stabbed a finger at his chest. "Do you want us shot like a couple of dogs? This isn't a game, and I don't care how silver your tongue is. Just hand him the money. It doesn't matter; we can beg for food."

Lev pushed the boy away and turned to face the highwayman.

The ghost of an amused smile was on the stranger's face. "What are you doing here, anyways? A couple of children like you? This isn't a safe road."

Lev weighed each word, his mind and pulse racing. "I'm on my way to university."

"University?" barked the man. The boys jumped. His face had shifted almost instantly from bemusement to anger. "You need university like you need cholera in the face! And besides, one travels to university by train. You're no student. I can smell a lie from a mile away."

"I *am* a student. I had a train ticket to Warsaw." Lev's voice got ever higher and faster as he explained. "On a stop along the way, I got off to stretch my legs, and a couple of thugs—may it never happen to you—dragged me into an alley. I slipped away and ran for dear life. But my train was already gone. If I weren't so quick, I'd be a soldier in the Tsar's Army this very moment, God forbid."

"It's true," added Sholem quickly.

The man turned on him with narrowed eyes. "If it's so true, why doesn't he wire his folks for another ticket?"

Lev shook his head. "They scrape to pay for tuition, they scrape to pay for the train... I'd rather walk than ask them to scrape even more."

"Ah, how the world has changed!" cried the highwayman, gesticulating with both hands. "Your parents—they save, they scrape, they let you fly away. Have you no pity?" His words seemed to be tripping over one another in their rush to escape his mouth. Every time he waved the gun in his excitement, Sholem flinched. "A couple of healthy sons are more precious than gold. To have such fine sons, such good fortune—I should be so lucky."

"You may yet," said Lev, as kindly as he could. All this talk of parents reminded him horribly, inevitably, of the watch. His father would never forgive him for pawning it off.

But the highwayman didn't seem to have heard him, and the spittle was flying now. "It used to be that a child respected its father. And nowadays? What does a boy do? He goes to Warsaw, attends university, and shaves his beard. Go home to your mama and papa. If you stay in Warsaw, you'll break their poor hearts."

"You're right," said Lev, looking down at the ground, a hint of artistic sorrow in his eyes. He'd begun to suspect they might have a chance. "I've already broken my mother's heart a dozen times, and university is only bound to make things worse. Perhaps I'll just turn back, as you advise."

The highwayman advanced on Lev. He peered into his thin face, now pallid with fear.



“Don’t you dare lie to me,” he ground out. The stench of onions and vodka was on his breath.

Lev cringed before him, turning his face away. “I can smell a lie.”

Lev noticed that the gun hand was freckled, thick-veined, trembling.

“I’m not lying,” he whimpered. “Can’t you see I’m scared?”

The robber looked. Lev was shaking like a leaf. He could hear the old man’s breathing, deep and ragged in his chest. Suddenly he stepped away, polishing his pistol on his sleeve.

“Look here,” said the thief, friendly now. “If you swear to me you’ll turn around and go back to your mother and father, I won’t take a kopeck. You must swear to me, though—like the good old days, when a Jew’s words meant something.”

“I swear it,” said Lev, almost sobbing, as if in prayer.

He turned on Sholem. “You, too.”

“I swear it,” said Sholem.

“Louder.”

“I swear it!”

The highwayman glanced between them, then nodded slowly. “Now, if words mean anything to you, you’ll go back. Leave Warsaw for the beardless, heartless, penniless Jews. Your mother and father will rejoice to have such sons in their arms again.”

“Thank you,” began Lev. “We—”

“I’m not finished,” snapped the thief.

Lev fell silent.

“If I catch you going the wrong direction, I won’t just shoot you dead.” He took on the sing-song manner of a teacher of little boys. “I will tie you to a tree, a fine tree, just like this one. I’ll get a good, heavy book out of your bag and beat you with it until the blood runs from your scalp in streams. Then I’ll

tear out its pages and stuff them down your throat into your lungs.” He smiled slightly, his thin lips drawing back over his teeth. “Is that clear, boys?”

They stared back with wide eyes.

He shouted. “Is that clear?”

“Y-yes, sir,” stammered Lev.

Again he raked them with his gaze. This time, his eyes came to rest on Sholem.

“You’ve barely uttered a word this whole time.”

“He’s from the back woods,” explained Lev. “Not much of a talker. He can’t even write his own name.”

The older man did not spare Lev a second glance. He kept his eyes trained on Sholem. “And yet I already know you’re smarter than your friend. How old are you?”

Sholem set his jaw, keeping his voice as steady as he could. “Seventeen.”

“You don’t look it. In fact, I just had a funny thought.” He let a loud bark of laughter. “If it weren’t for the hair on your lip, I’d say you were a girl.”

The man still held the gun in his right hand. Now, with the left, he reached for the side of Sholem’s face. Sholem smacked the hand away as hard as he could. The highwayman’s features contorted with sudden rage. He grabbed at him again. Now, Sholem had never punched a soul in his life, but he had a strong arm, and his closed fist landed with a resounding crack. The thief staggered backwards, clutching his jaw.

“I’m no girl.” Sholem stood there, panting, his fists raised. “You want proof? I’ll piss on your grave.”

The highwayman spat out a bloody tooth. He grabbed Lev’s collar and jammed the cold muzzle of the gun into his neck. Lev’s eyes bugged halfway out of his head. He wobbled on tiptoe to keep from choking, silent tears running down his cheeks.

“The money. *Now.*”

Lev emptied his pockets of every last kopeck from the sale of the watch. When he witnessed those dirty hands and bitten nails close over the coins, he was hit by a crushing sense of despair. He would never make it to university. He would never see his father again.

“You thought this was a prank, eh?” The man shoved him away. Lev stumbled backwards, gasping for breath, and Sholem pulled him close. They held each other, trembling. “Well, boys, it seems that life is a prank. And if you ask me, God has a mean sense of humor.”

The highwayman glanced between them with an eerie smile.

“I could kill you both. The world would be better for it.” He tucked the money into his breast pocket and turned in the direction of town. Though his back was turned, they could still see the gun swinging from his hand. “It would be too great an unkindness to your mothers.”