

THE TIME OF MUD

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The man had the misfortune to die on the Sabbath. He was, in fact, killed Friday afternoon, but it was night by the time his remains were recovered. Since God rested on the seventh day, the grave diggers would not lift their shovels until the following sundown, and the man's funeral was postponed. His people, in preparing him for the occasion, did not remove his clothing, nor did they wash his corpse; the Laws dictate that blood should not be buried separate from flesh, and when the locals lifted him from their street and threw his body in a wheelbarrow, blood hung from it in strings, and the street and the wheelbarrow and the courtyard of the tannery—where the body was taken—were awash in too much blood to gather. His kinsmen decided that the sight of Jews in a Christian town, on their knees in public, scooping up blood, would not be seemly or wise. The deceased was brought back to his village in an open wagon. He was wrapped in a prayer shawl from which one of the tassels had been cut, and then in a sheet of white linen, and was brought at last to his former house, where he now lay on the table, his feet pointing to the door and a braided candle burning at his head.

The man's nephew, Itzik, sat on the stairs and watched the body. He was small and frail and his dark, bird-like eyes searched the shroud for the slightest movement. He knew the dead rose and haunted those who caused their death, and fear grated like bad clockwork in his stomach. It was impossible to sleep. His aunt was upstairs with his mother and sisters and the sobs, the sudden shrieks startled him. Downstairs, on benches in front of the fire sat the three who had gone with him to fetch the victim, who made the corpse ready and now stood watch for the night. They heard the sounds above them and kept silent. Sometimes one or the other of them exhaled deeply from his nostrils. Itzik was grateful for them. Perhaps the dead did not rise up until they were alone.

The water carrier Menke, a young man with a red beard and a mouthful of crooked teeth, fed more sticks into the fire. Flames lapped them, snapped and

hissed, throwing out an orange glow that lit Menke's face and hands. A wobbling luminescence played across the table and danced in the folds of the shroud. It appeared as if the corpse were straining at its wrappings and Itzik would have run upstairs, but he knew the women would harangue him again and smother him to their bodies.

"Look at the boy there," said Yaacov the book binder, his voice tight with grief. Menke did not look, but kept his gaze in the fire. Yaacov said, "Shame on him to cause such a thing. We can ask God for mercy or we can ask that our eyes should grow together. Now maybe he sees we're not like them. That we should never be like them." The old man pulled at a tear in the sleeve of his black coat. Threads popped and his white shirt showed through.

"Let their eyes grow together," the butcher Avram, a stout man who could not hide his restlessness, shifted himself on his stool. Again he rose to pace the room, to regard the others from his deep-set eyes. He went over and put his hand on the boy's bare head. "Itzik," he said gravely, "why don't you put your cap on?"

Yaacov scoffed. "Tell me, Avram, why he should put his cap on? He runs under God with his head uncovered. Does he wear a prayer shawl under his shirt? He doesn't even have a proper shirt! A tunic and belt he wears, like a soldier."

The butcher shrugged. "He likes to play."

"He's ten years old and he doesn't even know his alphabet."

Menke touched him on the arm. "Reb Yaacov, please."

"What please? *Russian* he speaks, to his elders," the old man pointed with his finger. "The rabbi's beard he pulls out."

Menke took hold of the finger. "Reb Yaacov, please."

"God doesn't need any more scholars," Avram said, gazing tenderly at the corpse. "See, Yaacov, what becomes of our geniuses."

"God bless and keep him. But that one there," he pointed again at Itzik, "little Cossack. His father should tell him what happens to our kind in the army." Yaacov pulled his shawl over his head and began to rock and mutter his prayers.

Itzik wanted to tell the old goat that his father would ride into the yard on a white horse, that he would have medals, but just then the sticks settled in the fire and the body, as the dead sometimes do, gave a twitch that thumped on the table. Springs of fear uncoiled in Itzik. He dashed past the butcher, flung open the door and hurled himself through the wet-smelling darkness into the familiar woods. He ran with his hands out, crashing through branches. When he stopped and looked back, the glow of the house was no longer visible. The voices calling after him were thin and far away.

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Until that morning, Itzik had been confined to the house as punishment. It happened when he was sitting in Sunday school after the other boys were sent out to play. Rabbi Moitl was making him write his letters over and over, and the

air in the synagogue was thick with the smell of wood rot, burning candles and the old man's breath.

"What's this?" the rabbi clucked his tongue and pointed out the crooked *gimels* and smudged *daleths* scrawled on the boy's slate. "Did a chicken dance here?"

"My hand hurts, Rebbe."

The old man peered out, not unkindly, from under his tangled eyebrows. The skin of his face was like a sheet of paper that had been crushed into a ball and flattened out again. His nose was webbed with fine red veins and hair grew out of his earlobes. The only beautiful thing about him was his beard. It hung to his waist in a white sweep, like falling water.

"Listen," the rabbi tugged the boy's ear, "when your hand drops off and lands on the floor, you're finished." He motioned Itzik to continue, then settled into his chair again and smoothed his whiskers. Soon he began to doze. The breath wheezed from his slack mouth and he leaned heavily onto his elbows and within a few minutes slumped forward, his beard fanning out on the table top.

In the dark, under the rows of benches, rats were scuttling. Itzik's chalk scraped on the slate. The shouts of the boys in the square reached him and he set aside the chalk and shook out his aching fingers and watched the old man hunched beside him. Itzik was a poor student because he could not sit patiently; he could not sit patiently because his mind was always out in the fields, in the woods along the river. He roamed there with his friends from the nearby hamlet—where the blue church tower rose above the houses. Itzik found that when he put off his black coat and tucked away the tassels of his undershawl, the boys stopped throwing stones and calling him names. After he stole a tunic from a washline in the hamlet, he no longer wanted to wear anything else. It was a brown tunic, embroidered with soft black felt, and the sight of Itzik scampering through the village dressed like *them* prompted an evening visit from the Rabbi, who drank cup after cup of Itzik's mother's tea and delivered a colorful lecture about the Symbols of the Covenant, about the importance of the old ways, excusing himself every five minutes to empty his bladder behind the house.

Itzik thought, a crooked sack of bones this rabbi; he was barely strong enough to lift the scrolls out of the ark and carry them to the rostrum. Again, the sounds from the square reached him, the children laughing and shrieking. The rabbi lay with his head on the table, his eyes moving under their lids. He had been writing letters, and nearby his elbow an urn of sealing wax sat above a kerosene flame. Itzik lifted it with both his hands and tilted it. Red droplets fell into the elder's whiskers. He tilted it further and more spattered out and all at once the lid swung open and the hot wax emptied onto the beard, matting it into a steaming pool that hardened almost at once. Snores rasped from the rabbi. Itzik pushed his slate to the edge of the table, nudged it and watched it clatter to the floor.

The rabbi awoke and tried to sit up, but he was stuck fast. The skin of his face pulled grotesquely as he struggled. His eyes bulged and he began to scream, baring his black teeth. Itzik would never forget the way he clawed the red mess, shrieking.

There was much commotion as the townsfolk descended on the temple and pressed around to watch their rabbi cut free of his beard. Men and women shouted and wrung their hands and clouted Itzik until his ears rang. When his mother came, they scolded her too, and shook their fingers in her face. She dragged Itzik home by his ears.

For days he was forced to sit indoors, where his sisters took every chance to pinch and scold him. He seemed to get under everyone's feet, but inside he stayed until Uncle Sasha suggested that the boy be released. "I need an assistant," he announced, "and Itzik has volunteered."

His mother was cutting onions and tears clung to her eyelashes. "He swims like a fish in bad luck," she sniffed. "Go and ask the rabbi's beard."

"Beards grow. It's not as if he murdered someone. Besides," he winked at his nephew, "it was the rabbi who fell asleep at school."

His mother relented and Uncle Sasha was allowed to take him along to Ivanovka, a town the Jews did not often visit. Ivanovka was a two hour walk from Chelm, and the residents of that unpainted, windowless village prayed it would always remain so. Sasha was a watchmaker, a dabbler in machinery, and wanted to visit the market stalls there, to search out clocks and music boxes that might be scavenged for parts.

A morning chill hung in the air as they made their way to the river crossing. It was the time of mud, when the snows had melted but the trees were still stunned from winter—their naked branches thrown up like hair standing on end. Crows swarmed in them and filled the air with screaming. The journey began slowly; the road sucked their boots at every step.

"Shall we go through the hamlet, Uncle?" Itzik could see white ribbons of wood smoke drifting up beyond the trees.

"I don't think so," Sasha said. "Our good neighbors are even better from a distance." He tested the depth of a puddle with his walking stick and motioned Itzik around it, but the boy stomped through anyway. "What a mule you are," his uncle laughed, and then the grin dropped from his face and he looked past Itzik at something in the woods.

Itzik turned to see two men walking out from the trees—a tall man with a harelip and a wool cape over one shoulder, followed by a fat one who struggled in the mud, his red face shining with sweat. They both held long-handled axes.

Uncle Sasha turned ashen. He hunched his shoulders and looked at the ground and grabbed Itzik by the hand. The men watched in silence as Uncle Sasha passed in front of them.

"*Dubroye utra*," Itzik said brightly to them.

Their faces changed they looked at the boy. "*Dubroye utra*," they said. And after a pause, they crossed into the woods on the other side of the road.

Until they were a good distance away, Uncle Sasha continued to hurry and to hold Itzik by the wrist, throwing his eyes this way and that. It was only when they came to the river that he relaxed once more. A small crowd was already waiting at the dock. The ferry, a large raft without railings, was on the far bank, where some men were driving a flock of sheep aboard. Shouts and the

barking of dogs rang out.

Suddenly a ewe bolted from the mob and a dog shot after it, nipping at its haunches. The ewe weaved and sprang in the air, and when a second dog charged it tried to lunge away, but lost its grip on the muddy bank and tumbled down into the river. Itzik saw the water break up white around it a moment before the splash reached him. The ewe drifted out and was pulled into the current, its head straining above water. One of the shepherds splashed into the water and reached for the animal with his staff, but he only managed to poke it under. It bobbed up again, wild-eyed.

“Look, Uncle, here it comes!” He climbed onto a woodpile. The beast was slowly passing to their side. The men on the other shore had given up, and the ferrymen were straining into their poles. The sheep was close now. Itzik could hear it snorting.

Uncle Sasha lifted him down from the woodpile and guided him toward the dock. “Let them see to it,” he said. “A wise dog scratches its own fleas.”

The ewe, too frightened to come near the bank, kicked in circles, drifting downstream. It was tiring; soon only its muzzle cleared the water. It sank under and then it was gone. None of the peasants and merchants who were massed on the little dock took notice.

“There,” Uncle Sasha pointed to a group of men standing to one side. From their black coats and beaver skin hats it was apparent that they came from Zetka, a larger shtetl some miles from Chelm with a lumber mill and wealthy families and a synagogue made of glass and stone. They were gathered around one who was reading from a newspaper. “Let’s go and introduce ourselves.”

Uncle Sasha smoothed his coat and strode up to them. “*Sholem alechem*,” he smiled. They looked him up and down, and then did the same to Itzik, who in his strange clothes and without his cap seemed to make them uneasy.

“*Sholem alechem*,” answered a big man with a stripe of gray in his beard.

“What wisdom does the newspaper tell us today?” Uncle Sasha took off his glasses and wiped them on his sleeve. “I take it the Messiah is still in hiding.”

The men did not smile. Their eyes darted from Itzik to his Uncle and back again. “Where do you come from?” asked the man with the newspaper.

“From Chelm,” Itzik said.

The men from Zetka exchanged glances with each other. Then the one with the newspaper shrugged and showed the front page to Uncle Sasha. “Terrible. Terrible,” he clucked his tongue.

“Soon we’ll be saying blessings in Japanese,” said another.

Uncle Sasha nibbled his beard, “How do you mean?”

“The Japanese beat the army at Mukden.”

“What, is Chelm at the end of the world?” asked a skinny fellow sitting on a wheelbarrow. He had a shoe off and was rubbing his toes. His smile dimmed when he glanced at Itzik, and broadened for Uncle Sasha.

“This can only mean trouble.”

“Such is life.”

“The Tsar will have to blame someone,” the big man sighed, “believe me.”

“So why not blame the Israelites?” Uncle Sasha bent over Itzik and knocked on his head. “Everything is our fault, or didn’t you know?”

“Feh,” the one sitting on the wheelbarrow said, “If we’re so important, why can’t I get a decent pair of shoes?”

The ferry docked and the people cleared away to let the sheep be driven past them. The men from Zetka waited for everyone to board and then took their places in back. They huddled close together and kept silent. Itzik twisted out from under his Uncle’s arm and squeezed between the soft-bodied peasant women with kerchiefs tied over their heads. They smelled of cabbage and the sour odors of flesh. He crawled under pushcarts and leaned over the edge of the raft, watched sticks and scraps of garbage swirl past in the brown water. A wonderful pressure filled his chest, an effervescence that spread inside his ribcage. He had never crossed the river before.

At the far bank, the men of Zetka bid farewell and took the road in the direction of Odessa. Uncle Sasha and Itzik sat on a fallen oak and waited until the other folks gathered their bundles and set off for Ivanovka. Uncle Sasha gave him an apple to eat and then spread his handkerchief between them. He produced a velvet purse from his pocket and out of it he poured a miniature treasure of gears and springs and watch faces.

“Look, here,” with a pair of tweezers he held up a tiny, notched wheel, “this doesn’t look like much. You could pick it out of your teeth and *pfffft!*” he spat on the ground, “it’s finished. But without this, this speck of nothing, no watch in the world could function.”

Above the fields across the road, a hawk traced idle circles, spiraling toward a copse of trees. “Listen to me, now Itzik, pay attention. I’m telling you that this gear is the most important thing in the world. If you plant it in the ground, it won’t grow an onion. It’s not a seed. It’s not a stone. It is what it is.”

The sun was pressing its warmth on Itzik’s head, and the earth was beginning to stir. The fields exhaled wisps of steam and the insects had roused and now flicked past, buzzed and clicked in the undergrowth. Uncle Sasha made his face amazed. “What do you suppose would happen if this little *yud* were to wake up one morning and say ‘I don’t want to be a winding cog anymore. From now on I want to be... a whale!’ Could you imagine?”

“I would rather be a whale.”

“Oy, Itzik!” He reached out and took Itzik’s nose between his fingers and shook it side to side. “Come, let’s bend our knees,” he said, rising. “I want to be home for the Sabbath.”

Their small road met a bigger one. There was more traffic on this road, more peasants bent under bundles of sticks, more carts loaded with sacks and metal goods, jars of vodka, chickens in crates. Itzik marveled at the sprawling estates hidden in groves of walnut trees, the barren orchards ringed by walls and locked behind gates of black wrought iron. Now and then a troika labored past,

the horses sinking in mud to their shins, and Itzik could smell perfume and cinnamon wafting from the well-dressed passengers. He stumbled along, his senses dazzled. Uncle Sasha kept a grip on his hand. From far away they could see the church of Ivanovka. It had a magnificent onion-shaped dome which seemed to glow like fire, and as they entered the town the church grew larger until, to see the cross at the top of the dome, Itzik had to lean so far back that he nearly fell over.

“Close your mouth,” Uncle Sasha told him, “or your teeth will fall out.”

The town had a cobblestone square where the market stalls were standing. Itzik had never seen so many people, such color and noise. They watched a man in gypsy clothes parade a dancing bear, and Uncle Sasha bought a wedge of honey cake from an old Jewish peddler with no teeth. Itzik chewed it with his lips tight together.

His Uncle took him by the shoulders and stared into his eyes. “I’m telling you, stay nearby me.” He grabbed Itzik’s chin and smiled at him, waiting for the boy to promise, which he did, and together they went from table to table, poking among the piles of junk for music boxes and wind-up toys, pocket watches and painted clocks.

But Itzik couldn’t help noticing the change in his Uncle: he always approached the merchants smiling weakly, bowing and apologizing. The vendors seemed to sneer at him. One even mocked the way Uncle Sasha pronounced his Russian words. Itzik noticed how differently the people in Ivanovka dressed, how plain his Uncle’s black frock coat was, his black trousers and cap. He let go of Uncle Sasha’s hand and backed away, and when he had the chance, let himself be drawn into the crowd.

He wandered past tea stalls, past fish laid out on blocks of ice, until he came to the animal pens. The air was ammoniac with the stink of soiled hay, and men argued over the price of hogs, and farther down, over horses. That was when Itzik saw the soldier. He was an officer—his black boots shining, his cape fastened with a silver chain. The oiled ends of his mustache glistened. He was escorting a woman in a red dress who held a handkerchief to her nose. Itzik trailed behind them, and when the man threw back his cape and reached out to stroke a mare’s neck, he saw that bars of ribbons were pinned to the man’s tunic.

It was the woman who noticed Itzik and drew the soldier’s attention to him. Itzik had been gaping like a stunned fish and he straightened himself. There was something in the way they looked at him, and he raised an imaginary rifle at the man, took aim and fired. The officer smiled under his mustache and tapped his riding crop to his cap. “Carry on,” he said. He guided the woman out of the market square and up onto the wooden sidewalk that bordered the main street.

Itzik followed at a distance. The chime of the officer’s spurs on the walkway was music, the rhythmic tock of his boots. The woman pointed in shop windows and turned her face up, laughing. In front of a tavern, the officer was hailed by the shouts of some men standing down in the road among a group of horses. He delivered up the same salute, touching his riding crop to his cap, but the woman frowned at the raucous voices, and let her escort usher her away.

The horses in front of the tavern had embroidered Caucasian saddles, and sabers with tassels tied to their hilts slung in leather sheaths. Itzik hopped down from the sidewalk and went closer, drawn by the strange accents and rough language of the men, whose mud-spattered boots were all that were visible under the horses' bellies. When he passed the first mount, he could see them—Cossacks. They had bearskin hats and bandoleers of ammunition across their shoulders. There were four of them standing in the road, shouting and jostling each other, the vodka slopping as they clanked their mugs.

"Hello, little man!" one cried out in a friendly voice when he saw him. A thick scar ran down through his eyebrow and into his yellow mustache. The eye socket was empty. "Do you want a drink?" He asked.

The others bellowed and spluttered at him. "Have a drink!"

"Sure, it'll make you taller!"

"When you're drunk enough, we'll buy you a nice fat whore!"

Itzik could smell their vodka and sweat, the tang of saddle leather and dung. He put his hand on the flank of a horse because he didn't dare touch the saber.

"He looks like an infantryman," said a dark one with high cheekbones. "No wonder those monkeys took Mukden."

"He's probably an officer!"

"The pride of the Tsar's army!" And all laughed.

"My father is an officer!" Itzik said, and emboldened by the sound of the words on his tongue he told them that his father also rode a horse. "A big white horse, bigger than this one!"

The men whistled and hooted and the one with the scar snatched Itzik up and swooped him into the air. For one exhilarating moment he was weightless—the street, shops, church spinning past—and then he was set firmly in one of the saddles. The horse bent its head back and nosed his foot. "There," the man announced, "that's the biggest stallion you've ever sat." He fixed Itzik with his one eye, a dazzling shade of blue. "Tell me now, you little turd, is your papa really an officer?"

"Does your mother wear a red dress?" asked another.

"Does she take off the red dress?" More laughter.

The man with the eye waved them quiet, "What's your name, boy?"

"Itzik."

"Well, now Private Itzik. Be honest with your comrades. Is he an officer, your father?"

Itzik looked at the faces, the crude, watching faces. "I don't know," he said softly. "Soldiers took him and he didn't come back."

The men's eyes shone with something that made their faces soft for a moment. The dark one took a drink from his cup. "Well," he said, "that's all right."

They shouted into the tavern for more to drink and a woman came out with a jug. The scarred one drew out his saber and let Itzik hold it, but it was too heavy, even for both hands, so he put his hands on top of the boy's.

From up on the horse, Itzik looked toward the marketplace—imagining a cavalry charge, a raid on an enemy village—when he saw his Uncle Sasha coming toward him. He saw him stop in the middle of the road and motion frantically with his hands. Itzik waved. Uncle Sasha let a cart go past, then crossed quickly to him, and when he was close, Itzik could see that his face and lips were colorless, his eyes filled with dread.

“Itzik,” he hissed in their native tongue, “you must be crazy!” He pulled the boy down from the horse and took him in his arms like an infant, shaming him in front of the horsemen. Itzik squirmed, but his Uncle had him so tightly. The soldiers fell silent and from the church dome, the low throb of bells began, slowly, one after another. Uncle Sasha was looking at the ground and stammering in his horrible accent, “Thank you very much, sirs. Very much. My boy, yes. No bother. It’s time to go home.”

“What the hell, Jew?” The scarred one grunted. He bounced the saber in his hand, and the sun glared off of it into Itzik’s eyes.

“What do you want, you circumcised rat?”

“We come from Chelm, sir” Uncle Sasha said. “This is my son.”

The men looked from the boy to his Uncle, and seemed to eye Itzik with different thoughts. Someone began laughing. “Where’s his white horse?” But Itzik thrashed and squirmed and managed to twist out of his uncle’s grasp. “That’s not true!” He pleaded and shook his head wildly, “I swear he’s lying. My father’s a soldier. He’s lying!” Tears came. They poured out of him.

“Itzik!” Uncle Sasha said, and almost bashfully he looked from man to man, opened the palms of his hands to them, but the dark one stepped up and slapped his face, sending his spectacles flying. Uncle Sasha’s expression was like someone eating a lemon, and then he straightened himself, threw his arms open and cried out in a strong, clear voice, “*Sh’m’a Yisrael!*”

The one-eyed Cossack raised the saber and hacked him in his open mouth. The blow made a sound like an ax sinking into soft wood. The wound gaped; the bone and broken teeth showed white, and as Itzik watched, a bright sheet of blood poured out over his Uncle’s beard, fell in a sheet to his waist. He crumpled and fell backwards and lay in the mud coughing and blinking his eyes. His hands twitched, and when the church bells finished banging out the hour, while their after-tone still hung in the air, the hands were no longer twitching. Itzik watched a dark pool widen under the body.

“Speech! Speech!” One of the men shouted.

“Excellent form, Yuri Alexevich!”

“You’re a weakling,” the dark one said, squatting over the Jew. “The top of his head is still on!”

The soldier wiped his blade on the dying man’s coat, and then began turning out his pockets. He drew out the velvet purse, and when he saw that it was full of small, worthless mechanisms, he flung these at the body.

There was a stir around them. Men poked their heads from the doorway of the tavern and the sound of footsteps drummed the wooden sidewalk as a crowd gathered. A group of children hurried over from the marketplace and

craned their necks to see what was happening. The eyes of the dead man were hooded now, glassed over with a secret, distant rapture. One of the boys tried to push a girl closer and she shrieked. Already, fat horseflies were swarming over the corpse. Itzik's throat was closed like a fist and a spell gripped him, rooted his feet to the spot. He saw how the dead man's skin looked waxen, how he'd fallen on a pile of green horse dung.

There came another scream, and Itzik looked up at the crowd on the sidewalk to find the woman in the red dress gaping. The officer took hold of her shoulders and pulled her back and as she turned, her eyes met Itzik's. "Go home, child!" she cried violently "Go home!"

At the sound of her voice the spell was broken. Itzik stumbled, reeled about and fled. Some of the children jeered at him and a mongrel dog barked and pursued him until he plunged into the market throng. He sprinted out through the town gates and along the side of the road. The sky was still bright, and sunlight gilded the cloud gorges, but the fields and woods were blue with shadows. On the ferry he rested, and again he ran, the mud collapsing, sucking his steps. It was sundown, the Sabbath, when he finally reached Chelm.

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Avram the slaughterer called out, "Itzik, don't go. Stay with us!" But Itzik was crashing through dead branches, and when he reached a certain tree, he clambered up into its highest elbow. From there he could see lamplight in the upstairs room where the women were grieving. Avram and Menke called his name. Menke walked into the woods and Itzik listened to the breaking sounds as he came closer, and then as he moved away again. They stopped calling. Around him, the hush of night was broken by hoot owls and the pulsing of crickets. Stars burned in particular clusters.

He was up there when the darkness seeped away and the crows began calling out to each other. He was up there when morning services ended, when neighbors poured from the synagogue, their black coats flapping behind them, and came up the road and into the yard. They kissed the *mezuzah* on the doorpost and went inside the house. And later, such beautiful chanting rose up, the layered hum of ancient lyrics. Itzik lay his head against the limb of the oak and felt so tired, so utterly exhausted. The prayers reached him, caressed him from all sides. The sun was warm on his face. Soon the mud would be steaming, and by the time it was dark enough for the gravediggers, the ground would be firm underfoot.