

DARK EXIT

Benjamin Sholonsky wants to stick his tailor's needles in his eyes. I, his friend Jakob, want to stop him. Admittedly business hasn't been so good for him lately. I've heard rumors. But is this any reason to go to such drastic measures, I ask myself.

I saw him yesterday in his apartment. What an assortment of needles he keeps there, red-bulbed ones, copper ones, long ones, safety pins, even a few tacks. He had several tape measures lying about but can he strangle himself with his tape measure? He'd faint first, then I'd burst in and save him. But needles he had littered all over his two-room apartment when I walked in, his shop is downstairs, by the way.

"This is crazy, Ben," I said, "look, are you crazy? You collect such things near where food is kept," pointing to a half-eaten sandwich lying on a plate, "and – "

"So what, who cares anymore." He laid back in his chair, his hand dangling; it was bleeding. "Good, Benjamin," I said, grabbing his hand, shaking him, "you need these tricks?" he reached and grabbed for some of the needles piled before him, lying on the table between us as we sat drinking tea, squeezing them in his fist. I took them out of his hand by force, sticking my finger with one of them. I had to wrap a handkerchief around my wound and decided to wrap up all the other needles too, bundling them in a thick scarf I saw hanging out of his dresser drawer and placing the whole lethal tangle in a bag I had carried along.

"Landau, my old partner, that cheat, once said to me (he knew) that tailors who sew with wool thread often cannot see the wolf pack that temporarily harbors them, only when the supply of wool is topped do they, look up from their work and see with their own eyes."

"I don't understand what you're saying," I had to confess to him.

"Alright," he sighed. "I have problems you wouldn't believe."

I asked if it was money he needed.

“You’ll have it?” He laughed. “Our days as business men here are ending. Ousted by edicts!” He started to rub his eyes and I leapt out of my seat. I realized though that all the needles were in my bag. He let his fists fell, opening his reddened eyes, their lids heavy and half-closed.

I had been silent long enough.

Any fool with brains can see something’s wrong,” I coaxed.

I’m not alone in this,” he interrupted,” but what can another man do, how much –“

“You feel weak – I don’t?”

“So you feel weak, I feel weak, Landau felt weak, that cheat, we’re weak – so what.”

“Weak together.”

“A privilege!”

“You’re alone, Ben?”

“They’ve taken away my license.”

“Why? What did you do? It’s been in your family a long time.”

“Six generations; I don’t know why.” He pulled some papers out from a book. “Here,” he put on his reading glasses, “it reads – no, I’ll tell you: I’ve been accused of sympathies that brand me as disloyal. They’re taking everything away from me, my livelihood. Who brought me the news? Kaganovich, he brought me my notice of license termination, the accusations against me, the notice of confiscation. My shop, Jakob, gone. I said to him, ‘How can this be, Simon? You knew me since I’ve been a child, how can this be?’ Big government man. He says to me he can’t discuss the charges with me, I will have a chance to defend myself. ‘from what.’ I ask him, getting angry now. He told me he was here on official business only. One of us ‘here on official business only!’” His face reddened. “What am I to do? Make a living from air?” spreading his arms wide. I looked about his small, poorly furnished apartment. “A rich man, I’m a subversive rich man to them.”

“Calm down, Ben, you know it’s not good for your health to get so excited. What else did Kaganovich say?” Benjamin cursed him, raising his bony fists in execration. He had been accused of belonging to organizations he’d never even heard of, he had been called

the systematic exploiter, he had called greedy. “They’ve taken away my life,” he yelled, “and from one of my own, to get the summons!” He was waving his arms about.

“Quiet yourself,” I urged him, “your neighbors have ears.”

“My neighbors,” he yelled, “who cares about my neighbors?”

“Leave, Bennie. Get out. Who need this? You’ve seen with your own eyes. Let me give you addresses.” I reached for a pen to give him the names of my relatives in another country.

“Leave? Gladly. But they won’t let me out. I’m dangerous, you didn’t know that? I’ve been a spy for the past twenty-five years. It says it here on paper,” he waved his court summons and list of accusations around, some of the sheets fluttering to the floor, “they won’t let me out.”

“Don’t give up hope,” I protested.

“Hope is a liar in such circumstances.”

And what of me, I wondered. I am a tailor too. And wasn’t my safety only relative to his at this moment?

“And your stock – gone?”

“Gone.”

“Your shop, you still have the key?” I had a plan. “Nothing, Jakob, it’s been confiscated by edict: so declared, so be it.”

“So let them make it hard for us,” I said to Benjamin. I confessed to him that it was this way with my father, his father and before that, as far back as I have ever heard. “Let them sew their own clothes. It’s been no privilege, believe me.” I had decided I would go elsewhere.

Bennie urged me to be quiet, they expected just such words from our mouths, he said.

I opened the bag I had set between my knees and took the contents out. I picked several needles out of the tangle of wadded cotton. “And they expect us both to meet at the head of this pin and make a living?”

We heard a knock at the door and both went rigid with fear. “I’ll get it,” I said. It was four men. They held a letter for me, a summons. From the desk of Kaganovich, in charge of our province’s merchant’s licensing. I had told my wife where I was going; they had been to my house. At ten o’clock at night they had come to find me at Sholonsky’s.

“You are both together I see,” one of them said, taking a note pad out of his pocket. The other three searched around Sholonsky’s apartment. I didn’t think to ask them for a warrant. They rummaged everywhere. “You are friends with Mr. Sholonsky,” the man stated; the way he said “friends” convinced me he didn’t mean friends.

“We’re cousins, he’s my sister’s brother-in-law, I’ve known him since I’ve been a child,” I said. “Yes, we’re friends.”

He asked me, excusing Mr. Sholonsky from the questioning (he had already been questioned before), if I had ever belonged to certain organizations, naming them. I said no. he didn’t believe me and smiled at me a great deal as if I were not so clever as I seemed to suspect I was. Had I ever solicited and received funds from this aid society, which he named. I answered no. He didn’t believe that either. Had I ever attended meetings of a certain club? No. Had I ever frequented a certain café? Yes, that I had. “But my uncle owns it,” I told him, which caused an explosion of scribbling on his note pad. One night a week, Thursdays, Benjamin and I got together to play chess, they had noted that – what were we really doing? I was at a loss to explain myself. “We play chess,” I said, “C-H-E-S-S.” This angered him.

It went on like this until midnight. I read the letter informing me, from the office of Kaganovich himself, that my tailoring license was terminated and I was a spy and an enemy. My trial would come.

“Will that be all?” I asked one of them.

“Yes, we have guards placed outside to escort you home to get your belongings. You will be transferred elsewhere.” He named a prison near the city which I knew, for a fact, to be a dangerous place housing some of the land’s worst criminals. I was curious to see, also, when I looked over my notice of termination, that I had been licensed since I had

been seventeen, since my father had died and I had to take over his small shop. It had been a long time.

They finally left.

The apartment was in disarray. Of the few books Benjamin possessed, they were ripped to pieces in their attempts to find something hidden in them and were scattered, a few pages here and there, all about the room. Even the needles had been carefully unwrapped by our visitors, copious notes taken on the variety in our possession. They were lying on the table before us.

“All we need is thread,” Benjamin said, “and I’d sew my eyelids shut for good, if there’s no way out.” I pressed my chest, I felt as though I couldn’t breathe. “If there’s no way out,” I said, “then we’ll never let them in.” I grabbed a handful of the needles. I had no choice but to do what I did; the last thing I saw was Benjamin reaching forward, then all went dark.