

The Legend of Hyman Litman?

My pocket watch says two minutes to noon. The worn sign reads "Deadwood", and the town looks deserted. Still no opponents in sight. Like my throat, the dusty street is parched, and wind-driven grit stings my face. I wish this were just a bad dream. My stomach knots say it isn't.

I adjust the brim of my Stetson to block the glare. Across the street, the bartender peers through a gap in the saloon's bullet-riddled swinging doors. This is no Disney simulation.

Is my holster tied tight enough? Minutes from the duel, it feels like it's slipping.

I can't believe I'm really here, far from my 2024 fantasy-filled life in Brooklyn.

A strange thought hits me: This is all my mom's fault. She taught me enough piano to get a job in our neighborhood taproom. Out of boredom, I'd often picture the place as an old Western saloon, filled with characters from the movies I binged day and night on. That's where I longed to be.

My nostalgic life style pushed my conservative Jewish father over the edge. "Six years of Hebrew school and what do I get? A barroom cowboy! You're twenty, for God's sake. Get the hell out of my house."

That night, over more than a few rounds of drinks, a group of amateur life coaches formulated my plan. "Go west, young man," which made perfect sense. My beer-bloated brain conjured an acting gig in a Western, with all the resulting fame, fortune, and women.

Before I could sober up, I left to meet a dude named Moontide, who'd be leaving for California at midnight in his VW microbus, "To beat traffic."

Pushing my small suitcase, I zigzagged down Belvedere Street as a massive column of dense grey fog rolled toward me. Assuming it's from the New Jersey and Canadian forest fires, I lurched to the left to avoid it but it was too wide, and my suitcase had other ideas.

Its outer layer, cold and turbulent, spiraled me toward the center, for what seemed like hours. A screeching wind tossed me end-over-end, like a toy. At the core, it slowed to a soft breeze that circulated slowly, like a lazy tornado. It smelled of cinnamon and burnt wood and carried the whisper of an old hippy song—The Doors' "*Soft Parade*."

A few minutes later, I fell through the fog, hitting the ground squarely on my feet, and looked around. This wasn't in Brooklyn anymore.

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A stagecoach rolled by. The driver's eyes stayed glued to me until his neck swivel reached its limit. Did someone spike my drinks? No. The cloud of dust choked me. This was the wild west—at least my version, maybe distorted by too many movies.

A few feet away, my suitcase lay in the dirt. I pulled it across the street, trying to dodge the wheel ruts and piles of horse turds. Raucous laughter and loud voices poured from the saloon as I approached.

On the front porch, a sexy, but well past her prime lady in a rocking chair gave me a wink and a one-fingered *com'ere*. Her double-take said I didn't appear to be from this planet, let alone these parts. As she rocked, her breasts threatened to jump from her low-cut top. Then it dawned on me who she was.

Her full but sagging figure and powder-caked face spoke of years of selfless service to the cowpokes and miners who'd been saving more than just money for their visits.

To the right of the swinging doors, a few grizzled old men sat on a long bench, as if to ward off evil spirits.. They were one ugly group, with weathered faces, scars, missing teeth and wrinkles. They elbowed each other and laughed while I climbed the few steps to the porch. I looked down to avoid eye contact, only to stare into a community spittoon of floating cigarette butts.

Worried about how these folks would react to my Brooklyn accent, I blurted out, "Howdy Maym, I reckon this here's Deadwood."

My best wild western accent seemed close enough. She extended her heavily ringed hand and pointed to the Deadwood Saloon sign above the door. "No shit. Call me Gracie." She frowned while looking me up and down. "What the hell you draggin' around. Looks like a lizard skin coffin."

I looked down at my imitation alligator suitcase and shrugged. "Don't know. Found it in the desert. Wanted to see if anyone here owned it."

"Well, if I were you, I wouldn't bring it into the saloon."

She winced as she checked out my skinny jeans and buttonless shirt, thanks to my rough trip here. Eying up my red sneakers, she grunted, "And that get-up might get you in trouble, if not shot. Where the hell you from anyway?"

Before I could say "I'm from France," I went with, "Europe...England, that is." Just my luck, they'd have a French-speaking cowboy. I gambled that no Englishman ever came this far west.

I extended my hand. "You can call me Hyman."

"Hi-Man? You fuckin kidding me?"

Evidently, they'd never met a Jew either. "That's my name. Hyman Litman."

Gracie leaned back in her rocking chair for a minute and, eyes closed, shook her head. "So, you're an Englishman named Hi-Man, God help you." She raised her eyebrows. "You sure ain't no cowpoke or miner. Too puny. What'd ya do?"

She had a point. At five-four in my sneakers, I was no John Wayne. Cowboy boots would only help a little. "Play piano."

Gracie's eyes lit up. "Hotdamn! Last month, my piano man got hit in the head with a whiskey bottle. Died right where he played. Took days to get his blood off the keys. If you're any good, the job's yours for room, board, all you can drink, and... fringes." She winked as she finished the sentence. "Let's get you dressed proper and see what you can do."

We stashed the suitcase under the porch, and I stealthily slipped my smart watch into my pocket. No need to explain that useless marvel. My cell phone and wallet were missing, probably shaken from my pocket and still spinning in that mystery fog.

I followed her down a side alley to the back of the saloon and up a rickety set of wooden steps to the crude second-floor balcony of her bedroom. Taking in the frilly, red, and gold satin decor and imagining what would glow under a UV light, I wished for some latex gloves.

She disappeared into her closet. "Here you go, Hi-Man." She flipped me a pair of shiny black pants, a roughhewn, heavy white undershirt with yellow stains at the neck, and a wrinkled blue vest with white pinstripes.

I changed and chuckled when I saw myself in the mirror, a pint-sized version of Doc Holliday. The boots were loose like the rest of my outfit, but this wasn't a dance audition. Since I'd arrived in need of a haircut, the dusty brown derby she gave me looked about right.

We entered the saloon by the front staircase. Nobody noticed since I looked like a typical john dressed in his Sunday best for a toss in the hay. She led me to the piano, and I sat, trying to ignore the reddish-brown residue between the white keys, and wishing again for those gloves.

Gracie gave me an elegant introduction. "Hey, assholes!" she yelled. The mayhem continued as the drunks ignored her. With a sigh, she reached under her skirts, drew a revolver, and blasted a bottle of whiskey off the bar shelf. Everyone dropped to the floor. Some drew their guns, and my ears rang in that immediate silence that always follows a barroom gunshot. The movies got that right.

"Got your attention? This is my new friend, Hi-Man." A mocking chorus of "Hi-Man?" filled the saloon. "Yeah, I know. That's his name. He's all the way from England, and he's gonna play some piano for you. It's been a while since Francis retired because of the bottle. Let's see if Hyman's good enough for this highfalutin establishment." She looked my way and wagged her forefinger in circles for me to get on with it.

I checked out the assortment of tough guys and whores, mostly the latter, wondering what song might get me those fringe benefits. I could easily fake some standard Western honky-tonk but took a chance with a simple version of Billy Joel's "Piano Man," complete with my best vocal efforts.

The crowd had a priceless reaction. First, faces of anger and confusion, then a minute of adjustment as the song's hook sank in. Eyes teared at the nostalgic parts and, by my second time

through, the whole place sang. Nobody in the crowd noticed forgotten words or ones changed to suit the times.

I got the job and, over the week, made about two hundred alcoholic friends in the bargain. But there were tradeoffs. The food tasted like shit. My gut rebelled every other day from spoiled meat, and they used a cactus product for toilet paper, complete with quill stumps.

Of course, I did enjoy my fringe benefit. That came every Tuesday night. Gracie called it Bath and a BJ. "Gotta keep you clean, so no cooch for you. Can't play no piano while you're scratchin. The good news... Jenny's a washrag artist. By the time she's done scrubbing you up, the rest will be quick, and she'll be fresh as a dewdrop for paying customers." Not the ultimate experience, but the price was right.

For some reason, the old Madam took a liking to me. During one of our talks in her room, she prodded me about my past, and I spun a tale of a sea adventure from England, taking a stagecoach from back east, surviving an Injun' attack, stealing a horse, and riding through the desert until the poor thing dropped dead. I think the plot came from a movie I saw—maybe with Clint Eastwood. She ate it all up without interruption.

She asked, "Where's your six-shooter?"

I swallowed hard before answering. "Lost it during that desert ride."

She rolled her eyes. "You even know how to shoot?"

"No point." I shook my head. "Never needed to."

"Well, 'round here, if you don't learn soon enough, you'll get the fuckin' point. My daddy was a gunslinger—top-notch. Showed me all the tricks. I still have his revolver." She reached under the bed and handed me a wooden box. "Meet me behind the saloon at dawn, and we'll get you shootin' like a mal hombre! Never know when shit's gonna start flyin'."

For the next week, we spent hours in the desert each morning. Thanks to my Xbox, dozens of combat games, and the better part of my childhood, I amazed her with my hand-eye coordination and twitch reflexes. Before long, I'd beat her to the draw every time, even with my slow hand.

After our final session, she stretched her usual scowl into a warm smile and hugged me. "No more practice. You're as good as I've ever seen. Keep the six-shooter until you can get yourself a decent weapon. Daddy would be proud."

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Two days later, my skills would be put to the test. In the middle of a rousing version of Joplin's "The Entertainer," a beer mug flew by my head and smashed against the wall.

"What the fuck you playin', boy?"

The room silenced as a giant of a man pointed at me from the other side of the saloon. He must have been six-five, broad as a grizzly, with a torn up face that could have come from a bear fight. He was very drunk and weaving in place. I calmly stood and respectfully answered, "I call it 'ragtime,' sir."

He cocked his head and chuckled. "Sounds like what ladies bleed on. The last bastard that played a tune that bad took a bottle to his goddamned head."

Before I could answer, he had his hand on his gun, and the crowd hit the deck. Eyes darted between me and the big guy. As I went for my gun, a shot rang out. He grabbed his chest and dropped to the ground. He flopped twice before dying. Then the room filled with mutters of my incredible speed. Old Gracie must have been bragging about me to the customers.

Certain I hadn't even touched my holster, I wondered what to do next. Then Gracie touched my side and whispered, "I shot the motherfucker from behind the staircase. That'll teach him to leave my music men alone. Take the credit. You'll get lots of respect."

A few of the johns helped the barkeeper remove the body amid the shuffle of everyone retaking their seats. I continued playing as if nothing had happened. At the song's end, I took a break and sat at the bar.

Three of the friendly regulars gathered around to marvel at my lightning draw. The one missing two front teeth shook his head. "Marvin had it coming to him. Didn't even see your hand move!"

The oldest added, "Now you've got to look out for his brothers— Boon and Len. They're busy causing trouble a few towns over, but they'll be back when they hear the news. They're smaller and slower than old Marvin but even sicker in the head." He held up half his right hand. "Got me behind the stables one night. One held me down. The other worked on me with a knife." He spat on the floor. "Just for fun."

The third regular, dressed to the tee, but armadillo ugly, elbowed the toothless one and looked my way. "It'll be fun to watch this guy go to town on those sumbitches."

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A week after Marvin's shooting, while humoring myself with a rendition of "Hey Jude" in the nearly empty saloon, the old guy rushed through the doors and straight to me. Glancing at his hoof-hand, my stomach churned. He whispered, "Marvin's brothers are back in town. Surely they'll be payin' you a visit tonight. Good luck. Just don't say who told you." He ran out without looking back.

I hoped my unproven marksmanship was as good as old Gracie claimed. For a moment, I wished I was back in Brooklyn.

Around sundown, as the johns and gamblers began to filter into the saloon, I filled Gracie in. "I might get a visit from Marvin's brothers tonight. It could get messy."

She laughed. "They're nasty but shit-your-britches dumb. Challenge one of them to a duel at high noon tomorrow. Do it real loud. They fancy themselves big-time bad asses and won't pass on a high-noon gunfight." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "They're like coyotes. Believe me, they'll try to double up on you."

At nine sharp that night, the saloon doors crashed open, and the two brothers, each much less imposing and fearsome than Marvin, burst through. The taller one yelled, "Where's that Hi-Man piano player?"

Gracie leveled her shotgun at the two. "At the piano? But I gotta warn you, he'll blast your sorry asses off before you can think about drawing your guns."

They were likely already spooked by talk of my blazing speed. I even believed it myself. I sauntered through the crowd, went up on my toes, and got in the shorter one's face. I do wish someone had told me Boon had a wandering left eye. Struggling to keep my game face, I yelled, "I'm gonna deal with you yellow-livered-chicken-bellied cocksuckers right outside."

The crowd, including the brothers, looked at each other with confused faces as if they'd never heard the expression. It was a Hollywood writer's thing, I think. The two brothers shook their heads and turned toward the door. Raising my voice, I added, "Not so fast, Boon. We're doin' this at high noon tomorrow, so I can watch that jitter-eye of yours go to sleep."

Boon's lip quivered as Len let out a small sigh of relief and nudged his embarrassed brother out the door, yelling, "High noon it is. Better be there." His voice trailed off as he chuckled, "Hi-Man at High Noon."

The next day, I nervously declined a dozen drink offers. Gracie pulled me aside, took my hand, and pressed a massive gold pocket watch into my palm. "This belongs to the asshole that owns the hotel down the street, Seth Bullock." I hefted it from one hand to the other and examined the back.

"Even has his initials carved in it. He's a decent sheriff, but he won't dirty his hotel with whores. He visits mine to get his pencil sharpened. I'll get the watch back to him soon enough, but right now, you need it more than he does."

Five minutes to noon, I went to the street sporting the sheriff's watch and the toothless guy's ten-gallon hat, slanted to lessen the sun's glare. The sound of galloping hoofs approached town. Not another body in sight—just lots of eyeballs trying to hide. Up on the bank's roof, a flattened silhouette aimed a shotgun in my direction. Even without her big, goofy, flowered hat, I recognized Gracie.

The brothers dropped from their horses and tied them up, never taking their eyes off me. I cracked my knuckles, yawned, and asked, "We doin' this one at a time, or both you together?"

Boon's laugh sounded like more of a hiccup. "We drew straws. You're all mine."

Len spat at my feet as he walked by and took a place on the saloon porch.

I went with Gunfight at OK Corral protocol and, hand on my gun, poker-faced off with Boon for what seemed an eternity. I gave him my best Burt Lancaster wink and smile to force a move.

It worked. As he squeezed the trigger, I nailed him in the chest. He dropped where he stood. Len pulled off two shots before Gracie got him. One got me high on the vest. I don't remember hitting the ground, but I awoke in a puddle of blood. The last thing I heard was Gracie whispering, "You weren't nearly as good a shot as I said. Just wanted to puff up your confidence."

That thought was terrifying, but nothing compared to what was rushing toward me.

A beige dust devil, at least twice my height, swept me away. Before anyone could reach me, I spun in a spray of blood, sand, and bits of desert brush. My chest exploded in pain, and I passed out again.

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The cold drizzle on my face revived me. The street, dark except for the trace of a distant street lamp, chilled my back. I tried to sit up twice, but then things went black.

I woke up in a warm, dry place with my parents at my bedside. I inhaled a strangely pleasant sanitizer odor and scanned the room, relieved to see modern hospital decor. My mom spoke first. "The ER doctor said you lost a lot of blood." She put a sympathetic hand on my forehead to check for a fever—a mom thing.

Dad, not so gentle, yelled, "You meshuggeneh bastard!" He waved his hand above my head. "The movies finally got to you. They found you dying in the street dressed like some antique cowboy goof. Your drinking buddies had told us you were somewhere out west, but we didn't believe them."

"Naah. I missed my ride. But I found a local group of Western movie fans who took me in. We'd cosplay our favorite scenes. I guess someone's gun accidentally fired. Happens sometimes."

Dad shook his head in disgust. I had my fill of the old west by now and reassured him. "I'm ready to get serious about life—study the Torah, meet a nice Jewish girl, work in your jewelry store, and finally become a mensch."

His smile stretched nearly beyond his ears, and he hugged my head. I couldn't breathe, but loved the gesture. He let go of me when a doctor knocked on the doorframe.

The doc sat at the edge of my bed and looked me in the eye. "You're a lucky guy, young man. The bullet passed right through you and your wound had caked in dried mud. That slowed the bleeding but could have caused sepsis. "

I took a deep breath. "That western play group knew their stuff."

After the doctor left, my mom reached into her purse and handed me a pocket watch with the initials SB inscribed into the back of the case. "I found this in your vest when they brought you in."

The End