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The Lazarus Project

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Extract

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The time and place are the only things I am certain of: March 2, 1908, Chicago. Beyond that is the haze of history and pain, and now I plunge:

Early in the morning, a scrawny young man rings the bell at 31 Lincoln Place, the residence of George Shippy, the redoubtable chief of Chicago police. The maid, recorded as Theresa, opens the door (the door certainly creaks ominously), scans the young man from his soiled shoes up to his swarthy face, and smirks to signal that he had better have a good reason for being here. The young man requests to see Chief Shippy in person. In a stern German accent, Theresa advises him that it is much too early and that Chief Shippy never wishes to see anybody before nine. He thanks her, smiling, and promises to return at nine. She cannot place his accent; she is going to warn Shippy that the foreigner who came to see him looked very suspicious.

The young man descends the stairs, opens the gate (which also creaks ominously). He puts his hands in his pockets, but then pulls his pants up—they are still too big for him; he looks to the right, looks to the left, as though making a decision. Lincoln Place is a different world; these houses are like castles, the windows tall

and wide; there are no peddlers on the streets; indeed, there is nobody on the street. The ice-sheathed trees twinkle in the morning drabness; a branch broken under the weight of ice touches the pavement, rattling its frozen tips. Someone peeks from behind a curtain of the house across the street, the face ashen against the dark space behind. It is a young woman: he smiles at her and she quickly draws the curtain. All the lives I could live, all the people I will never know, never will be, they are everywhere. That is all that the world is.

The late winter has been gleefully tormenting the city. The pure snows of January and the spartan colds of February are over, and now the temperatures are falseheartedly rising and maliciously dropping: the venom of arbitrary ice storms, the exhausted bodies desperately hoping for spring, all the clothes stinking of stove smoke. The young man's feet and hands are frigid, he flexes his fingers in his pockets, and every step or two he tiptoes, as if dancing, to keep the blood going. He has been in Chicago for seven months and cold much of the time—the late-summer heat is now but a memory of a different nightmare. One whimsically warm day in October, he went with Olga to the lichen-colored lake, presently frozen solid, and they stared at the rhythmic calm of the oncoming waves, considering all the good things that might happen one day. The young man marches toward Webster Street, stepping around the broken branch.

The trees here are watered by our blood, Isador would say, the streets paved with our bones; they eat our children for breakfast, then dump the leftovers in the garbage. Webster Street is awake: women wrapped in embroidered fur-collar coats enter automobiles in front of their homes, carefully bowing their heads to protect the vast hats. Men in immaculate galoshes pull themselves in after the women, their cuff links sparkling. Isador claims he likes going to the otherworldly places, where capitalists live, to enjoy the serenity

of wealth, the tree-lined quietude. Yet he returns to the ghetto to be angry; there, you are always close to the noise and clatter, always steeped in stench; there, the milk is sour and the honey is bitter, he says.

An enormous automobile, panting like an aroused bull, nearly runs the young man over. The horse carriages look like ships, the horses are plump, groomed, and docile. Electric streetlights are still on, reflected in the shop windows. In one window, there is a headless tailor's dummy proudly sporting a delicate white dress, the sleeves limply hanging. He stops in front of it, the tailor's dummy motionless like a monument. A squirrelly-faced, curly-haired man stands next to him, chewing an extinguished cigar, their shoulders nearly rubbing. The smell of the man's body: damp, sweaty, clothy. The young man stomps each of his feet to make the blisters inflicted by Isador's shoes less painful. He remembers the times when his sisters tried on their new dresses at home, giggling with joy. The evening walks in Kishinev; he was proud and jealous because handsome young fellows smiled at his sisters on the promenade. There has been life before this. Home is where somebody notices when you are no longer there.

Responding to the siren smell of warm bread, he walks into a grocery store at Clark and Webster—Ludwig's Supplies, it is called. His stomach growls so loudly that Mr. Ludwig looks up from the newspapers on the counter and frowns at him as he tips his hat. The world is always greater than your desires; plenty is never enough. Not since Kishinev has the young man been in a store as abundant as this: sausages hanging from the high racks like long crooked fingers; barrels of potatoes reeking of clay; jars of pickled eggs lined up like specimens in a laboratory; cookie boxes, the lives of whole families painted on them—happy children, smiling women, composed men; sardine cans, stacked like tablets; a roll of butcher paper, like a fat Torah; a small scale in confident equilibrium; a

ladder leaning against a shelf, its top up in the dim store heaven. In Mr. Mandelbaum's store, the candy was also high up on the shelf, so the children could not reach it. Why does the Jewish day begin at sunset?

A wistful whistle of a teapot in the back announces the entrance of a hammy woman with a crown of hair. She carries a gnarled loaf of bread, cradling it carefully, as though it were a child. Rozenberg's crazy daughter, raped by the pogromchiks, walked around with a pillow in her arms for days afterwards; she kept trying to breast-feed it, boys scurrying at her heels hoping to see a Yid tit. "Good morning," the woman says, haltingly, exchanging glances with her husband—they need to watch him, it is understood. The young man smiles and pretends to be looking for something on the shelf. "Can I help you?" asks Mr. Ludwig. The young man says nothing; he doesn't want them to know he is a foreigner.

"Good morning, Mrs. Ludwig. Mr. Ludwig," a man says as he enters the store. "How do you do today?" The little bell goes on tinkling as the man speaks in a hoarse, tired voice. The man is old, yet unmustached; a monocle dangles down his belly. He lifts his hat at Mrs. and Mr. Ludwig, ignores the young man, who nods back at him. Mr. Ludwig says: "How do you do, Mr. Noth? How is your influenza?"

"My influenza is rather well, thank you. I wish I could say the same thing for myself." Mr. Noth's walking stick is crooked. His tie is silk but stained; the young man can smell his breath—something is rotting inside him. I will never be like him, thinks the young man. He leaves the cozy small talk and walks over to the board near the front door to browse through the leaflets pinned to it.

"I could use some camphor," Mr. Noth says. "And a new, young body."

"We're out of bodies," Mr. Ludwig says. "But we do have camphor."

"Worry not," Mrs. Ludwig says, cackling. "This body will serve you well for a long while."

"Why, thank you, Mrs. Ludwig," Mr. Noth says. "But do let me know if some fresh bodies come in."

Next Sunday at the Bijou, the young man reads, Joe Santley stars in *Billy the Kid*. The Illinois Congress of Mothers offers a symposium on "Moral Influence of Reading"; at the Yale Club Dr. Hofmannstal is talking on "Shapes of Degeneracy: The Body and Morality."

The camphor jar and hat in his left hand, Mr. Noth struggles to open the door with his right one, the stick moving up and down his forearm. Mrs. Ludwig rushes over to help him, still carrying the bread, but the young man reaches the door before her and opens it for Mr. Noth, the little bell joyously jingling. "Why, thank you," Mr. Noth says and attempts to lift his hat, the stick poking the young man in his groin. "Pardon me," Mr. Noth says and walks out.

"How can I help you?" Mr. Ludwig says from behind the counter, even more coldly, for the young man is much too loose and comfortable in his store. The young man returns to the counter and points at the rack with lozenge jars. Mr. Ludwig says: "We have all kinds of flavors: strawberry, raspberry, menthol, honeysuckle, almond. Which would be your pleasure?" The young man taps his finger on the jar with nickel-sized white lozenges, the cheapest kind, and offers a dime to Mr. Ludwig. He has money to spend on pleasure, he wants to show them. I am just like everybody else, Isador always says, because there is nobody like me in the whole world.

Mr. Ludwig glares at him; for all he knows the foreigner might have a gun in his pocket. But he weighs a throng of lozenges on the small scale, takes a few out, and slides the rest into a waxed bag. "Here you go," he says. "Enjoy." The young man deposits one of

the lozenges in his mouth right away, his stomach howling with anticipation—Mr. Ludwig hears the howl, looks toward Mrs. Ludwig. Never trust a hungry man, his eyes tell her, particularly a hungry man who does not take his hat off and buys candy. The lozenge is apple sour, the young man's mouth awash with saliva. He is tempted to spit it out, but the lozenges entitle him to linger in the store, so he frowns and keeps sucking it, strolling over to the leaflet board to look at it again. At the International Theater, Richard Curle is in his new musical gambol, *Mary's Lamb*. Dr. George Howe and Co. promise a certain cure from knotted veins, blood poison, blisters, and nervous debility. Who are all these people? Dr. Howe's face is on the leaflet—a grim man he is, a venerable black mustache on his white face. Olga's veins are constantly swollen; after work, she sits down and puts her feet up on another chair. She likes to lance his blisters. Mother used to soak her varicose legs in a tub of hot water, but she would always forget the towel. He would be the one to fetch it, wash her feet, and wipe them dry. Her soles were ticklish; she would squeal like a schoolgirl.

The lozenge is nearly entirely melted now and has become bitter. He bids good-bye to Mr. and Mrs. Ludwig, to which they do not respond, and steps out. The horses are clip-clopping, snorting out plumes of vapor. He nods at three women, as they pick up their pace passing him, ignoring him; their arms are linked, their hands warm in muffs. A thick-necked man chewing a cigar stump buys a paper from a boy, who then shouts: "Famous Gunman Shot in Fight!" The young man tries to look over the newsboy's shoulder at the headlines, but the newsboy—hatless, with a scar across his face—scampers away, hollering: "Pat Garrett, the Lawman Who Shot Billy the Kid Dies in a Gunfight." The young man's stomach growls again, and he takes another lozenge. He is glad he has a few more left; he enjoys possessing them. Billy. That's a nice name, a name for a fretful, yet happy, dog. Pat is weighty,

serious, like a rusted hammer. He has never known anybody named Billy or Pat.

Shortly thereafter, he walks up to Chief Shippy's door, another lozenge dissolving under his tongue, the bitterness scorching his throat, shrinking his tonsils. He waits for the lozenge to disintegrate completely before he rings the bell; he can see a shadow moving behind the curtain. He remembers a childhood evening when he played hide-and-seek with his friends—they were hiding, he was seeking; then they all went home, without telling him; he kept looking for them well into the night, shouting into the darkness full of their shadows: "There you are. I can see you," until Olga found him and took him home. A daggerlike icicle breaks off from a high eave and falls to the ground, shattering. He rings the bell; Chief Shippy opens the door; the young man steps into the murky hall.

At nine o'clock clock sharp, Chief Shippy opens the door and sees a young man with *a foreign cast of features* who wears *a black coat, a black slouch hat*, altogether looking *like a working man*. *In the brief all-comprehensive glance he gave his caller,* William P. Miller will write in the *Tribune,* Chief Shippy *took in a cruel, straight mouth with thick lips and a pair of gray eyes that were at the same time cold and fierce. There was a look about that slim, swarthy young man—clearly a Sicilian or a Jew—that could send a shiver of distrust into any honest man's heart. Yet Chief Shippy, never to be unsettled by malevolence, invited the stranger into the comfort of his living room.*

They stand right at the living room door, the young man unsure whether to enter deeper. After a long moment of ominous hesitation—Chief Shippy flexing his jowls, a confused sparrow chirping just outside the window, a scraping step upstairs—he thrusts an envelope into Shippy's hand.

"He handed me an envelope with my name and address on it," Chief

Shippy will tell Mr. Miller. *"I did not wait to examine the envelope any further. The thought struck me like a streak of lightning that the man was up to no good. He looked to me like an anarchist. I grabbed his arms and, forcing them behind his back, called to my wife: 'Mother! Mother!'"*

Mother Shippy comes rushing in, with all the natural force *Mother* implies. She is stout and strong, with a large head; in her haste she nearly tumbles. Her husband is holding the hands of *a Sicilian or a Jew,* and, in horror, she presses the palm of her hand on her chest and gasps with a boom. "Search his pockets," Chief Shippy orders. Mother pats the young man's pockets, her hands trembling, his sour smell making her stomach churn up. The young man fidgets and tries to wrestle away, grunting like a sinewy beast. "I think he has a pistol," Mother vociferates. Chief Shippy drops the stranger's hands and quickly draws his revolver. Mother dodges and wobbles toward a tapestry that featured—William P. Miller does not fail to note—*Saint George killing a squirming dragon*.

Chief Shippy's driver, Foley, who has just arrived to drive him to City Hall, runs up the front stairs, alarmed by the sounds of scuffle, pulling out his revolver, while Henry, Chief Shippy's son (*on leave from the Culver Military Academy*), surges downstairs from his bedroom in his pajamas, clutching a shiny, blunt saber. The young man wiggles out of Chief Shippy's grasp, steps away for a long instant—Foley opening the door with a gun in his hand, Henry stumbling down the stairs, Mother peeking from behind the dragon—and then lunges at him. Without thinking, Chief Shippy shoots at the young man; blood gushes so hard that the burst of redness blinds Foley, who, being well trained and aware of Chief Shippy's dislike of drafts, is slamming the door shut behind him. Startled by Foley, Chief Shippy shoots at him, too, and then, sensing a body rushing at him, wheels around like an experienced gunfighter and shoots at Henry. *The vile foreigner shot at Foley, shattering his wrist, and then at Henry, the bullet piercing his lung.* Consequently more bullets are fired by Shippy and Foley, seven of which hit the

young man, his blood and brains spurting and splattering on the walls and on the floor. *Throughout the struggle,* William P. Miller writes, *the anarchist had not uttered a syllable. He fought on doggedly with that cruel mouth shut tight and the eyes colored with a determination terrible to behold. He died without a curse, supplication, or prayer.*

Chief Shippy stands frozen, holding his breath, exhaling with relief as the young man dies, the gun smoke slowly moving across the room, like a school of fish.