2005

Leo

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The University of Montana

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LEO

by

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A.B. Harvard University. 2000

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

May 2005

Approved by:

Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

May 9, 2005

Date
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Mid-winter, Leo's mother grew sick. Her spare frame bent and bunched in on itself. She hobbled. Leo heard the miller compare her to potatoes that were too small to bother cleaning and so were fed to cattle. His mother was maid to the miller, the miller's wife, and their young daughter. She aired and changed the upstairs bedrooms. She swept and tidied the living room. She tended the twin fireplaces. While she washed up after the evening meal, Leo eavesdropped on the miller's private conversations with his wife. The miller was bald. He had a long face and trim black beard. His breasts were bigger than those of his wife or Leo's mother. When he spoke, he rubbed his fat chest with the open palm of his hand.

The new year came. Leo turned nine. He asked his mother how old she was and she said, "I have suffered for thirty-three years."

She stopped eating. Her suffering increased. Certain she would die and he would have no one, Leo wept. He was a serious child. When wrens twittered too long, he scolded them. Come harvest season, he punished small heads of wheat and barley by tearing them from their stalks and tossing them to the ground. He often dreamt he had said something he shouldn't have and was spanked for it. His playmates were a lively creek running east to west along the property's northern border and, limning the south and east, the first pine trees of a forest. The closest town, Lementz, was ten versts to the west. Leo had never left home. He had no father. He had never had a father. He begged his mother to eat.
To his surprise, she agreed. Her illness made her comply with any order, even a child's. Shy as ever, however, she refused to be spoon-fed. Little by little, over the course of each day, she chewed and swallowed the remnants of boiled potatoes with herring sauce. Her cheeks reddened. Her walk straightened. The flesh around her fingers filled. She woke smiling one morning. Was she well? Leo asked. She told him that she would live another fifty years.

"And me?"

"You will live," she said, "one hundred years more."

Snow fell. His mother lost a boot stepping out of a foot-deep drift. Immediately she searched for the shoe, but the inscrutable mass of powder offered nothing. She had fallen behind on her chores in her illness and now had no time to replace her boot. All day she worked with one foot exposed to the cold.

In his earliest memory, Leo himself stood barefoot. This was three and a half years ago, a sunny afternoon by the creek the summer of his fifth year. A small dam diverted a section of the stream down a seventy-five-foot-long raceway, turning the red-painted, four-ton waterwheel. From the end of the millrace, Leo watched the coming flow rise to what seemed a flood. As the slotted wheel groaned awake and began to turn, he drew closer, until water misted his face and splashed his bare feet. He had thought this great fun until he realized the miller had left his side to enter the mill. Leo's heart caught and he hurried himself through the door, only to halt in fear again at a tremendous whimpering sound surging beneath his dripping toes.
The miller laughed, told him in Yiddish that the “beast” was the bull gear in the basement, powered by the turning of the waterwheel. As the underground tailrace returned the borrowed water to the creek, the miller explained, the bull gear turned a pinion gear, driving belts which drove the pulleys. The pulleys’ high-pitched squeaks echoed like birds of the forest off the building’s white brick walls. Power transferred to the upright shaft. On the first floor, the shaft turned the runner stone above the stationary bed stone. In this way was grain ground into flour.

The next summer Leo learned to place a wooden cover over the stones during the grinding process, preventing the escape of any stray powder. His master climbed a sturdy ladder to the second floor, engaging and disengaging gearsets to power one machine and halt another. Leo turned seven. His chores expanded outside the mill. Early each spring, the miller hired six stocky village peasants to lay new logs horizontally across the creek. Before they formed this dam, the peasants cleared the wheel of stray stones that had accumulated in its period of disuse and might jam the mechanism. Somehow the miller had grown to suspect that these men trespassed his land under cover of dark, surreptitiously adding stones to the wheel all winter to justify their exorbitant fee of ten roubles for the dam work. He exacted his revenge kopek by kopek, adding a heavy toe to the base of his black metal balance beam scale each time village women approached the storage bins to buy flour. It was Leo’s responsibility to check the red wheel each day of operation after that first clearing, and to alert the miller of any new encumbrances delivered by the hand of God or man.

He did this job well, for the following spring the miller taught Leo basic arithmetic to help him weigh and measure. “Addition, you eat,” the miller said.
“Subtraction, you starve.” Half deaf from a life of long hours amidst rushing water and heavy machinery, the man spoke with the same raspy shout whether ordering Leo to sweep the barn or his daughter to sit on his knee, telling his maidservant to boil tea water or his pinch-faced wife to unrobe for him. This bark was to Leo the very emblem of manhood. As his mother spoke only when spoken to, even alone with her son, what Leo learned of the world beyond his own experience came from eavesdropping on his master.

He learned, for example, that his mother was a poor cook, but a cleaner of such persistence that she could scrub a black bear white. He learned that his father was a heaping pile of the shit of one such bear, and that the man had stolen a horse, abandoned Leo’s mother, and met his death on the road to Rovno, trying to cheat a left-handed Cossack at cards, all before Leo was even born. He learned that he was large for his age, that his mother took from her own meals to feed him, and that the miller allowed this indulgence—a child fed as much as a man—because he judged Leo strong, smart, alert, and obedient.

Leo learned that all peasants were drunks and all grain sellers cheats. He learned that the sun had shaken hands with the earth in a conspiracy to make Polish wheat, barley, oats, and rye hard enough to crack buhrstone. He learned that his master’s daughter (a pale-skinned, soft-cheeked girl nine months his junior) would grow to marry the son of a city merchant, some man so enamored of her that he would surely foreswear a dowry, buy the miller more land, and sprinkle them all with Moscow cologne, a blend of bergamot, jasmine, oak moss, and musk.

Christ, Leo learned, was tortured by the Pope, the Czar, and Julius Caesar so that they could tell the world to hate the Jews. Napoleon had crossed the continent as a
messiah, but had caught cold in Moscow before he could carry the east into the kingdom of heaven. The Czar was a miller, Russia his grinding stone, Poland his bed stone, and every Jew between the two a poor piece of grain.

A coughing fit took his mother. For three nights, rather than sleep, Leo, at her direction, compressed wet cloth rags atop her aching chest and kneaded her back at each point she identified the stinging pain. He did not cry. Crying attracted attention and he had been told to keep her fever their secret. His mother feared dismissal should the miller or his wife suspect disease. Through the worst of her coughing, Leo stood behind her and hugged her over her hollowed shoulders.

“I'll take care of you,” he said the third night, and meant it.

His mother sat up, spoke in a whisper. “Something has broke me.”

Her neck and head shook violently above his grasp.

“Your fifty years,” said Leo.

“I want,” she said, “no more of it.”

Early one morning the previous summer, Leo, then eight years old, had woken on his back. The cottage was cool and dry and dark and silent. It was not yet dawn. He felt his mother's long fingers on his lips, the warmth of her thin body beside his on the pallet. He raised his chin without opening his eyes. He let her look at his round face, his curls bronzed by the sun. Looking at Leo was how his mother told him she loved him. But she was so shy. She could only look if Leo kept his eyes closed. When his eyes opened, she would stand and turn from him. He wished he could once look at his mother looking
at him. He wanted fully to witness her love. By his own look, he wanted to show her that he loved her, too.

His eyes opened. His mother stood, she turned.

Leo stood himself. He stretched, scratching where the straw had worn red in the bare skin above his knee breeches.

"Today the miller goes to town," he said.

"Come wash," his mother said, and brought Leo a shallow basin of well water.

Drips fell from his chin as he wriggled on his gray, rough-cloth blouse. He had grown four inches in the last six months. To kiss his forehead, his mother stood at tiptoes.

"If he takes me with him to Lementz," Leo asked, "what will I buy you?"

She bowed her head, frowning. She said, "We have only each other."

In the barn, Leo brushed the bay horse. He bridled it and harnessed it to the carriage. He led the rig outside to the light. Chickens scattered. Leo smiled at their clucking. He kicked dust and the birds fluttered. He laughed. He looked over his shoulder, first at the brick well, forty-three feet deep, then to the two-story stone house of the miller. He had the carriage to himself for several minutes more. His master ate an enormous breakfast each time he left for Lementz. It was an oft-expressed point of pride for the miller that, since the day he married, he had never paid for a meal.

Leo tied the lead rope of the horse to the trunk of an old maple. Pushing himself up by his elbows, he crawled inside the carriage. He swept the wooden bench of dust and checked it for splinters. He took the seat and sat tall.
A bird chirped. Leo closed his eyes. He imagined a tall black hat on his head, peasants nodding below as he passed. He dreamt that the miller had taken him on as a true apprentice. He had married the miller’s daughter. He had taken over the mill. He had prospered such that his mother was attended day and night by two servants all her own. Beside him in the carriage was a red silk cushion on which he carried home from town gifts of silver, diamond, gold.

Then Leo heard heavy footsteps. He hopped from the carriage and chased chickens across the yard. The miller arrived in a stiff collar and well-shined shoes. Leo stretched to hand him the leather reins bunched on the horse’s back. He untied the horse and walked it past the barn and mill to the creek. His master loudly ordered him to release the bridle. Leo obeyed, retreating. Light off the passing water played on the bank.

As the miller crossed the gently-bowed wooden bridge over the creek, the carriage wheels clicked. Leo had never traveled further from his cottage than this bridge. Despite what he had told his mother, despite his daydream, the idea of traveling with the miller to town terrified him. He had no money and simply to exhale in town, the miller had said, required fifty kopeks. In town lived three thousand strangers. Leo did not like the idea of someone seeing him and having thoughts about him that he could not control. He would have questions he could not ask, and so would feel stupid. He would miss his mother and the company of her silence.

He hastened back home among the friendly berry bushes thriving near shore. The fruit emerged as a tart vermillion in late April, maturing to a sweet purple by mid-July when his mother picked them for use in the miller’s kitchen. The season had only just

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begun, but Leo gathered a great handful of berries to carry back to his mother. He took care not to scratch himself on their thorns. The air was warm when he finished. Leo yawned. His eyelids were heavy and it took concerted effort to blink. He trudged back.

At the base of the waterwheel, Leo noticed a new rock. The stone was black as night, the size of a grown man’s head.

Suffocating in the cottage, his mother told him to carry her to the barn. It was midnight, the dirt path illuminated by a hostile moon on dumbly falling flakes. When she went limp, Leo staggered, sank an inch deeper into the compact snow, but kept on until his mother lay on straw beside the stall of the miller’s horse. Wind whipped the building’s wooden walls. Leo untied her shawl, and they sat together, mother and son. He stroked her hair, clumped with sweat, and clasped her calloused hands. Small mouth open in an overbite, she stared at him with filmy brown eyes. He stared back.

First light. A cock crowed, then another. The horse stirred with whinnies, snorts, shuffling hooves. His mother did not blink.

Leo leaned forward. He kissed her forehead. With long, nimble fingers, his only inheritance, he closed his mother’s eyes.

She had survived only long enough to pass her cough on to the miller and his family. Her pains now wracked them, too. Above his seat in the living room, Leo heard the miller’s hoarse cry, then, trailing two octaves higher in the air, the plaintive wail, a dying animal’s, from the daughter of the house. He sat on the floor before the fireplace, holding his shins in his hands, rocking. He had discovered a way to close his eyes so
tightly he could see bright light beyond the black. The miller's wife whimpered that she could not breathe. She called his mother's name. The miller called his name. A cup of water, they asked. A change of clothes. One fewer blanket. One more. They called and called again.

Leo said nothing. He did nothing. The pain and self-pity of the miller and his family turned his heart against them. Already, they could no longer stand of their own accord. Tomorrow, their breath labored, they would cease to speak above a whisper. Without assistance, each—first the child, then the woman, then the man—would drop dead within the week. Leo rocked. He squeezed his eyes still tighter. He would not let anyone take his hundred years from him. He had to take care of himself.

The daughter: “Papa! My back!”

“Boy!” barked the miller.

The fire flickered and Leo fed it the last of the house wood. The cries upstairs diminished. He returned to his rocking. As tight as he squeezed his eyes now, however, he saw nothing but black. As the fire died, an odd heat overtook him. He sweat under his chin, behind his knees, between his toes. A stench descended on the living room.

When he opened the door, Leo gasped in the white air.

He blinked twice, squinted, raised a hand to shield his eyes. A fresh snow cover reflected the first rays of sun. He licked his chapped lips. He ran his hands through his hair. The wind fell, and he heard the gurgle of the half-frozen creek.

He recalled the miller's story about the left-handed Cossack, and, for the first time, wondered what was true and what was false.
Snow invaded his high, wrinkled boots through tears below the ankle. New flakes pushed those before them forward until slush covered Leo heel to toe. He had decided his father was not dead. He had decided that the man lived in town. He had decided that he, Leo, would find him. His alternative was to die alone in the cold. Leo crossed the creek.

An hour passed. He reached a peasant village. It surprised Leo to see the peasants lived in cottages like his own only bigger, built of pine beams and metal rods interwoven with straw cords and clay. The men had rough red faces. They wore bushy beards and black caps. With their sons, they loaded wooden carts with carved pails and yokes and kneading troughs to sell in town. They joked and swore and slapped each other's backs.

Leo squinted, searching the faces by the passing carts for his own round features. The men opened their mouths so wide when they laughed. Inside, past their lips, past their tongues, past their teeth, Leo saw a trembling darkness. He understood little of their low grunts. When one spoke directly to him, he shook his head. A wet wind ballooned his loose, unbelted trousers. He tugged his sheepskin coat up at the collar. Goosebumps raised at the exposed skin of his upper arm and neck. He had no cap. Flurries flaked his brown curls. It was mid-afternoon when he reached Lementz.

A bent and broken metal gate, eight feet tall, blocked the raised highway over a swampy pit where once a deep moat had surrounded the shtetl. Leo pushed the door, but the structure held shut. He tried again, failed again, shaking the gate's metal bars several times without effect. A fresh path of hoof and foot prints circumnavigated the moat to his right.
Leo drew his eyebrows together toward the middle of his forehead. His nose ran.
If he touched the roof of his head, he knew, he would find his hair wet as after a wash.
He placed his hands, red with cold, under his coat and blouse and against his bare belly.
He was hungry now and imagined peeled potatoes, thinly sliced and boiled with beef.
The real herrings they had eaten at winter solstice. A steaming black kettle, full of thick barley, onions, and potato soup, a slice of lamb or veal bobbing at the surface in a reddish film of fat. He would find food, then his father in the town marketplace. Walking around the moat was an unnecessary diversion.

Leo removed his arms from his abdomen. He stood and stepped down into the ankle-deep mud of the pit. His feet warmed just enough for him to know how cold they were. Wet, sucking sounds followed each step. Dirty snow spewed out his boots at the ankles, dripped from his elbows, found its way past his lips. Tugging up his trousers, cleaning himself as he could with the clean snow at eye level, Leo crawled up onto the single cobblestone street of Lementz.

Smoke rose from the brown brick chimney of a schoolhouse to his right. A hundred yards off in the opposite direction, a peasant woman fed cattle straw and chaff from a tumbril. Leo approached. He asked directions to the market.

The woman shook her head toward the south.

Leo asked for money for a meal. “My father will repay you well,” he said.

“Who is your father?” the woman said sharply.

“I am the father,” said Leo. He kicked snow at her, heard her curse his back when he turned.
A young girl stooped before an uncovered well, ladling dusty water. Further down the road began blocks of frame houses, cramped close to each other and to the street, topped by stacked rows of wooden shingles. Inside these kitchens, he imagined, other boys' mothers punched down the dough set to rise last night, cleaned fish for dinner, sat to peel potatoes for pudding. He wanted none of it. He told himself he had his own family.

Leo reached the square area of the marketplace. Shoppers packed the stalls, their footsteps and the warming day making mud of the brown earth perimeter. Leo shuffled between passersby. He shuddered. The strangers were too many. He backed into the center of the market. His shoulders grazed cold concrete. He shifted to face an enormous pillar. Forty feet tall, ten feet square at the base, the column narrowed to two feet at the top where a round brass ball, perhaps three feet in diameter, hung by a foot-long bar. Leo strained to find his own glimmering reflection in the ball, or some sight of the market, but made out only shadows. He had never seen anything as huge or as horrible.

On the other side of the pillar, he heard a high-strung men's tailor scolding his apprentices. Leo turned. The apprentices relined the overcoats of two fellow merchants of prosperous middle age. The merchants had noses entirely unlike his. The apprentices, of course, were far too young to be his father. The tailor had black hair whereas Leo had light brown. He moved down the row of tailors. Hung loosely on a wooden hook behind a counter of the next shop, the frayed silk cape of a Polish nobleman twisted in the breeze. Apprentices, still too young, sewed the sleeves of dress shirts. The tailor, his left eye squinted shut like that of a pheasant hunter, rifle high, finished the tricky seamwork of a broad trouser bottom. The man's narrowed eye was only a shade darker brown than
Leo’s. When he stood, however, Leo saw that he had a large mole on his chin; the mole made it impossible to consider the man his father.

A skinny groom parked a horse and carriage before the entrance to an inn. Steam from the horse’s nose wisped in the shape of a mustache. The groom grinned broadly. Leo thought his teeth too white. The groom was a fake and a fool and he had straight hair instead of curly. Leo hated the man’s happiness.

“Four for a lonely rouble!” he heard a seamstress protest when a beggarly customer tried to wheedle a better bargain.

He tracked a stiff-backed nobleman to the workshop of a joiner. Inside, the nobleman showed skin several shades lighter than his own, but the joiner had a perfect round face and round light brown eyes, a great mass of curly hair of the same color, skin like Leo’s, and a kind, intelligent smile. He was tall and strong and he listened carefully as the nobleman spelled out the name of his sixteen-year-old son. This name—Wieslaw Wilczynski—the joiner was to carve in handsome script below the metal fittings of a richly-decorated chest. “The boy begins university in Lodz next month,” the nobleman told him, “and his mother insists he carry an entire wardrobe, not excluding his favorite bedsheets and pillow.”

Leo dug his toe in the dirt while he waited for the nobleman to leave. When he was alone with the joiner, he spoke. “Do you have a son?”

“I have two sons,” the joiner said.

Leo did not know what to make of this answer. “Am I your son?” he asked.

The joiner’s smile deepened, but in a way that made Leo feel foolish. The man moved to sand down the curved wood walls of a baby’s cradle. “Stay warm,” he said.
Outside, Leo’s shoulders ached. His knees buckled. From a passing basket, he filched a potato. Leo turned the root over and over in his hands to slough its skin of dirt. He salivated. He could cry he was so eager at last to eat. His first bite tasted like an especially watery apple, his second like soft wood. His throat would not open to swallow the third. He was tired and hungry and his exhausted head stung. He wanted only to be home, held by his mother. He knew now his story of his father was no better than the miller’s. His father was dead or insurmountably distant. He had only himself and he hated himself. He could not say now whether he wanted to live.

Leo stomped in the snow. None of the shoppers noticed him. Their inattention doubled his sense of insult and injury. He stomped again, splattering mud. Rather than acknowledge the tantrum, the crowd shifted almost imperceptibly to avoid him. With all his weight, Leo stomped. He managed to mar the knees of a blonde man’s trousers, but the man flicked his pants clean without breaking stride. Leo stomped again and his boots split at the seams. Again and the bottoms broke in two. When Leo stepped down a final time, it was with naked skin on snow.

In the coming crowd, he saw a middle-aged woman with a basin face. She wore a fine shawl and furry muff. With care, she stepped through the marketplace. A tall, bucktoothed man in his mid-twenties shuffled beside her, offering his elbow when needed. He scowled above a blinking squint. Both wore expensive black boots.

Leo crouched his toes in the cold earth. He shifted from heel to heel to keep from freezing. He would not die like his mother of bare feet and a broken spirit. He wanted his own fine boots. He wanted to live. As well, he wanted notice.
Leo gathered snow in his hands. He saw that it stuck. He formed a ball and chucked it at the woman, formed another ball and chucked it at the man. The woman took her hit square in the jaw. She squealed, slipped, fell back on the man. The man got his on the forehead. As if slapped, he stared dumbly forward and failed completely to catch his falling partner. Their shock when she met the mud could not have been more satisfying. For the first time since his mother’s death, Leo laughed.

The injured man peered over the gathering onlookers, saw Leo’s wet hands, read his dumb grin. He took chase.

Leo sprinted across the square. His exposed flesh on the snow made a slight spitting sound. He slid past black-robed men with uncut earlocks. He pressed his back against the warm wall of a baker’s stall. At a distance of fifty yards, Leo saw the bucktoothed man interrogate a shrugging blacksmith. He halted. If he saw the man, he believed, the man would see him. But if he did not move, neither would the man. Slowly, surely, Leo shifted his gaze. Another blacksmith shod a sad-eyed, jittery black pony. The animal turned its long head to take in Leo. His theory proven, Leo backed away, one step at a time, until he saw no one but strangers and no one but strangers saw him.

He reached a cluster of five shoemakers’ shops. At the last of the lot, Leo opened the door to the rich animal odor of leather. His icy toes made muddy prints on the dirt floor. Leo felt himself sway. He steadied himself by inspecting the store’s wooden shelves. The shtivl maker wore a white smock and molten black curls. He did not turn from his conversation in the store’s rear. “Tell him my measurements are correct,” he told a delivery boy. “Tell him I’ll make the uppers myself if I must.”
Leo hastened to act before the argument ended or the bucktoothed man appeared. He tugged sturdy laces, he squeezed well-blocked heels. The shoemaker turned. Leo sniffed the thick fur lining, he nestled his fists in its warm tufts. He licked his fingers, then ran them along the leather grain to see if the shoes soaked or squeaked. The merchant's facial features bunched so tightly together a porridge bowl could cover completely his eyes, nose, and mouth. Leo took shoes from the shelf and placed them on the floor. He stepped inside a black pair simple in design, but superior to all others.

"Stop!" said the shoemaker as Leo finished tying the laces. "Thief!"

Leo ran from the store. He had never worn such well-made shoes. In warmth, support, fit, and flexibility, their comforts surpassed his imagination. The sensation was as foreign and fantastic as had he been given new feet. The air felt free on his face and the snow underfoot firm and friendly. His round eyes widened. His wet curls flapped. He heard shouts, saw outstretched hands, but knew no one could catch him. He neither had nor needed a destination. He would simply run. In running, he would escape his mother's eyes. He would escape the miller's call. He would escape his father's absence. He would escape his hunger, his poverty, his anger, his fear, his seriousness, and his solitude. He would escape himself and never be found. In these boots, he would have his hundred years.

Ahead Leo saw a great burst of white. Then he was upon it.
A special order. Going to the see the czar. Above the dirty snow.

The warming day and commotion of footsteps had turned the ice and dirt of the market ground at the scene of the crime to ankle-deep mud. Police Chief Henryk Dorn, a short man of two hundred pounds, stepped with care past the women of the market, curious types, thick around the waist, thick around the head. "Clear the way," he said. "Let me through." But these great busybodies would not budge from the spectacle before them. So diverting was their blockade of plump behinds and the danger of the sodden turf, it was not until Chief Dorn stared the whelp face-to-face that he realized the latest criminal in his custody was a child.

Dorn pushed up the spectacles rimming his blue-black eyes. Forty-one years old, punctilious in matters of hygiene, he parted his pomaded brown hair in the center, bathed thrice-weekly, and washed his hands with soap each evening before supper. In March, he would celebrate the tenth anniversary of his marriage to a timorous woman with whom he enjoyed hearty, mutually-satisfying anal intercourse. The couple was without children, whom the police chief considered incurably untidy. Now a blocky boy without yet a hair to his balls wriggled in the arms of his deputy.

"What's the trouble, Tokarski?" Dorn asked.

His assistant, twenty-six, contorted his 6'1" frame as the boy turned and twisted. "Little bastard took a pair of boots from one of the market yids."

The injured party stepped forward in the smock of his trade and the greasy, lice-ridden curls of his kind. Twice on his approach to the thief, the yid craned his neck to scan the shadows of his dusty shtivl shop, as if suspicious of another intruder. Dorn
shivered at the thought of entering the ramshackle structure. He would not have used it as an outhouse.

"Ganef!" Thief! "Ganef!" the merchant shouted.

Too quickly for Dorn to stop him, the yid grasped at his stolen merchandise. The boy, squirming, refused to release his treasure. In the struggle before they could be separated, victim and thief kicked up a considerable quantity of earth. Dorn didn’t know whether to curse or cry as he looked from the footwear in the boy’s hands to the dirty, black drops marring his own polished Hessians. The knee-high boots had been manufactured by the famous Viennese cobbler Pipsberg, a special order down to their red-tasseled tops. It would take him an hour with soap and water, polish and rag to restore them to sanctity.

One of the market women coughed. Chief Dorn felt the eyes of the female crowd on him. Their breath mingled with his in the chill noon air. The police chief pulled his powdered white uniform gloves tighter, then helped his constable pin the writhing boy in place.

He was all bone, this boy. Not weak, however. Clutching him by the elbow was like squeezing sharp flint. Nor, Dorn thought, was the young thief stunted. If he should happen to perish in custody, his corpse would fetch the full price from the surgeon Okonski.

Blows from Tokarski brought the boy to his knees. Dorn placed a heavy knee on the child’s neck. His deputy squeezed hard around the thief’s midsection. With his left hand, Dorn applied additional weight to a shoulder. With his right hand, he pinched the boy’s ear until he heard a squeal.
The child's resistance ceased. Hands in place, Dom stood and gasped for air after his exertions. Still, he did not dare release his grip, not even for the second it would take to sweep the sweat from his brow. The wretch might smell of the barn in which he had been born, but there something more to him than the typical starved young country thug. He could be biding his time for a second attempt at escape. Even after his public capture and beating, the boy's round face showed no sign of alarm.

"Are you too stupid to be frightened?" Dom asked.

"I'm going to see the czar," came the child's strained response.

"I am the czar." Dom straightened his back. Let all remember who was lord and master here. "Tell me your name."

"Herzel," said the yid.

"Not you. The boy."

But the thief did not answer.

"Where is your father?"

"I am the father," the child said.

Constable Tokarski back-handed the delinquent's ruddy cheek. "Answer the question," he said.

The boy looked down at the ground. He spat.

"Tokarski." Dorn invited his junior colleague to an impromptu conference.

Sylwester Tokarski's shuffling walk, blinking squint, and two prominent front teeth had emboldened his peers to taunt him as a simpleton until a growth spurt at age eighteen allowed him vigorously to defend himself. What insecurity remained manifested itself as sudden, intense anger. When intoxicated, Dorn knew, Tokarski took advantage of his
height to peep into otherwise closed shutters. Yet he was intensely loyal to his employer, who had never teased him and whose orderly manner the constable said he found calming. "We will question the boy elsewhere."

Tokarski crossed his arms. "It's a simple question, sir." He spoke at a volume sufficient for Herzel and the female onlookers to hear him. "I think he can be made to answer it."

Taking care not to loosen his grasp on the child's shoulder and ear, Dom stole another look at his muddied tassels. He would soak them in alcohol, but how to do so without eating away the surrounding leatherwork? The longer he waited to clean the boots, he knew, the smaller the chance of their complete recovery.

"Sir?" said Tokarski.

Dom sighed. "Very well," the police chief told his constable.

Tokarski bent to position his lips by the boy's other ear. "Tell us who your father is!" he ordered. He slapped the child. "We will be answered!" Panting, another slap. "Tell us!"

"Look at him," spoke a woman of the crowd. "He's an orphan."

"His clothes," another said. "He's dressed in rags."

Tokarski caught his breath. Glowering, he wiped spittle from his chin.

"Don't worry," Dorn told the shivl seller, Herzel. "The boy will not bother you again."

But the yid did not respond to him directly. Instead, he addressed the thief:

"Redstu Yiddish?"

A nod.
“A Jewish boy,” the women whispered to each other.

Dorn turned. “Silence,” he told them. “This is not your concern. I must order you to disperse.”

The crowd quieted, but did not move. Where once Dorn would have counted seven or eight as their number, now he saw a dozen female faces, all red cheeks and unsympathetic eyes.

Tokarski stripped the pair of boots from the thief’s hands. “Do you deny you stole these?” he said. Six or seven times, he smacked the boy’s forehead with the shoes.

Calmly, the child endured this onslaught. When the boots lay still before his eyes, his big brown eyes squinted in appraisal. “Yes,” he said. “Those are the boots.”

“Look at him.” Tokarski laughed. “An appraiser for the empress!”

Dorn took the footwear from his deputy. He wiped clean any dust from the scuffle. Before he wore a single item again, his entire wardrobe would need a wash.

“Here you are, sir,” he said, returning the bundle to Herzel.

The yid studied his merchandise with a puzzled expression. He breathed deeply through his nose. He stroked his horrible chin. “These are good boots,” he told Dorn. “The best in my shop, likely, and this little ganef had to run almost right into my arms to take them.”

“Yes?” said the police chief. He would wash his hair and scrub his face. He would clip and clean his fingernails. He would soak his feet. He would sprinkle the back of his neck with cologne imported from Moscow, a blend of bergamot, jasmine, musk and oak moss. Only then could he attend to his clothing.
"If the boy had taken other boots, shabbier ones, like those I keep outside, I might never have seen him," Herzel said. "A curious choice, then, to take the ones he did, no?"

"Simple chance, I'm sure." Dorn thought he would gladly trade half a year's salary for fresh linens. "The boy is a common thief."

"Trash," said Tokarski. He took Dorn's position behind the child, squeezing hard when it appeared the boy might swing.

Herzel turned to face the culprit. "Why these?" he asked. "Why from me did you take these boots?"


Dorn's chest itched as if consumed by body lice. He scratched and scratched. A nine-year-old nothing lecturing them on laces! Dorn could not say how he had come to this absurdity and he could not say how he would end it. Let a blizzard come and bury boy, yid, constable, and crowd. Alone, let him walk away white and clean. He looked off into the distance and imagined his wife's buttocks, wet with soapy water from the bath. His heartbeat slowed. His breath deepened. He stopped scratching.

"This case," he said, "is settled."

"What a shame, for a Jewish boy, with an eye like this, to be taken away." The yid addressed the crowd. "A cousin, he could be. A brother. A son!"

"Come now," said Dorn. "You say he's an orphan, you say he's a son."
“Khappers,” one woman said, crying. An onion tumbled from her small straw basket to the snow. “Kidnappers. Waiting in the street. Snatching boys for eastern Siberia.”

“He’s a criminal,” said Dom. “A thief.”

Tokarski, tugging the boy all the tighter: “Trash!”

“Can’t we save him?” asked Herzel.

The women, as one: “What are we going to do?” Together now, these thick creatures wept.

“Disperse!” said Dom. “I will not order you again.”

Tokarski hooted. “Yes, cry!” he said. “I will fit him in his soldier’s overcoat myself.”

The boy looked back and forth between his captors and the crowd. He closed his eyes. He lifted his chin. His mouth opened and he spoke: “Baruch atah Adonai.”

“Speak Polish or I will strangle you,” said Dom.

“Baruch atah Adonai! Baruch atah Adonai!”

Herzel, to the crowd: “Help him as you can!”

A black-haired bagel seller lifted one of the dozen skirts she wore, one on top of the other, to keep warm. She picked up the next skirt, and the next, and the next. Hem bunched on hem until they formed an inch-thick fabric wad. Her fat hands thumbed their way to a pocket sewn into the last skirt. From this pocket, the woman proudly counted out several coins and offered them to Herzel.

“Thank you, Madame,” said the yid.
Another skirt lifted, and beside that skirt, another. Like an entire garden's petals opening in unison to a bloom, some six score skirts rose in the winter afternoon. Two dozen hands grasped for tinkling coins. An equal number of legs, hardly hidden now from the wind, rubbed against each other for warmth. Together, fifteen roubles were collected before all one hundred and twenty-one raised skirts fluttered down to their proper position an inch or two above the dirty snow.

Herzel said, “I will hire the boy. With me, he will always have a job.” The yid could not close his greasy palm, so full it was with coins.

Tokarski looked to his superior. Dorn nodded. At last, he could anticipate an agreeable conclusion to this all.

His constable dropped a hand from the boy, into which Herzel slipped three roubles. The remainder could go well toward another bottle of cologne. Even when the yid counted out ten roubles, keeping two for himself, Dorn accepted the sum as fine wage for an hour's work. He could always take the other two roubles from Tokarski.

“Very well,” said the police chief. He sniffed. “Do not call us to such a dispute again.”

He sacrificed another second’s precious cleaning time seeking the attention of the child. Freed from Tokarski, the thief rolled his sore shoulders forward and back. The boy yawned, by all appearances entirely unflustered by his rapid change in fate.

“I don’t care what your name is, but you are a resident of my town and you will live by my rules,” Dorn told him. “If you have to drown in the River Dvina doing it, see that you take a bath.”
On his right index finger, just below the upper knuckle, Leo balanced a thin, flat, tooth-white stone. Concentrating on the object, he held his breath. His eyes crossed, softening the stone to a gray cloud. Thirteen, flush with strength to the point of clumsiness, Leo felt his biceps bulge beneath a black vest whose buttons he had twice this month popped putting it on in the morning. He sucked air in through his nostrils, uncrossed his eyes. His pupils fluttered to a focus. Only his long fingers, conditioned by the daily lacing and unlacing of shoes, could be counted on to operate with reasonable reliability.

With his thumb, Leo pushed the stone up onto and across the top of his index finger. He raised and lowered his middle finger in quick succession, lifting the object, then pinching it vertically in place between fingers. The middle digit further lowered to flip the rock over and onto the middle knuckle. Raise, lower, lift, pinch, flip, catch—the stone floated from middle to ring finger, ring to pinky. When it reached the end of his hand, Leo let the narrow object drop flat to his extended thumb. He then brought it back around underneath his other fingers, raised it to his index finger, and repeated the trick two more times until he lost his rhythm. The stone struck his chest, dimpling his clean white shirt, and fell to the dry, dusty path just outside the door of Herzel’s shop.

Leo tidied his shirt. “As if they were your own skin, take care of your clothes,” the boy had been instructed each time he needed a new outfit or alteration. He resented the implicit accusation of carelessness. Was it his fault how fast he grew? Easy for older men, who could afford their own purchases, to lecture! Yet Leo made no outward sign of
his dissatisfaction, nodding at each insult. Alone, he might bristle, might protest. But what was he to do without money of his own?

Bending to retrieve the rock, he noticed at a distance of six feet the approach of two cracked and dirty brown leather shoes. On neither shoe were the laces tied, and the sole of the right member of the pair had split from the base at the toe. The stray leather flapped pitifully, like the open mouth of a newborn lark looking for its first worm.

As if dancing, the shoes trudged two feet forward, spitting dust, spun eighty degrees to the right, returned to their original position. They retreated a step and idled briefly, right heel up. Along the underbody of the tattered right shoe, as another man might scan a woman's chest for the outline of her bosom, Leo discerned the swell of a big toe. The footwear meandered forward again on something of an ‘s'-shaped curve.

Pocketing the stone with his left hand, Leo raised his right in greeting. He looked up. These sorry shoes, he saw, belonged to a man in his late twenties. Dominating the man's face were thick, wriggling, caterpillar-like eyebrows between sleepy, almond-brown eyes and a wide rectangular forehead. Decently-dressed other than his footwear, the man frowned, facing down. To scratch his abdomen, he tugged his tan shirt up from his black trousers until the cloth bunched over and covered his leather belt. He carried a thick text under his right arm whose title his armpit obscured. His left hand clutched a full money purse.

"Good morning, sir," said Leo. His voice had cracked to the beginnings of a baritone.
The man looked from the ground to Leo. His long and furry eyebrows raised. Taken aback, the man instinctually shook his head. Immediately, with a sound like teeth grinding, he shuffled backwards one, two, three, four steps in the dirt.

"Forgive me." Leo removed his blue cap and bent his back in a half bow. Time and again, Herzel had chided him to keep his own head below those of his clients: 'Men do not like looking up to boys. On a busy day, the teenager, four inches shy of six feet, might stoop for hours. All while Herzel, his back propped against the cool, dark, curtained wall of the shop rear, 'rested' on a three-legged stool.

Leo gestured to the man’s feet. “Your shoes are untied.”

The man looked down. He bit his lip.

"Time for a new pair, isn’t it?” said Leo. “Come, come,” he hardly waited for the man to nod before ushering him inside the shop.

It was a high, humid spring day, and Leo had to pull the rope handle twice to separate the swelled wooden door of the shop from the frame. The man followed. Leo bent at the knee on the smooth dirt ground inside the shop. “Out with the old,” he said. As his customer shifted his weight from foot to foot, the boy tugged the broken brown shoes from the man’s sticky, dirt-caked feet. The familiar smell of captive sweat rose and passed. Only then did Leo notice the man’s toenails, which were scrubbed a spotless white and well-shaped in little half-moons. He smiled in surprise. Someone had cleaned and clipped each toe with loving care.

Leo stood and consulted a shelf a shelf to his right. He brandished a shiny black model pair at his best estimate of the high end of the man’s price range. His customer, he decided, was among the self-fashioned students of the Torah, not promising enough to
leave fifteen years earlier for the Yeshiva. Unmarried, dressed each morning by his
morning by his doting mother, who wished only that she could follow him from place to
place to scratch his back and wipe his nose, he spent his days at the synagogue. Anything
less than five hundred years old mystified him. God save him if he should ever peek at
the Warsaw newspaper and see an automobile!

"These are the shoes you deserve," Leo said. "If I were a man myself, a student,"
he nodded to the book, "a scholar, these are the shoes I would wear."

Yes, Leo told himself, today Momma had sent Sonny to market to buy meat for
the Sabbath meal. But our boy preferred his book. By the time he arrived on the path to
Herzel’s shop, he had no recollection whatsoever of his original mission. All he knew
was that he was somehow to spend the contents of that coin purse.

"Indisputably, these shoes." Leo nodded vigorously. His assumption might all be
wrong, of course. But he had a story now, and 'A story,' Herzel had taught him, 'always
help a sale.' "For you," said Leo, "none other will do."

The man raised his left hand to his mouth. He sucked the tip of his thumb, lightly
biting the nail with his teeth. "I wonder—"

"The toe!" Leo interrupted. "For few of us, I know," said the teenage salesman,
"are these extremities our most flattering feature. There is a reason, we can agree, that
God in His great wisdom put these particular appendages on our feet rather than our
faces. Rest assured, however, that our footwear makes a most discreet presentation. In
these shoes, how small, how well-shaped your toes will be!"
The customer again looked down. His face scrunched in well-worn lines, as if surprised to learn he even had a lower body. What’s worse, his expression read, his feet had gone and sprouted toes….

Leo bowed a little lower. The man shook his head, trance broken. “Tell me,” he began….

“And at this toe, rest assured,” said Leo, “we will stitch the upper and insole to a narrow strip of leather called the welt. Like our labor, you will never see the welt, you will never feel the welt, but it will serve you well. Without the welt, a shoe splits within a single season and can not be resoled!”

“How—”

“Your soles will be sturdy, thin, and closely-clipped,” Leo said. “Thin? Why would you want thin soles when they are all that separates bare foot from bare earth?” He paused solicitously. His customer, of course, had no answer. “It’s true,” Leo continued, “other shops might weigh down the sole, clouding your mind with the idea that size equals strength. But,” here he lowered his voice, looked left, looked right, as if confiding a secret, “better the bottom of the footwear be light as possible.” A shrug. “Shoes should carry the man, after all, rather than man carry the shoes, no?”


“Last comes the leather strip covering the instep: the vamp,” Leo said. “This strip, I promise,” he raised his palm, promising, “to keep low on the arch.” Leo let his customer process this mysterious tidbit. The man placed his book on the ground, put his hands on his hips, listened. At last, he gave the salesman his full attention.
"The appearance of the vamp is the appearance of the foot," Leo explained.  
"Stitch the vamp too high and the foot will look as large and awkward as a hoof. Other cobblers may shod you like a horse. We prefer," a final pause, "to fit you like a glove."

The customer nodded. His eyes widened. He smiled. He reached for the shoes as if already his own.

At this reach, Leo pulled the pair into his chest, out of sight, out of reach.

"But I'm so, so sorry!" the teenager said. "They are simply too much."

Leo squeezed the bridge of his nose. He clutched his forehead. He winced exactly as Herzel had taught him. "I want you to have them," he said. "That is why I picked them for you. I shouldn't have. Not at this price. Only these are, in my mind, your shoes. But I know, I'm an orphan, believe me, I know"—'Thick, you lay it on,' Herzel had said—"you are not at liberty to choose at the Czar chooses, by desire alone. You have other considerations. And you can not serve your shoes. Your shoes must serve you."

"How much?" said the customer.

"Oh!" Leo parted his arms, flashing sight of the shoes again, before hustling them behind his back. When the man craned his neck to see over the young salesman's shoulder, Leo paced. He bowed his head. He moped. The man stretched his arms as if to take the shoes. Leo dodged. He extended to his full height. He placed the shoes on the topmost shelf, out of reach. He threw up his hands as if to push all memory of the transaction away. Then he quoted a price too high by half.

"My!" the man said. He shook his head, he backed toward the door.
To expel what he’d just uttered, Leo slumped at the knees. His customer’s backward progress halted. “Are you—” he asked.

With one hand, Leo scooped the shoes back from the shelf into his arm. With the other, he slammed his fist against the wall. As if on cue, which it was, Herzel rose from his seat at the rear of the stall and approached:

“What seems to be the problem?”

Leo told him. “And I wouldn’t mind,” the distraught adolescent said, presenting the pair for inspection, “only tell me, in your mind, are these not his shoes?”

Herzel could only agree. “I must,” he said, “take twenty percent off the price immediately.”

“Thank you!” said Leo.

“When the shoes match the man as these do,” Herzel said, “whatever my own cost, I have no other choice.”

The man licked his lips. He brought his thumb back to his mouth for another bite. Before he could wonder what sort of fix was in, Herzel took the hand in his own. The shop owner closed his eyes. He squeezed. The effect was that of two men communicating in the intimacy of their souls. When his eyes opened, Herzel nodded gallantly. “More, I must do,” he said. “Another ten percent off!”

“Too much,” said Leo. “You, too, must make your living.”

“No, no.” Herzel insisted. “For a scholar”—“for a working man like myself,” he would have said had the customer been a laborer, ‘for an elder,’ ‘for a father,’ for anyone, only Herzel would make it personal so it didn’t sound that way—“for a scholar, I must take another ten percent off.”
Leo shrugged at the customer. “His shop,” he said, rolling his eyes heavenward, where practicality did not matter. “His decision.”

“Yes,” the man said. He opened his coin purse.

“She’s not important now,” Herzel took the entire purse from his customer only to retie the drawstrings himself. “That’s not important now.” He turned to his assistant. “Leo,” he nodded sharply, “measure the man.”

Fifteen minutes later, back for the moment in his dusty shoes, the customer thanked Herzel with the humility of a tzedakah recipient. Given Leo’s initial fifty percent price inflation, the final fee still left a markup at least a couple roubles more than any other shop in town. Yet as Herzel took the man’s money, he winced with the pain of an upright man forced to live in an fallen world.

All the way to the bank, he winced, and Leo never saw a kopek.

“Ten to one he forgets to come back,” Herzel said when he and Leo were alone. “We keep the money, we keep the shoes.”

“You keep the money,” said Leo.

Herzel chuckled. “Who else?”

“I want a salary,” said Leo. “You should pay me.”

“This again? You’re a child.”

“I’m thirteen.”

“I feed you. I clothe you.”

Leo shook his head.

“Thanks to me,” said Herzel, “you sleep inside, under a roof.”

“Other apprentices are paid.”
“Now you’re my apprentice? Tell me, apprentice, what do you make?”

Leo sputtered. He waved the measurements he had just made before his employer. “Shoes, of course.”

“You prepare the uppers to measure?” asked Herzel.

“That is the cutter’s job,” said Leo.

“Your duty is to the wooden last, then? You wrap the leather?”

“No,” Leo said. Herzel still made the shoes himself, or hired out the work to other artisans without his talent for salesmanship. These men spoke with fear of the mass-manufactured shoes now available in the larger cities. Herzel looked forward to their arrival with undisguised glee.

“Perhaps you cobbled sole to heel? What of that precious welt you told our fine-foreheaded customer so much about? Do your agile hands, your unseen labor, perform the all-important stitching? Well?” Herzel raised his palm. He shook his head. “No,” he said. “You’re no kind of apprentice at all!”

“I talk,” Leo said. “I sell.”

“When I found you, you were too timid to speak your own name. It’s my spiel, you say.” Lightly, with the back of the tips of his fingers, Herzel slapped the boy’s chest, then his own. “My spiel, my shoes, my profit.”

“For four years, I’ve worked for you,” said Leo. “I can stop any time.”

“Big bluff.” Herzel puffed his cheeks dismissively. “Start your own shop, it’s so easy.”

“I don’t need my own shop.” Leo crossed his long arms. “Friedel and Domb”—shoemakers two doors down—“will take me as a partner.”
Herzel's black eyebrows dipped. His brow tightened. In three quick steps forward, he reached Leo's neck and began to choke. "I'll kill you!" Herzel said.

Leo's hands flapped helplessly at his sides like the wings of a shot duck. Cold sweat filmed his forehead. Though he had six inches on his employer, the boy could not shake the grip of hands strengthened by years of stretching leather.

"Stop!" he choked. His mouth curled in an 'o.' Where his tongue met his throat, he tasted bile. "Please!" His scope of vision narrowed to the very center of the shop shelves, the tiny black hole of a yellow work boot's unlaced eyelet.

"Wait and see!" Herzel said, slowly releasing his grasp. "Take my spiel to another man's shop!"

He kneed Leo in the stomach. The boy fell, gasping, to the ground.

Herzel gave his great-man shrug. "Two roubles a week," he said.

Leo wiped tears from his eyes. "Six." He stood. "And I want a commission."

"Commission?" Herzel turned his back, waved him away with the back of his hand. "Please, continue on your way to the Czar. I'm sorry to have stopped you."

"Six roubles, then," said Leo. He stroked his sore neck.

Herzel: "Three."

"And one more a year after that!"

"We live in dangerous times. War, famine, disease. In a year, who knows you'll be here breathing?"

Leo groaned. "May I have this week's wages?" he asked.

Herzel smiled. "Say please."
Leo, red-faced, threw the model black dress shoes to the floor and kicked them clear across the shop. On rasping impact with the door, the shoes skittered back across the ground, stopping several inches from the feet of his employer. Dirt filmed the once-spotless pair quite completely.

“You’ll only have to clean them later,” Herzel told Leo.

“You owe me three roubles.”

“Here.” Herzel flipped the boy a coin with his thumb.

“This is only one!”

“The week isn’t over.” The shop owner picked up the shoes. He pushed open the door, inviting an even surge of warm air. “Go out, spend it,” he said. “I pay you, you feed you.”

Leo walked softly from the stall with an affected calm. Alone outside, he checked his palm; yes, the coin was still there. Tugging his vest together so as not to pop another button, he ran to the only place he considered entirely his own, his seat in the rock pile at the rear of the new railway station.

The population of Lementz now exceeded five thousand; a year ago, railway construction had connected the town to Bialystok and Brest-Litovsk, as well as east to Moscow and west to Lodz. Leo could not say who exactly engineered the iron road, but on slow afternoons he had wandered from Herzel’s shop to watch the hired workmen, poor Poles and White Russians, turn earth, level roadbed, and lay track a block from the marketplace. When construction finished, many of these men had settled in the area with their families, hauling timber from the forests to feed western sawmills or serve as
railway ties further east down the line. The great stones they had unearthed in their labors stayed as well, piled one by one on a weedy, undeveloped lot behind the station.

Leo liked to climb this pile to its center. By himself, he had made a seat here ringed by larger stones; in it, he saw nothing but the sky and nothing but the sky saw him. Even when a steam engine whistled to a start thirty yards away at the station, the tall rocks surrounding his seat rebuffed the intrusion. On this throne, Leo could imagine himself all-knowing and all-powerful, a god on high. Here no history encumbered him. His future was as he chose.

In early July 1904, one week into their work, another three from finishing, the railroad laborers had unearthed close to one hundred and fifty skeletons at a depth of three feet. No one in town recalled a cemetery in this spot, nor talk of an ancient tragedy that would require sudden burial of so many. Orderly arranged in two dozen rows, four to ten skeletons to a row, the bodies bore no clues for closer identification.

“Any could be your father,” Herzel had teased Leo. “Or maybe you are a miracle. Perhaps they are all your father.”

Despite the prodding of curious community members, the boy had said nothing of his former family. He had, for a time, feared someone would remember him as the child who had twice accompanied the village miller to town. Even when the man’s fevered corpse was found with those of his wife and daughter, however, no one questioned him or suggested a connection. Another man bought the lease, took over the mill. If the new miller took special note of the small shape of a female in the barn, word never reached Leo in Lementz. The boy decided to forget the first nine years of his life; on his seat at least, he succeeded.
Leo crawled from stone to stone, placed his arms over the tall, sharp wall of his seat, and descended to the cool, smooth base of the throne. Again, he checked his coin. In the noonday light, the bearded profile of the czar appeared to wink.

Leo grinned. He placed the rouble flat on his index finger, carefully closing his knees as he did so to catch the coin should—disaster—it drop. With his thumb, he pushed the czar's face up onto and across the top of the index finger. He rolled the coin across his knuckles, caught it with his thumb, returned it to play. Seven times he rolled the rouble across his hand, then stopped to study its design in every detail, to rub its upraised features with his thumb. His first wage! Absurd, Herzel's suggestion he spend it on lunch! Better to starve than to beg again.

The boy returned to his play for several minutes more. In a pause, he stood and stretched. He climbed out of his seat. He secured the rouble on a flat, sunny rock for safekeeping. The coin glistened like the sun itself. Already, Leo anticipated its new warmth when he took it again in hand.

He dug in his pocket for the tiny white stone with which he had played this morning, a stone he had found here two months earlier, wedged behind his seat, the first day snow had melted from the rock pile. He had thought the stone special then, as if expressly placed there for him to find at winter's end. Now it looked like any other pebble. He could not imagine how he had found comfort in its company. In fact, it embarrassed him, the idea of a man carrying a pebble from place to place with him—as if it were worth something.
Leo pulled back his arm. With a yelp, he tossed the stone with all his might. The tiny object arced far past the rock pile, into the edge of the dirt and weeds, where it did not make a sound.

Leo sniffed once and rolled his right shoulder. To his left, the air smelled of soot; to his right, of pollen.

Shifting his feet, he returned his attention to the coin.

Evening approached, and with it, the Sabbath. Friday afternoons at three, the shivtsh shop closed along with the rest of the market. ‘To the bathhouse,’ the sexton summoned street-to-street in his resonant bass. All in town had fewer than two hours then to transform themselves for the holiday.

Slowly and precisely, in the dying light of late day, Leo unfolded his white wool talis koton. Two feet wide and four feet long, with black stripes along the edges, knotted fringes at each corner, and a hole in its center through which his head slipped, the fine fabric of the prayer shawl accentuated a high, muscular chest and broad shoulders more imposing than those of many full-grown men. So dressed, Leo stood taller. At temple tonight, he had nothing to sell, and therefore no need to stoop. Any shorter men sitting behind him would find their view of the bima blocked by an orphan whose existence they otherwise chose to ignore.

He smiled at the thought of their frustration. Rather than see the pointy salt-and-pepper beard of the rabbi, these men would stare at the roots of his brown curls, still wet from the bathhouse. They would lean forward, twist their necks, raise their chins in vain, sniffing the kerosene with which he had rinsed soap from his face. He imagined
anguished internal deliberations before they mustered the nerve to tap his shoulder or tug, gently, his talis. "Please," they would say, "shift to the left or right, if you will." He would pretend not to understand them. Ever so politely, he would ask them to repeat themselves. Only then, when he had fully humbled them, would Leo oblige.

"It's time," he told Herzel, who stood five feet behind Leo in the quarters they shared behind the shop.

"What's your hurry?" Herzel dug wax from his ear, then used the same finger to pick his teeth.

Leo spit on his thumb and knelt to wipe a spot of mud from his boots. They were a larger size of the same model he had stolen his first day in town. Every six months or so for almost four years now, Herzel had given him a new pair. Until today, Leo had received no other payment for sixty hours a week of work. The thirteen-year-old patted down the talis, probing two layers deep to the shirt breast pocket where he had deposited the rouble. His heart quickened at the touch of its round outline.

When the boy rose again, he put on his cap and passed Herzel his own. "Let's go." He wanted to choose his seat this evening, not take what was left.

Herzel took the cap. He shook his head. "Something sinful, I think," he said, "to hurry to the day of rest."

Together, the two walked to the synagogue along a new sidewalk surrounding the market. Earlier this year, Chief Dom, his tolerance for the mud of commerce exhausted, had ordered property owners to pave the street around the shops. Traversing the smooth pale path, Leo stomped, trying to knock the dirt from his boots and thus, in some small way, contribute to the trig, priggish officer's dismay.
In the synagogue yard, boys his age clustered in small groups. They prodded and poked each other. They whispered. They teased.

Leo curled his lower lip in a disdainful frown. These playmates had begun school together at age five. By twelve, students in the modern Hebrew school as well as the public school, they had known the Bible in basic outline and had started study of the Talmud, read and wrote Yiddish and Hebrew and a smattering of Russian, and could add, subtract, multiply, and divide. Spoiled brats, when they put on and took off their talis, they said prayers in Hebrew he could neither read or write. Most had now become a Bar Mitzvah, puffed up with ancient nothings they paraded in temple services. Four years ago, Leo had made the mistake of asking Herzel when he would join the Hebrew school himself. “Who speaks Hebrew?” Herzel told him. “Stick with me, in the shop, much more you’ll learn.”

The doors of the sanctuary opened. The crowd outside tightened into a line of entrants. Boys left their friends and found their fathers.

Leo looked up and out at the clouds of the darkening sky. He had no need for fathers, no need for friends. Herzel had taught him to read, and enough additional arithmetic to assist him. Languages, the boy learned listening to the negotiations from stall to stall. Twelve was the earliest others might apprentice to an artisan. In this way, he told himself, he had had a three year advantage over any child in town. The market was his school, the customers his company. From the lowliest landsman, a single cow to his name, trading village peasants manure for mushrooms, to the two or three major merchants, their stock worth ten thousand roubles, traveling by train several times a year
to Warsaw on business, Leo understood the entire economy of Lementz. Today—once more, through his clothes, he fingered his rouble—he had joined that economy.

He entered the temple, hung his cap, put on a yarmulke. Herzl, just ahead of him, yawned broadly. “How warm they keep it,” he said. “In May!”

“There’s no heating today,” Leo protested. “It’s only the crowd.” At least once a month, whatever the season, the boy had to nudge his employer awake during the brief Friday evening service.

Inside the hall of worship, closest to the Ark on the eastern wall, davened the men of learning, the pillars of the temple, led tonight by the pear-faced, thick-lipped Bialik.

Minutes after extricating Leo from Chief Dorn’s custody, the women of the market had marched the boy straight to this man, the gabbai, charged with the funds for the synagogue. Every cent of the tax on kosher meat—three kopeks for a chicken and six for a duck, eight for a goose and twelve for a turkey, sixty for a calf and eighty for an ox—passed through Bialik’s two-room office on a quiet corner of the synagogue yard. What purpose this tax, the market women had asked him, if it could not keep their neediest children clothed?

Trustees of the Community Council rarely answered to the public. Yet Bialik had not risen to such importance without taking full measure of those with whom he spoke. He apologized, lips smacking, eyebrows pinched, in the stressed, strident voice of a Yeshiva student who has torn a scroll of the Torah. “I will see to it,” he had said finally, “that the boy has enough to wear.”

To that promise Leo owed his entire outfit from his talis to his trousers, freshly tailored to his expanding frame, in which he now took his seat. When he outgrew his old
black silk Sabbath caftan, Bialik had graced him with a new one, embroidered around the neckline. In this respect, Leo noted proudly, he was more smartly dressed than Herzel, whose own ceremonial robe lacked embroidery and had greened with age. Yet the gift of the garment had renewed an old frustration. “Rip this,” Bialik had warned the boy when he presented the bundle, “and you will sew a new one yourself.”

As he had then, Leo nodded now in obsequious acknowledgment of the gabbai. He could suffer such petty lectures a little longer. With his new salary, the shtivl shop employee would soon clothe himself. Bialik and his kind might be kings on the Sabbath, but Leo was more interested in the position one held the other six days a week.

The seating arrangement of the synagogue reflected this hierarchy. Far behind Leo in the rear of the room, he knew, stood strangers and beggars. Already the boy had moved from their ranks to those of the proste Yidn, common Jews like Herzel, seated directly behind and beside him. Leo, however, looked ahead. In his study of the broad, well-clothed back and balding, egg-shaped dome of wooden cart magnate Mordechai Gourevitch, the boy realized how childish were his fantasies of others squirming to see over his shoulders. Six-foot-two, nearly three hundred pounds, Gourevitch employed his own product to move among his workmen, salesmen, customers, and public. “Pride of the priests, delight of the nobles, trustee of the merchants, eye of the congregation, light of Israel and Judah,” prefaced the merchant’s name each time he was called to the Torah. He and the other balebatim—men of substance and esteem—would never crow over their seating position. Noble-like, they took such deference as their due.

Leo examined Gourevitch’s every gesture as sharply as he had once Herzel’s shoe racks. The merchant’s plump, uncalloused hands turned his gilt-edged siddur to the start
of the service. The boy opened his prayer book as well. Gourevitch nodded to an associate at his right. Leo tipped his own head in same general direction. When Gourevitch scratched his nose, his understudy felt his nostrils itch. Leo leaned forward better to appreciate the high crown of the diamond adorning the man’s cufflinks. In the hush before the congregation began to pray, he heard from a vest pocket hidden beneath Gourevitch’s tali the faint tick of a fob watch.

“L’kha dodi lik-rat kalah, p’nei shabbat n’kablah!”

Come, oh Cherished One, and meet the Bride! Let us welcome the face of Sabbath!

For eight verses, though the entire congregation sang in unison, Leo heard only Gourevitch’s high, scratchy voice. The fat beneath the merchant’s chin trembled and shook at the end of every sentence. Twice Leo, staring, entered the next line late.

“Bo’i v’shalom ateret ba’lah...”

Come in peace and come in joy...

All rose on the ninth and final verse. To welcome to entering holiday, they turned in unison from the Ark and bowed before the synagogue entrance. Warmth filled Leo’s chest as he turned. Facing the floor, he beamed. For these fifteen seconds, Bialik bent his head before beggars and Gourevitch sniffed his orphan ass. This was the world ordered as it should be. As it would be.

“Bo’i khalah, bo’i khalah!”

Come, O Bride! Leo sang. Come, O Bride!
Leo was in love. Her name was Gitl. She was his age, sixteen, as shapely as he was strong. Her father was Mordechai Gourevitch.

When Leo had first asked the rotund entrepreneur for work after closing Shabbat services one Saturday two and half years earlier, the rich man squinted at him, as if unable to reconcile the boy's size with his smooth cheeks and unlined forehead. Gourevitch, in turn, surprised Leo by speaking in the same high, scratchy voice with which he prayed aloud in synagogue. The boy had assumed this tone, so incongruous with worldly success, was the older man's idea of singing.

"How old are you?" asked Gourevitch.

Leo squared his shoulders and stood erect before answering. "Fourteen."

"See me again," said Gourevitch, "when you reach six feet."

Meanwhile, the shivivl shop suffered. Herzel, that cheap cheat, had his comeuppance: the merchants Krol and Landenberg, brothers-in-law twinned by identical narrow black mustaches as well as marriage, began to import shoes from Warsaw at prices below the cobbler's wholesale cost. Herzel banded with his colleagues in town, declared a boycott, refused to repair such shoes. "We'll show them," he told Leo.

The boy had believed otherwise. His wages, which had risen to six roubles a week, dropped to four, and then three. Herzel would be out of business by decade's end; in the meantime, he meant to keep Leo from saving enough to quit the shop himself.

Every Saturday night, the teenager again approached Gourevitch. Every Saturday night, he heard again, "See me when you reach six feet." Leo hit five-foot-ten in June of
1906, and stayed there, stubbornly, for the remainder of the year, though he stood and stretched on his stone throne as much as half an hour each day, even when the ice and snow of winter made climbing the rock pile its own struggle.

He had not still not yet reached his target when, the day after New Year's, 1907, a great fire consumed half the shtetl. Rumor blamed Felek Schwartz, the town drunkard, for the blaze. He had, it was said, neglected for some time to feed his goat. The starved beast tried to eat an untended lantern, starting the inferno that roasted it alive before tumbling south.

Whatever its origins, the disaster doubled Gourevitch's wooden cart business. The townspeople were fortunate in their savings, and construction began immediately on hundreds of new homes, each of which required a steady supply chain from the railroad depot. In this building boom, any man with a horse bought a cart and called himself a draymen. When Fishchak, the moneylender, refused all pleas after the fire to suspend his collections or lower his collection rates—four roubles interest, deducted initially, for each six-month loan of twenty-five roubles; repayments made from the first week, at a rate of one rouble a week—a cooperative savings and loan formed. The competition forced the usurer from town in six months. Trade increased. The men and women of Lementz had yet more money to spend. Commission merchants hired out increasing numbers of Gourevitch's carts to shuffle produce, dry goods, hardware, and household items between village farms, Bialystok, and town.

In the midst of this prosperity, Gourevitch hired Leo as an errand boy. Immediately, like Lementz itself, the boy grew again, three inches in three months, as if the height had been there all the time, laying in wait to ambush him. Spine sore with
growing pains, Leo was now the same stature, though little more than half the weight, as his huge and hugely-successful new employer.

His job was to follow Gourevitch on foot. Intelligent and able, the strapping teenager clarified instructions and corrected contracts, divvied out payments and devised new sales pitches, schlepped the order sheet and account books, and curried his fat master from cushioned cart to chamber pot and back when necessary. This last task explained why Gourevitch had bade him wait for one more growth spurt.

His salary started at eight roubles a week, leaping to ten by year’s end, then fifteen, and now twenty in the late spring of 1908. Emboldened by his new fortune, Leo played with the idea for something of a side business that could multiply his savings. Borrowing a couple of Gourevitch’s extra carts, he would smuggle meat free of the kosher tax from outside of town. As long as he chose his customers carefully, he could do with chicken and duck, goose and turkey, calf and ox as Krol and Landenberg had done with shoes—underprice anyone in town. He had already scouted out an unused corner of the nursing association cellar, especially attractive since it already stored ice. Before he could put plan to action, however, he fell for Gitl, a secret side business all her own.

“Pretty thing!” Leo told her. Inside the empty brick school house at the north end of town, he tugged loose her blouse—red, her favorite color—to expose a pale shoulder, which he kissed. She smelled of the perfume she had her maidservant purchase for her in secret, a simple mixture of two parts lavender and lilac to one part water. Leo ran his finger down the soft, transparent hair on the nape of her neck. He stroked her chin. He tickled her lightly above a ruby amulet that danced and spun on a thin gold chain.
Gitl giggled. Her hazel eyes flashed. They had passed the clumsy, awkward period of early courtship. “Hold me,” she whispered, and he did.

It was early evening, the first night of the Lementz summer fair. Fewer than four hundred feet away, visitors still streamed through the tall metal gate at the entrance to town. A ten minute’s walk from the schoolhouse, on the other side of the gated path, found scattered low houses and the remnants of Schwartz’s half-burned shack. Yet by the soft cooing and tender cuddles of the young couple, these possible passersby might well have stood on the far side of the moon.

Leo lifted Gitl and placed her on the wide wooden desk for the instructor at the front of the room. He brought his hands to her bosom, but she clasped his fingers in her own and raised them to her lips. They kissed for a minute, eyes closed, the only sound their soft inhalations and exhalations, her breath warm on the skin above his upper lip.

“I must go,” he said afterward.

She propped out her red lower lip most attractively. “Another date?” Playfully, she kicked at him, toes pointed.

Leo caught her by her thin ankles, which he raised to his chest.

“Shameless!” Gitl said, smiling. She pushed her dress down with open palms.

“I won’t be but two hours,” said Leo.

“You’re not serious?”

“Meet me later at the fair.”

Her lips pursed. “Where are you going?” she asked. “What are you doing?”

Leo smiled to reassure her. “A private matter,” he said. Twice quickly, he kissed her cheek. “Don’t pout.”
Gitl turned from him. Her tone softened. “I thought we would have the whole evening together.”

“Pretty thing,” Leo said. “Don’t cry.”

“It was my idea,” said Gitl. She crossed her arms, which stopped her tearing.

“Without my saying how hard you work, Father would never have given you the night off for the fair.”

Leo squeezed her shoulders. “Just two hours, I promise you, maybe less,” he said. One last time, he kissed her, square on the forehead. “You know I have no secrets from you. Only what I need to do, it’s for a friend.”

Gitl raised her eyes. “Friend?”

Shrugging casually, Leo put on his cap. “The very first man,” he said, “I met in Lementz.”

Leo tensed, wincing, at the noise Aaron and Markus made entering—the younger man’s familiar fervent oaths against the enemies of Zionism; the elder’s heavy-footed walk; the steady clanking of the glass jars of kerosene both carried tonight in cloth sacks at their sides. Fools. If they weren’t more discreet, some curious peasant in the surrounding houses would hear them. The authorities would intrude an hour earlier than planned.

For ten minutes now, Leo had paced the abandoned, unburned half of Felek Schwartz’s old shack, waiting for his co-conspirators. Curious, he had looked first for any evidence of the cause of last year’s fire—the fallen lantern, the goat’s charred remains—but uncovered nothing in the dim confines but dirt and a thin yet thriving
green, grassy stratum. If not for what they were to do tonight, the patch would make a fine garden.

"Leo!" Aaron Danzinger, 33, waved broadly as he stepped inside. Loose-limbed and easy-going, the eldest son of the founding Bund president was a charming talker whose smile stamped his entire face with enthusiasm when discussion turned to the future military might of the Jewish people. He was the most dangerous kind of salesman, Leo thought: someone who believes his own pitch. "What a relief!" Aaron said, though he hardly appeared anxious.

In reply, the teenager raised a finger to signal silence.

"When we didn’t see you at the fair...."

Leo clamped Aaron’s mouth shut with his wide palm. Someone had to take responsibility here. "Hush!" he whispered. Then, glaring at Marcus, "God help us if he can’t keep quiet."

"God help us in any case," said Markus Majzel, shoulders hunched, head slowly shaking side to side as he breathed. A morose, long-faced man in his mid-forties, the vice-president of the Bund was the rare pessimist capable of great activity. He and Aaron’s father had formed Lementz’s Jewish Labor Organization after the terrible pogroms of 1903. That April, Easter Sunday had coincided with Passover. In the city of Kishinev, mobs raged for two days, killing fifty, injuring five hundred, and leaving two thousand families homeless. Further proof, Markus argued from door to door, “There’s no such thing as a Russian Jew, only a Jew in Russia.”

In its border conflicts with Poland, had not the Empire (Markus asked his neighbors) slaughtered half a million of our ancestors? When the blood-hungry Black
Hundreds, Cossack bands, murdered our father’s fathers and molested our mother’s mothers, looted our homes and burned our settlements, did not the new Russian civil authorities sit and sip tea for the first forty-eight hours before intervening? Could any man confuse the intention of one Russian Orthodox Church high official’s widely-published prediction: ‘One-third of the Jews will convert, one-third will die, and one-third will flee’?

“If we do not prepare our defense,” Markus concluded, “they will kill our faith and they will kill our families.” Through darting, recessed eyes, he accused every man who did not join the Bund of being complicit in any massacres past, present, and future.

Now those accusing eyes turned to Leo.

“You’ve made your point, boy,” he said. “Take your hands off Aaron.”

Leo waited a beat before complying. He flicked the loose spit and dribble on his fingers to the ground. Strange to think if he touched Gitl tonight, her juices would commingle with Aaron’s saliva. His trousers stirred—the intimacies of shtetl life—and he grinned at his own private perversion.

Aaron sputtered for several seconds. Confusing Leo’s smile for an apology, however, he grinned himself, as if to confirm that comrades-in-arms could have no misunderstandings. “Don’t let it worry you,” he told Leo. He let the bag of kerosene fall with a clatter and raised his arm to clap the boy’s broad, muscled back. “We’re all brothers here!”

Leo swatted away the hand. He hissed. “Keep quiet or I’ll kill you.”

“Come now,” said Markus. Carefully, quietly, he laid his own bag on the ground.

“You forget,” he said, “that Aaron’s already dead.”
The man in question brushed the top of his short, spiky, sandy-brown hair with both hands, a nervous tic. “Only in a matter of speaking, of course.” Aaron patted his chest. “The heart beats strong as ever for the cause.”

Three years ago, he had responded to tense rumors of new pogroms with a solo raid on the town’s government liquor store. Aaron gave no advance word of his plan, whose full details were revealed only after a triumphant arrival at that evening’s Bund meeting, two hundred gold roubles in hand. “The money,” he announced, “will buy arms for our self-defense.”

Yet he had not intimidated the liquor store salesgirls so much they did not recognize his face, which in his enthusiasm he had forgotten to mask. Aaron was identified and arrested, released pending trial only on bail of five hundred roubles. Chief Dorn, ecumenical in all money matters, offered to produce a false death certificate he would submit to the district attorney, who would then release the bail. His fee for this service was three hundred roubles, plus half the haul from the liquor store. Even with the stolen money, then, the Bund, bankrupt, lost two hundred roubles. Disgraced, Aaron’s father resigned his post as president. Two months later, he was dead.

Leo sighed. “Help me set things up,” he said. He turned to the bunches of dry, broken twigs he had carried and hidden here before meeting Gitl.

“Of course,” Markus said. He held his hips, grunting, as he knelt beside Leo. The two of them began to line the standing wall with kindling.

“Let me see the matches,” asked Aaron. Giddy with excitement, he danced in place to a rhythm and tune only he could hear.
Leo took the faded black matchbox from his coat pocket. He pushed it open with the thumb until the first row of nubbly red heads was visible. "There," he said. "See them?" He returned to the twigs.

"Really!" Aaron said. "I'm twice your age."

"Act it," said Leo.

"We don't have time for this," Markus told them. With his thumbs and palm, he evened each small branch, as if building a wall rather than preparing to bring one down.

"I'll gather the kerosene, then," said Aaron.

Markus: "Very good."

Aaron sat on the ground and dragged the bags to his feet. One by one, he removed the glass jars. Pausing only to let the furor from the botched robbery pass and to sit shiva for his father, he had continued to organize for the Bund even as the organization diminished as a local power broker. Every year, it seemed, higher-ups in St. Petersburg pressured local authorities across the Pale to keep Jews in closer check. Last August, Dom had two teenagers arrested and questioned for the crime of reading a book outside the gate to Grodno. He held them in custody for two weeks. One boy returned home with two broken fingers. The other would forever lack four front teeth.

With the town fair at hand, the police chief had declared the Bund an "enemy of order." He neither acknowledged nor cared that political agitators like Aaron and Markus were exceptions in what was now primarily a social and cultural organization. All police forces in the vicinity were to attend the celebration. Dom would not risk the embarrassment of another robbery.

"We must organize," Aaron told the others. "We must protest."
But his old associates said their best course was to keep a low profile until the official pressure passed.

"In the desert, our brothers restore our homeland," Markus said. "The men of Lementz discuss the weather and wait to die."

Last week, Constable Tokarski had raided a forest meeting of the group, arresting six men and three women, and roughing up several more. To all those who asked when their father or mother, brother or sister, son or daughter would be released, Chief Dorn answered, "Our visitors will not be bothered by dangerous elements." He refused all offered bribes for the moment. "Let us discuss the matter again," he told one distraught newlywed, angling his glasses better to see her proffered coins, "at the end of the festivities." Tokarski, the sadist, whistled these days as strolled the streets. His pleasure could only mean another's pain. At last, the remaining Bund members turned to Aaron and Markus with their pleas for justice.

Leo had followed these developments in his capacity as Gourevitch's assistant. His employer had long supported the local Zionists financially, helping to fund the Jewish National Fund and send delegates to Zionist congresses, operate the Hebrew school and supply stipends to the Bund leaders. Of every such gift Leo delivered, the errand boy pocketed a few roubles. Personally, he had no interest in religion or politics except as they concerned the possibility of graft. He distrusted anyone who claimed to see either past or future. Those who spoke of a "home" further away than a day's travel by train, he suspected, did so only because they could not make a success of themselves here and now. The little clubs of Lementz struck him as either exclusive or confining, their debates at best petty, at worst absurd. After he married Gitl, endowed by her father,
he would start his own business in a bigger town, maybe even a city. First, though, let him satisfy an old urge.

"Imagine Dom’s face when he sees us," said Aaron. As if it were a magic window to the officer’s fat red cheeks and spectacle-rimmed blue-black eyes, he held up a kerosene jar for examination. "Tonight he feels the fist of the Maccabees."

"Finished," said Markus, surveying the kindling.

Leo nodded. "Let’s not delay." Until he had heard the Zionists’ plan, he had not realized how much he still wanted to revenge himself on Chief Dom for the affront of their first encounter. The three of them would light the shack on fire. While Leo and Aaron oversaw the flame’s progress, Markus would hurry to the fair and announce the blaze. Regulations required the presence of the police chief at any fire, a fact of which Dorn had been sternly reminded by the district authorities after last New Year’s disaster. This time, the officer would come running.

Extinguishing any flames would take but a few minutes; after Dorn did so, Leo and Aaron would ambush him. By any means necessary, they would convince the police chief to change his cruel policies, to let the captured Bund members go. Matchbox in hand, Leo crouched. He could already picture Dorn, ashamed, his fine uniform in tatters, crawling barefoot back to his colleagues with a black eye and the taste of his own blood on his tongue. Constable Tokarski—Leo winced at the memory of those two cracked and yellowed front teeth rising up and down in a chuckle—maybe, if he showed up, Tokarski wouldn’t walk back at all. Should he let them beg for mercy, or simply attack until they could not speak?
Aaron poured kerosene over the kindling, then splashed the wooden wall with any remaining fuel. "On with it!" he said. He and Markus had agreed immediately when Leo asked to join them. In him, they saw simply a delegate of Gourevitch, their great patron. Leo let them think it. Markus, cynical, suspicious, would otherwise have interrogated him as to his motivations. He had no wish to recount to this goblin his story of orphanhood and impecunity, the Czar and the stolen boots, Chief Dorn's lectures and Constable Tokarski's beatings. More annoying would have been Aaron's boyish enthusiasm at each little detail of his humiliation, twisting Leo's life into yet more proof that the Jews must arm, must attack. Leo loathed this man, in part, because in his character he saw his own proud eagerness and impulsiveness, his bravery at the risk of ruin, expressed as foolhardiness. The difference between them, he told himself, was that he thought twice before acting and Aaron acted twice before thinking.

At Markus's nod, Leo lit a match, the sound of a whisper. Until he felt his thumb and forefinger sting with heat, he held the match. Dropping it, then, Leo scooted back, buttocks propped so the grass would not stain his trousers, his palms behind him sledding through dirt.

"There she goes!" Aaron clapped. He shadowboxed, feet shuffling, as the flame caught and spread with a crackle.

The air in the shack grew thick and wavy. Their eyes clouded. The three men retreated to the field outside the structure. The standing wall shook slightly as the wood at its base blackened before crumbling. As of yet, however, little more smoke escaped the building than from a cigar.

Clearing his lungs, Markus coughed. "I'm off," he announced.
“Good luck,” Leo said.

Markus jogged south.

“It’s Dorn who’ll need the luck now,” said Aaron. He craned his head straight up at the night sky, found the half moon, and howled. “‘Back to soil!’” he shouted as Markus’s form shrunk from sight.

Leo searched the path from the gate and the scattered homes in their vicinity for sign the Zionist slogan had attracted someone’s attention. No, thank God; their luck held; everyone was at the fair. Still, he could not risk another outburst from Aaron.

“Did you hear Markus groan as he set the wood up for the fire? His cough now?” Leo said. “He’s getting old.”

“He has only to announce the fire.” Aaron flashed his white teeth in a smirk. “There’s no great exertion in that.” He cracked his knuckles. “We’re the ones who must be ready for rough-and-tumble.”

“What if he trips, though?” Leo said. “He could fall and never make it to the fair. The fire would spread. Everyone would accuse the Bund.”

Aaron grimaced. As he considered the concern, he extended his tongue, curled it above his upper lip, let it flap. “No,” he said. “Markus won’t fail us.”

“We must be sure, though,” said Leo. At his back, he felt the heat of the fire. “Run to the fair. Watch for him. Listen as he tells Dorn.”

“I can’t leave,” Aaron said. He squinted, scanned the darkness for Markus, but his friend had passed over the visible horizon. The tongue flapped faster for a time before retreating again behind his lips. “Dorn must know the Bund is at work here.”
"I’ll tell him it’s the Bund," said Leo. "You’ve made enough trouble for yourself."

Aaron, frowning: "But the plan...."

"The plan does not allow for Markus’s infirmities!" Leo threw his arms up, he paced, as he had so often in the shoe store. "No matter the bribe," he said, "Dom cannot fake the same death certificate twice."

Hands out himself, Aaron pooh-poohed the remark. "I’m not the least bit frightened."

"Markus may already have fallen," said Leo. "Be smart. Think of the cause." He shut his eyes, forced himself to count backwards from five before concluding his pitch. "Gourevitch told me you’re too important to the cause to risk capture."

Aaron extended his lower lip in a contemplative pose. He stroked his chin. "Gourevitch said that?"

Leo nodded, swallowing a smile. "If I go," Aaron said, "you’ll tell him it’s the Bund?"

"Go!" said Leo. Already, he saw, Aaron’s eyebrows arched in happy anticipation of endurance tested. "I’ll tell him."

"From Dan to Beersheba!" At the Biblical boundaries of Palestine, Aaron rose on his toes and lit off after Markus.

Alone at last. Leo tapped the tips of his fingers against each other. His breath deepened, timed to the slow hiss of the flickering fire. The smell of ash spiced the crisp evening air. He stretched his arms, yawning, turned to face the enflamed wall, thought of something that raised a smile. Shirt tugged over his nose, trying not to breath within the
thick carbon cloud, he hurried inside what remained of the shack, scooped all the empty kerosene containers into one of the cloth bags, and hustled out.

Chief Dorn, huffing and puffing, tumbled into view fifteen minutes later. His face was redder than usual. Drink.

Tokarski, behind him, followed a moment later with two green fire blankets. The blankets had come unbundled as he ran, and so dragged in the ground behind the constable like kites that won’t lift without wind.

“Here!” Leo waved as he called to them. “Bless you!”

Two curt nods. Neither man recognized the bedraggled orphan they had beaten seven years earlier.

Tokarski dropped the blankets on the ground just before the fire and turned to Dorn for instruction. “Fool!” his superior shouted. “Spread them!”

The constable obeyed. Together, woozy from the smoke, jousting with the flames, the two officials managed to extinguish the fire.

When Leo approached, Dorn and Tokarski had congratulated each other. Redolent of sweat and soot, they stood crouching to catch their breath. The air was still, the horizon empty of any other men or women. Leo twisted the ends of the cloth sack around his clenched first like a handle,

He swung. The heavy glass inside shattered on impact with Chief Dorn’s pomaded part. Half-moaning, half-yawning, the squat man thudded on the grassy ground. He shuddered once, violently, then stillled.
Tokarski raised his long ugly jaw, mouth agape. Leo pivoted, swung backwards, broke clean both those hated yellow buckteeth. As his adversary tumbled backwards, a sort of vibration traveled up Leo's arm and shook his knuckles. Dropping the bag of broken glass, he noticed Tokarski's blood had speckled the trousers he had been so careful not to mar. Leo cursed.

Curious fair-goers could crowd the scene at any moment. He must be sure the constable was unconscious. Leo raised his boot and kicked the man's chin. The sound was that of a wishbone snapping.

More blood raised from Tokarski's tongue, which flopped, torn and swollen, before Leo flipped the man over with a final kick. He tugged Tokarski to the smoldering, half-fallen shack wall. The constable twitched on contact with the embers, but not did not regain consciousness. If the kick hadn't killed him, Leo thought, perhaps the smoke inhalation would.

He hefted Dorn's round form over his shoulders and back, an easy task after long practice serving Gourevitch. "To the woods, sir?" Leo said. He carried the police chief out of town through the gates, off the highway, and into the forest.

Ten minutes passed. The temperature dropped and the ground softened under canopies of oak, alder, spruce, and pine, as yet little disturbed by logging. Twenty. Careful not to stumble, Leo slowed his steps. He was conscious of an atmosphere different than in town, the air itself more tangible, thicker with non-human life. Dorn, comatose, drooled over his shoulder, noisily slurped in oxygen, his pillowy stomach puffing two inches before sinking with the outtake of breath.

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The silver edge of evening deepened to the black of night. He smelled moss and moist wood. Every few steps, birds chirped to each other, fair warning to the world of Leo Elkin’s advance. Distant rustlings suggested other animals attuned to his presence, aroused perhaps by the scent of Dom’s blood. Let all hungry creatures come tonight, thought Leo. Let them feast.

He shrugged the police chief off his back to the ground in a broken heap. He stripped the man, strewing his clothes across the low-hanging branches of a thin-trunked alder. Naked, Dom appeared smooth and white, man modeled from a vat of rendered fat. Leo wiped the bottom of his boots clean on the official’s soft chest and belly. He tsked. “Dirty, dirty,” he told Chief Dom.

But he had forgotten his promise to say something about the Bund. Immediately, he imagined Aaron’s shrill pestering: ‘Why is Dom investigating his beating?’ ‘Doesn’t he know it was our hand upon him?’ ‘When will he release the prisoners?’

Leo unbuttoned the fly of his trousers. He pissed in the ground, making mud. He broke off a branch of the alder. He used the stick to scrawl in the mud.

“Let my people go,” he wrote. And a signature: “Aaron Danzinger.”

There. No confusion now about whom to credit for attacks.

Gitl clung to his neck behind the wooden platform built for the fair’s panel of judges. She kissed the face he’d splashed clean with water before seeking her out. At the intersection of their thighs, she rubbed her thin white summer dress against his change of trousers.
"How worried I was!" she said. "While you play with your friends, there's been a fire by the north gate!"

"Did you start it?" Leo smiled, took advantage of his position to slip two long fingers between the buttons closest her breasts. He touched skin, felt her heartbeat quicken. "Hotter than ever!" he said.

Gitl blushed. She tugged his neck harder, raised herself on tiptoes, parted her lips, bit his ear before whispering.

"Never leave me again," she said.

Leo encircled her waist with his arms, laying his hands on her buttocks. Up and down, with his long fingers, he caressed her.

"Leave you?" he said. "Now why would I do that?"

The spring of Leo's seventeenth year, as he dressed for work one morning, Gitl came to him crying. "Don't go," she pleaded.

"Men must work," Leo said. He smoothed the collar of his shirt. "Whatever is wrong, we can talk of it later." Firmly, he patted her back. "You should leave now," he said. "Think who might have seen you here—what if word reached your father?"

Gitl gasped at the question. She clasped her neck with her elegant white hands.

"Your ruby necklace," said Leo, only now noticing it was missing. "A robbery?"

He searched her face for answers. His own jaw clenched. "Not an assault?"

Gitl pouted. "Father tore it from me." She crossed her arms, turned. "Oh, Leo! The names he called me! Horrible!" Her voice softened before she spoke again. "The names he called you."
Leo took her by her shoulders and turned her face to him. “Pretty thing,” he said sternly. “We are not children. This is not a game.” He shook her once, lightly, a warning. “Did your father discover us?”

Wide-eyed, innocent, Gitl nodded.

“He confronted you?” Leo asked. “You confessed?”

Gitl’s brow winkled. She began to bawl. “We’re in love,” she said. “Why must we hide?”

The idiot! All he need do was squeeze her shoulders again, thought Leo, harder this time, and keep squeezing, and keep squeezing, and keep squeezing—and soon she would crumble into sand.

He turned from her. He finished buttoning his shirt. He put on his cap.

“You’re not going now?” Gitl asked.

“Men must work,” Leo repeated.

“He’ll kill you.” She tugged at his shirt. Wild-eyed, she threw herself against his chest, held him tight, lay her neck upright against his sternum to speak. “He said he would kill you.”

Right hand on her rib, left on her breast, not caring if or what he bruised, Leo pushed the girl away. “Be serious,” he said. “You think I’ll let myself be killed by a man who can’t wipe his own bottom?”

She stepped back. She shook her little fists at him. “You’re as horrible as he is!”

Leo kissed her, hard, his teeth striking hers through their lips. “I intend to be worse yet,” he said on his way out.
Blood rushed his brain. His fingers tingled on contact with the door. He rocked on the balls of his feet, then proceeded forward toward the entrance as if floating. Ducking at the transom, he searched the sunlight, lips twitching, for a sign of what was to come.

He would lose the job he held so dear, he was certain. He might marry Gitl, whom he realized he loathed. Gourevitch was not as quick to anger as Herzel, or as rash to act as Aaron Danzinger, but it was well within his power to have Leo killed should calm consideration advise murder. Hearing his lover's sobs behind him, however, Leo let an odd exhilaration consume him. A great change would come to his life, and he stepped into the open air to greet it.

Gourevitch: “Your attentions to my daughter are entirely inappropriate.”

“She’s lonely,” Leo said. “I try to be friends with her. I want only to help her.”

But Gourevitch, “For Gitl,” he said, “I don’t want your help.” Best for the boy to move on, the merchant argued. “If anyone should help another,” said Gourevitch, “let me help you.”

He made a present of it: wrapped in ten twenty rouble notes, a one-way train ticket. “To Lodz,” he told Leo, “where business is better.”

Leo countered that his eighteenth birthday might mean a mandatory twenty-five year induction into the Army, “where business is worse.” He'd escaped service to the Czar once. He meant to escape it again.

“I hear much of America,” the teenager said. In the market stalls, seamstresses discussed the mills of the famous land and woodworkers whispered about the coming
impact of its factories. With a lecture series on saving for the passage over and surviving
the months at sea, the Bund renewed its membership rolls. Those with relatives abroad
read aloud their letters. At play, children acted out their arrival at Ellis Island.

"Forget Lodz," he told Gourevitch. "I want the promised land."

When the businessman refused, it was Gitl who told her father that Leo would be
happy to accept his original offer.

"Papa," she said, "the moment we're married, Leo and I will move to Lodz
together."

Gourevitch then invited Leo to his home for a talk. It was early April, the first
night of Passover. "Come after the Seder," Gourevitch had written in a note delivered by
his new assistant, a hare-lipped, thirty-three-year-old married father of six. "We can
speak man to man."

Before knocking on the enormous oak door of his old employer's home, Leo
scanned the ornamental balcony on the brick structure's second floor. Better safe than
sorry: the platform could never support Gourevitch; still, the angry father might arrange
to let "accidentally" drop a great weight on an unwelcome male caller. Leo could defend
himself against any human opponent. Against gravity, however, he took no chances.

He applied his fist to the door, then stepped quickly aside.

Rather than any falling object, a sad-faced male servant, head bent, ushered Leo
onto the hardwood floor of the interior. The two walked in silence through a waiting
room whose brozne yellow wallpaper lightened after a flight of some twenty stairs in the
second-floor hallway. Gitl slept on the second floor, Leo knew. She could be there now,
the pretty little fool, imagining their life together. He had never desired her more strongly, nor wished more to rid himself of her forever.

The servant led him through a recently-vacated dining area, the settings for the Passover meal cleared save two small ceramic bowls of salt water and the glass of red wine set aside for Elijah. The aroma of lamb hung in the air. At a sharp odorous accent of horseradish near the table, Leo’s nose twitched. Crossing the red carpet, he made a little game of crushing the fallen pieces of matzoh to pale-yellow crumbs with his black boots.

They passed through a long hall festooned with multi-colored ringlets of dried flowers at a height of five feet. Turning to avoid a chair unaccountably propped against the kitchen door, which rocked lightly on its hinges, Leo abruptly found himself upon the threshold of Gourevitch’s study in the rear of the residence. Here his fate was to be decided. But how? And by who?

Over the servant’s shoulder, Leo saw Gourevitch push off his broad desk to rise unassisted from his seat. The pride of the priests, delight of the nobles, trustee of the merchants, eye of the congregation, light of Israel and Judah neither smiled nor frowned. He did not extend a hand.

“I have written my cousin Samuel in Chicago,” he told Leo. The seventeen-year-old’s passage to that city was arranged through a Maxwell Street shifscart bank, he said, whose representative would assist the young immigrant at Ellis Island. “You will leave the next morning with a letter of introduction to present Samuel.”

Leo nodded.
Gourevitch waddled around his desk. He clasped Leo’s back. “Let me walk you to the door,” he said. The stern expression on his face belied the friendly tone.

Crossing the dining room carpet again with Gourevitch, Leo heard a voice from the room directly above them.

“Grace?” Gitl called her maid to her bedroom. A quick patter of light footsteps followed. With a click, a key turned a lock to open the door. “Who’s here with father?”

The servant’s soft answer was indistinct. After a pause of perhaps five seconds, the key turned again to relock the door behind the maid.

Gourevitch cleared his throat. He clutched the rounded wood corners at head of the table. “You will never speak to Gitl again.”

“Of course not,” said Leo. “Sir,” he added.

“Sir?” Gourevitch trembled with rage. “You ingrate! You blackmailer!”

“Leo?!” Gitl cried above them. A desperate rattle sounded as she tried and failed to pry open her bedroom door. “Let me out!” she shouted. “We’re in love!”

“See what you’ve done!” Gourevitch shook his fist at Leo exactly as his daughter had done days earlier. “Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

Leo took the Seder wine cup for the prophet from the table and raised it to his benefactor.

“Next year on Maxwell Street,” he said.
On the passage over, rumor swept steerage that agents on board reported all signs of nausea to American immigration authorities. A family of eight had been returned to Warsaw for the offense of their eight-year-old vomiting in view of the second mate. For one couple (Naumberg was the surname), an upset stomach had cleaved the bonds of marriage; when Mr. Naumberg’s severe indigestion stalled him on Ellis Island, his wife of ten years had chosen to proceed to her new country without him. More selflessly, a young mother, subject to deportation for a simple yet stubborn case of the hiccups, had insisted her six-month-old son stay in the United States even if she could not. Other passengers had promised to adopt him themselves, but on landing, apparently, the infant was lost to the labyrinthine orphanage system of the state of New York.

“Given the circumstances, who can say the child will even know that he’s Jewish?”

“Well, he’s circumcised, is he not?”

“It’s America. They could put new skin on and none would be the wiser.”

One could counter seasickness, someone claimed, by swallowing nothing solid.

“Because why?” it was asked.

“Liquid seeks liquid, solid sticks with solid, of course we all know. On a boat, the juices of the body, they start to sway with the ocean; but the solid blocks of matter in the stomach cavity, your food, it stays put. It’s a shipwreck inside us. So we heave.”

Such a clear, confident explanation inspired a fad on board for chewing each bite of bread eight times, each slice of fruit ten times, each cut of vegetable sixteen times,
each forkful of meat twenty-four times, no fewer. Children who could not be made to understand the new rules cried at their parents’ scolding. Some, doubtless, would spend the rest of their life wincing each time they ate. How many would even remember why?

Leo doubted both rumor and remedy. Nonetheless, chewing was something to do—it cost nothing, only the energy to cycle one’s jaw—so he did it. When he vomited anyway, he did so discreetly; to his knowledge, no one took notes. If they did, well, he had nothing to hide. Who could question the health of a 6’3”, 210-pound seventeen-year-old?

The important thing was not to let the general fear of your fellow passengers infect you. Fear was what happened when you were thinking about what you were doing instead of doing what you were doing. These scared, simple types with him in steerage, if they no longer had to look over their shoulder for the Czar, they would be satisfied. Happy just to salt North American soil, they meant only to survive, no less but no more. Leo, by contrast, would will himself to thrive. When a coward hid, a better man defended; where a coward complained, a better man corrected; what a coward coveted, a better man obtained.

Everyone would soon leave the ship. How many besides him, however, looked straight ahead to the skyscrapers?

Given the dispiriting, brute cattle-like quality of his company, Leo speaks only when necessary, preferring to eavesdrop on the conversations of those who know English. At night, crouched heel-to-ass under a filthy brown wool blanket fifty feet from the clicking rudder, he practices each acquired expression as he satisfies himself. He imagines his body atop Gitl’s, his mouth barking out a new phrase—“Good morning,”
“Tell me,” “God damn”—with each thrust. Her pictured replies are wordless: puckered lips; sweat-dotted brow; once (in response to “I want to have a sandwich”) a single translucent tear. What he is saying, Gitl can not understand; where he is going, Gitl can not come; each word of English separates them as surely as another sea mile from Lementz.

An immensely satisfying sadness consumes him immediately after his exertions. Leo opens his eyes to darkness. He lets his head nod several seconds to the general pitch of the ship before turning over, tucking in to dream-less sleep.

Awake, he tried to think in English. He could not, not in any acceptable fashion. Without fluency, his thoughts were feeble, clumsy, childish—“I will be good,” “Work, I like,” “You give me.” He cursed himself in Yiddish, eavesdropped all the more. So eager, so impatient was he to learn the language, he finally traded his silver watchband for a tattered, mossy-green hardcover, its tan pages a reassuring backdrop to the imposing rows of tiny black print.

This book would be the only enduring possession of the first thirty years of his life. Yet owning the text, whatever his ambitions, did not make Leo able to read it.

“What is?” he asked the man with whom he’d traded after the barter.

The man, who wore glasses, and had the long, downward-sloped head of a horse, said his name was Arthur Arvey.

Leo shook his head, pointed aggressively to the faded silver print of the book’s cover. “Name?” he said. “Name is? Name? Is?”
“The book’s name?” Arthur Arvey’s neck protruded from his shoulders. He raised his right eyebrow, a narrow crescent. “Great Expectations,” he said. “By Charles Dickens.”

Arvey stuffed the watchband in a back pants pocket. He looked over his shoulder and back at Leo. His eyebrow never lowered. “Give me the watch, too,” he whispered in Yiddish. “I’ll tell you the whole story.”

At a distance of three yards from the door of Samuel Gourevitch’s Maxwell Street shoe stop, Leo identified a pale-haired, soft-built man with a puckered, feline face and little upturned lips. His shoes were worn at the heel. When he passed, Leo stopped him with an arm’s grasp on the shoulder. The man scowled in protest.

“Shoes,” said Leo in English. “New and make new.” His English had improved to the point he himself knew how much he sounded like an immigrant rube. He looked the part, too, dressed like a farmhand—rugged black pants, tight at the waist, and an ochre, open-collared work shirt with metal buttons—the only second-hand clothes the ragman had in his size. “Inside, good price, best price.”

He was a puller. Stood dumbly in front of the store like the wooden Indian at the cigar shop. Tried, shall we say, to persuade customers inside. Pure body work. No subtlety to it, even if his strength, Leo felt, granted a lightness to any imposition. But his mind was what Leo wished to develop; he wanted to make it American. Meaning familiar with wealth and power. Meaning fluent in the means to acquire them. The only American aspect to the pullers was their motto: ‘The customer is always held tight.’
The man shrugged to wrest his shoulder from Leo’s grasp. “Thanks, no, friend.”

He squared his white straw hat. “Not today.”

Leo bent to hold and lift the man, who squirmed, by the hips. With his left heel, Leo pushed open the creaking shop door behind him. As if the reluctant customer were no more than dirt under his fingernails, Leo flicked him off the street and into the shop. The closing door, Leo capped with his right heel to prevent it from being pushed open again from the interior.

Sunlight scratched his neck, which he massaged lightly with both hands. He realized the frayed fly of his pants had dropped; Leo tucked up his zipper, his first.

He breathed in the old fruit smell of the market, let his eyes graze the row of red brick and slatted-wood buildings, listened distractedly to the street’s verbal flotsam and jetsam—English, Yiddish, Polish, Russian—conversations, negotiations. It would take months yet before his own physical persuasions ceded to verbal.

Leo pursed his lips. He did not like Maxwell Street. Its patterns were too familiar to him, too European. How much could he glean where men and women still dressed and ate as they had in the shtetl, bought and sold as they had in the shtetl, bickered and made up as they had in the shtetl? What was this outpost of the old country in the new but a grander version of the sorry little paved walk of Lementz? And Samuel Gourevitch’s shop? A direct descendent of Herzel’s *shtivl* stand. The currency had changed color, but selling shoes was selling shoes.

He bid himself to be patient. He must not let his temper overtake him if he was to create his own empire. Step by step, he would acquire raw materials, accumulate cash,
command men, control industries. First, however, he must prove his patience. He must show himself to be as smart as he was strong.

At his feet lay the leather satchel in which he carried *Great Expectations*. Its forty-year-old binding he had reinforced with three shoelaces banded across the cover like the stripes on the flag. Every evening before bed, Leo untied those laces, he gently turned open the cover, he found the next chapter, and, in his approximate, amateur way, he read. If he could not really understand the prose, still he looked over every letter of each page. At least one word a sentence—"miserable," "complain," "common," "proud"—Leo tried to form, soundlessly, on his tongue.

Dickens would teach him to make his way in English. For this alone, Leo believed he had made a good bargain with Arthur Arvey, the horse-faced man who now, wherever he was, wore his watch. But Arvey had given him more than the book. He had told Leo its story. That tale Leo took as a guide to his new homeland: to rise from nothing, take what you can, fake what you can't, and, if you want to keep what you've got, never let your past catch up to you.

Two quick knocks behind him signal to release the pressure of his heel. He does so, stepping aside as the door opens with a long, yawning creak. The man he pulled strolls past him, no hurt feelings, taller now that he has patched the heels of his shoes. Away he walks, down the street, one foot in front of the other. Within minutes, he may catch a trolley to another section of the city; within hours, in a car, if he wishes, he can cross the state line; by the end of the week, if he means to, he may take the train to the nation's eastern, southern, or western shores. He is free in the American manner to roam
as he pleases while Leo—whose higher destiny could not be more manifest—stands anchored all day to this single, lousy, loud shop door.

A pat to the back. Commendation. “God is good to us, boy,” said Samuel Gourevitch, a pious man, reed-voiced, sallow-faced with thick eyebrows, as thin as his cousin the cart king was fat.

He means that I am good to him, thought Leo. He snorted inward sharply, gathering phlegm he chewed twice before spitting. The air stank of dried-out oranges and the sweaty brims of men’s caps.

“What God gives us, we do not deserve,” Leo told Gourevitch, knowing the man would take irony for earnestness.

“Quite right.” Another back pat before the door, once more, creaked shut.

Samuel Gourevitch eyed Leo suspiciously when his assistant, eighteen now, and conversant in English, asked for a commission instead of a flat salary.

“Too much, you reach,” he said. “Soon you’ll be as bad as the Germans.”

By German, of course, he meant German Jews. That was the point of a ghetto. There was no outside to it. The dirt was Jewish. The water was Jewish. The air was Jewish. So was any nationality.

“What’s the matter with the Germans?” asked Leo. “You and me, we’re one step past a wooden cart. Florsheim, their factory takes a whole block on Belmont.”

“Florsheim!” Gourevitch said. “Better dead than a Jew like Florsheim, bringing the name to disgrace. They parade around as Jews, these Germans, and down deep in
their hearts they’re worse than goyim. *Meshumeds*—apostates—“they are. Every one of them!”

“Anyone who starts acting half-American, you call him *meshumed,*” said Leo.

“So American they eat the pig and the shrimp and call kosher a lie!” Gourevitch shouted. “So American they work on the Sabbath! So American they worship on Sunday! So American, they don’t know Hebrew anymore and must talk to God like a baseball player!”

If Leo couldn’t agree in general, neither could he argue in the specific. It was true, what Gourevitch said. The German Jews at Sinai Congregation, the city’s largest, worshipped Sundays. They cast aside kosher restrictions and curtailed Hebrew readings. For a time, they even eliminated the Ark. They made the Haskalah look like Hasidim. And they were rich.

Once or twice a month, then weekly, Leo sneaks away in the late afternoon to State Street. At the twenty stories of the Masonic Temple, at the iridescent glass mosaic ceiling of Marshall Fields, he lets himself stop and stare. Human faces, he avoids; he is shy here, afraid in seeing, he will be seen and exposed as the immigrant lug from Samuel Gourevitch’s Maxwell Street shoe shop. Instead, Leo lingers at shop windows, licking his lips, rubbing his cheeks in little circles before the diamond-laden décolletage of the female store window mannequins, the striped suits and sharp black fur felt hats of the male. Mouth open as if height could be swallowed, palms out as if might could shake his hand, Leo takes in through his pores the whirring, serpentine El cars above him, the trolleys clattering beside the clean, cool white cement sidewalk. When the sun falls, broad canvas store awnings shade him from quivering, multi-colored electric lights. Out
of time here, Leo bows his head, he closes his eyes, he takes a deep breath, absorbing the aroma of chewing gum and fresh shoe polish before rejoining the orderly commotion of the crowd.

Did Leo quit Gourevitch’s stand or did Gourevitch fire him? Semantics. Either way, they parted. Once an orphan, always an orphan.

Leo found a new gabbai in the form of one of the immigrant relief organizations established by Germans.

“You’re one of them Jews who aren’t Jews?” he asked a high-humored man at the front desk, who chuckled in a puppety manner that made his plaid suit jacket rise and narrow above the shoulders. The laugh made the back of Leo’s neck itch.

The man put him to work guarding a toy warehouse three blocks from the Florsheim factory. Toughs had threatened the building, and the owners, the Becker family, thought they’d try a night watchman at one tenth the ‘protection’ price.

“Buy wool socks, two pairs,” the man said before Leo left. He looked the new hire up and down, laughed his itchy little laugh. “The bigger they are, the faster they freeze.”

Midnight in the tank—the tank Leo’s name for the Becker toy warehouse because inside it he felt like a kept fish. A vast open space, a block-long cube, four stories tall, unheated, empty as the moon but for the rows of board games, boxed die-cast cars and trucks, slim metal cylinders of bubble solution (“with blowing wand” promised cheery red cursive print) packed away in stacked crates on the first floor. Elegant, even beautiful
in its facade, the building’s proud chest puffed out onto Belmont Avenue as red brick and black-barred windows, capped below the roof every ten feet by turret-like, stately-gray cornices. Pass it outside, at day, and you’d call it a castle. But Leo knew better because he knew it from the inside. Inside it was the tank.

He tapped his faded black shoes on the concrete floor, wriggling his thick toes against the worn leather, seeking warmth, settling for numbness. Two years—twenty-five months, three-quarters of a thousand days—he’d been trapped here, a pet animal, purchased to circle and protect this particular piece of the Becker fortune. Leo made his night watchman rounds through wintry air that chapped his face until his cheeks stung, raw, as after shaving.

However bracing the temperature, he had thought breathing such cold might have had a salutary, almost-alpine effect. Not so. The warehouse shared ducting with the adjacent two-story Becker doll factory, whose fetid machine exhaust butted against windows sealed in winter, found egress in the common vent, and rose to the higher plane of the warehouse, which it roamed like a ghost before dipping down to Leo’s nostrils at each inhalation. Twelve hours a day, his lungs suffered this gaseous mix of grease and sweat, burnt yarn and hot metal button shavings. If open too long, his eyes watered. His damp armpits chilled, itched, burned, and chilled again in forty-five-minute cycles. Each morning, home to bed in the third-floor cubby of a featureless men’s boardinghouse, Leo fell asleep with the cough of a six-pack-a-day smoker.

How clever he’d thought himself to get the job. How very advanced. How American. Alone he could read, work on his English. He could think. He could plan.
To find success he must first show enterprise. But what enterprise was there to show in an empty warehouse? And who was here to see him?

His eyes sweep the room’s hazy gray horizon, all that empty atmosphere beyond the string of forty-watt bulbs loudly whizzing, humming, buzzing a quarter of the way up the exposed wall. Below the bulbs, cloth dolls hang vertically on wooden rods—a line of carnival prizes, a thin, monotonous totem pole. The half-light against the red brick background brings out their rouged cheeks. If Leo squints, he can see the doll’s black button eyes, which gives them an owl-like aspect that causes him, whatever the season, to shiver.

Placing his hands in the pockets of his threadbare corduroy pants, Leo lets his index fingers slip through the holes in the fabric. He scratches his goose-bumped thigh. Midnight is a hateful, awkward time, especially in winter. Awake and alone, breathing in poison, breathing out steam, Leo imagines the man who owned this factory, Becker, sound asleep in the broad, soft bed and warm down blanket of his South Side mansion while he, Leo, the pet watchman, scratches his way through rags. He is twenty years old, strong and smart, three years an American, yet should fate or magic return him to Lementz, he will have to stand in the back of the old village synagogue with every otherbeggar and bum.

He walked toward the entrance, strumming his fingers along the splintery tops of the wooden crates. Beside an open box of hobby horses, their black manes radiating outward from the base like flower petals, he found his book. Leo unknotted the shoelace ties, opened the novel, and read as he had one thousand and one times before:
‘My father’s family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant
tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So, I called
myself Pip, and came to be called Pip.’

“Called myself,” Leo repeated aloud. “Came to be called.”

He pocketed the book. He unlocked and opened the warehouse door. After
taking in the fresh air, he decided to step outside to watch the arc lights off the snow on
Belmont Avenue. In his shirt pocket, he had half a chicken sandwich, which he ate now,
making a game of gathering the crumbs that gathered in the corners of his mouth with the
tip of his tongue.

A block behind him, footsteps sounded.

Leo turned to see three adolescents, fifteen, sixteen at the oldest, one five feet tall,
one five-foot-six, and the last a strapping six feet. Dressed alike in ankle-high brown
boots, black wool coats and caps, and white shirts with suspenders, they looked at a
distance like three sizes of dolls fresh off the Becker assembly line. As that distance
narrowed, Leo noticed differences other than height between them. Acne scarred the face
of the biggest of the boys. He was drunk, and he half-stumbled as he walked. The short
one, a chubby type, talked continuously in a high-speed chatter, gesticulating wildly as he
spoke. Finally, though it had first appeared as if all three walked in tandem, the middle
member of the group, handsome, square-faced, full-bodied, in fact led the other two by
half a foot. He held himself with something of a military air which further distinguished
him as their leader. To Leo, he resembled a young, bored George Washington, more
sharply cornered than the face on the dollar bill, but with the same noble chin, high,
smooth forehead, and heavy-lidded eyes.
Chubby was the first to notice the night watchman. With a fleshy elbow, he nudged the man in the middle, the leader, whom he called Mort. Mort nodded at whatever was said, then whispered to Big Boy. The inebriate jutted his pimpled jaw. His eyes dismissed Leo as an alley wall against which he'd like to piss. “They got statues out on Belmont now?” he asked.

Leo frowned. He straightened his posture.


He and Big Boy laughed. Mort did not join them. He acted as if he heard nothing, saw nothing, and his eyes, black in this light, gave him the appearance of a sleepwalker. His reserve made Leo more uncomfortable than the others’ aggressive teasing. Leo could handle three juvenile delinquents, three boys, he was sure; but two boys and a man were another equation altogether. He didn’t know what this Mort wanted, only that he wanted something. Leo could not help himself from looking over his shoulder at the warehouse door he had so stupidly left open.

He took his hands from his pockets. He made a show of flexing his fingers. He formed two fists.

“Easy now,” said Chubby. He flicked his wrist and Leo saw the steel blade of a pocket knife glisten between the street light and snow. “Don’t hurt yourself on our account.” He raised his eyebrows in mock alarm. Skin folds formed on his brow like the lined quarter inches on a ruler.

Leo stepped back, but Big Boy grabbed his collar. “Check his pockets,” he told Chubby. His breath made the air taste of soap and metal.
Chubby patted Leo down, picked out *Great Expectations*. "A professor!" he announced. "And here we were without a teacher!"

Big Boy shook his head. "Keep looking."

"See we're sophomores here for the school charity drive," Chubby said. He stretched his frame to rummage the folds of Leo's clothes; at last, his hands clasped the key to the warehouse. These, beaming, he waved before his friends. "Come to collect toys for orphans."

"I am orphan," said Leo. "The toys are mine."

Big Boy kneed him in the crotch.

Pain—an aching vibration below his abdomen. Leo fell. His pants dampened immediately in the wet snow, which crept into his outturned pockets and open mouth as he moaned. He spat once, then tossed and turned in the puddle to still the vibration.

Mort spoke for the first time. "Door's already open, boys."

"Well we can keep the key, come back 'till they change the locks," Chubby said. "Hey Joe"—this, it appeared, was Big Boy's name—"how's he hung?"

"Take a look you're so curious."

Chubby: "Heavies like you and him are all the same. Big dicks, tiny brains."

Big Boy: "Go touch your sister."

Chubby chuckled. "I got a little dick, I'll be honest. But it fits my hand real nice."

"C'mon?" Big Boy said. "No cash on him at all?"

Chubby must have shook his head. "But sell the toys," he said, "we could go to a show with the money."
“Forget a show,” said Big Boy. “I want some hootchie-kootchie.”

“Shut up,” said Mort.

Leo placed his frozen palms on the sidewalk as preparation to push himself up. A bitter wind whorled the cold night air around him. The wet skin of his right ear stung at the helix.

“What should I cut him or what?” asked Chubby.

Leo stopped moving. How little I have, he thought. How stupid I am.

“Nah, he’s nothing,” said Mort. “Let’s go.”

The three walked away and into the warehouse.

Alone, Leo shivered. His loins ached and the sidewalk smelled of oil. He curled his tongue, tasted bile and bitter mustard remnants from the sandwich. He straightened his tongue. He spit again and again, until his throat caught and he started coughing.

He could stand, walk home, change his wet clothes, and wait. In all likelihood, he would be fired—first for failing in his post, second for abandoning it.

He could stand and walk to a police station or public phone—somehow, in other words, alert the authorities. But policemen were unkind to new immigrants and particularly unsympathetic to young Jews. Without the promise of financial gain or some sense of personal threat, they did not like to dirty their clean white gloves.

He could remain as he was and call for help. But who walked this way after midnight except cops or those potentially more troublesome than three young thugs? These boys, moreover, appeared more organized than mere teenage hoodlums. They had a leader. In their own way, they worked well together—as if from experience. They knew the Becker building held toys. The whole robbery could be planned.
Leo did not doubt that he could take any one of them—all three likely—in a fair fight. But they showed no inclination to fight fair. They could be part of a larger gang. Their older brothers or fathers might be connected to the mob. Had not the jokey bastard at the relief organization mentioned some sort of specific threat to Becker?

An automobile rumbled past without stopping. Leo closed his eyes to avoid the glare. When the noise of engine faded, he raised his head and looked down the line of street lights to their vanishing point.

The boys might hear him, too, if he cried out, and hurry outside to silence their accuser. He could be killed, and no one would care. Whether he lived or died, this street, this city would go on as always.

Leo closed his eyes. He let his head drop back into the snow. It was not the first time that he wished he had a family, but it was the first time he realized that if he were to have a family—in the future, that is—he would have to be its head. He would have to marry, in other words. His wife would have to bear him children. Though he would never be a son or brother, he could be a husband, a father.

It was not a complex or original idea, but it was complex and original to him. He would marry, Leo decided. He would have children. He would not only succeed, but leave a legacy of success for someone else. In this way—and only in this way—would he live forever.

He pushed off the sidewalk and onto his feet. His balls still stung from Big Boy's blow, and he walked as if after a long horse ride. Entering the warehouse, he chipped away at his anger until it was solid and particular as the Palmer House's granite cornerstone.
He did not mind their insults, their threats. Even their physical attack, Leo forgave. What bothered him—what enraged him, if a man as calm and clearheaded as he was now could be said to be enraged—what bothered Leo was the comfort and assurance with which they conducted their little robbery.

The barbed back-and-forth, the threatened knife blade, the knee to the balls, the glib dismissal, 'He's nothing. Let's go'—how easily it all came to them. In part, let him admit it, Leo was jealous. Two years now, broke and hungry, he'd been surrounded by another man's treasure, and he had not thought to take a single toy car. Likely even Becker assumed the night watchman supplemented his salary with a hot item here and there—explaining, for one, why Leo's wages were so slow. He could just imagine the great man writing off such theft as the cost of doing business—and he, Leo, like an idiot, as with everything else in America, had never quite realized the game they were playing, much less the rules.

In Lementz, he would have had the whole system—what to steal, when to sell, how to hide it all—laid out within a week. Here he could not even pick up presents laid out before him.

Near the center of the warehouse, Chubby pitched dolls to Big Boy, who hit them with a borrowed hobby horse, raising his long arms afterward to an imagined roar. Mort, further back, had found a loading cart, which he stacked with the three crates of toy cars; these, he must have thought, would be the easiest to resell. Mort was drunk, too, Leo realized, and there was something sad about the slow, lonely way he worked that briefly evoked Leo's sympathy. The other two were overgrown children, but Leo imagined that
Mort would distribute some of his haul to needy kids in the neighborhood. He imagined that Mort had never had many toys himself.

Stopping this robbery would not right his own life, Leo knew. It would not make his future, not earn him the love of a good woman, not ensure him a son someday to carry on his name. All he could hope to do tonight was shatter these punks’ sense of privilege. Let them know that the world was not theirs for the taking, that traps and obstacles blocked one’s every advance. That here and now he, Leo—another man’s pet, their statue, their nothing—chose to make them and their interests his enemy. He would show them how young and foolish they were, how much tougher life was than they imagined.

He followed the first two as they cavorted across the warehouse floor, tossing and swinging their stolen toys. Chubby cat-called, pitched; Big Boy swung, roared. So enraptured were they with each other and their game, neither noticed his approach.

Leo tapped Chubby’s shoulder. When the boy turned, Leo palmed his fat face and pushed him backwards to the concrete floor, which echoed with a loud knock on impact with elbows and skull.

Big Boy stepped forward. His pimples reddened. “You’re going to die tonight.” The hobby horse dangled loosely in his hands.

Leo grabbed the toy. He pushed Big Boy aside and walked past him toward Mort, who only now turned to investigate the trouble.

“Hey!” he heard Big Boy call behind him. Leo rotated to face him. “Try that again,” Big Boy said.

Leo punched him in the face and the teenager fell like confetti.
Mort made no cry of alarm at the fall of his comrades. Even his eyes offered little reaction to the events at hand, only the sense of a certain heat, as from logs just before or after a fire. He opened his mouth. With the nail of his right index finger, he picked at a lower incisor. His other hand held a knife.

"Come to take your toys back?" he said.

"They are not mine, they are not yours," said Leo.

"You shouldn't talk," Mort said. "You're as boring as you look."

"Leave here." Leo's left wrist hurt. He realized he was squeezing with all his might the wooden handle of the hobby horse, which had started to splinter. With exhausting sadness, the thought came to him that the first Chicagoan he had met who might understand him, who might explain the city to him, was the very man threatening his life. "Don't come back."

"Hit me, you're gonna hit me," Mort said. "Here I am."

Leo raised the fist with which he'd just beaten Big Boy. Mort extended his noble chin. As well, he waved his knife, whose metal point made the air whistle.

This was the closest Leo would come to a fair fight. He believed, even wounded by the knife, he could subdue the man. But could he work afterward? If so, how well? He had the welfare of his future wife and son to consider.

Leo stepped forward and faked a punch. His nose flouted the swishing blade by three inches. He took the hobby horse up like a mallet and pounded it down on Mort. The sound was that of buckshot fired into a pillow. Chest ringing, Leo thrashed the living hell out of his opponent. A seam broke in the toy. Stuffing—straw and sawdust—flew from the horse's head and fluttered to the floor. Leo sneezed. When he held but a
wooden pole, he let the weapon drop. Mort lay unconscious, but alive. He had lost perhaps half his upper lip.

Leo dragged the body outside to the sidewalk, from which he retrieved his book. If Mort woke, let him decide his own fate.

Back inside, Leo locked the door behind him. Chubby and Big Boy, he kicked around until daylight, when his shift ended, and Becker’s astonished day manager, his hands on his little tie knot, nervous, nervous, hurried next door to the factory’s second-floor office and called the police.

“Through with me?” Leo asked when he had recounted, more or less, what happened. “I’m tired.”

The day manager caught his wrist, then dropped it at Leo’s look. “Stay a minute, that’s all,” he said in a whisper. “We should call Mr. Becker.”