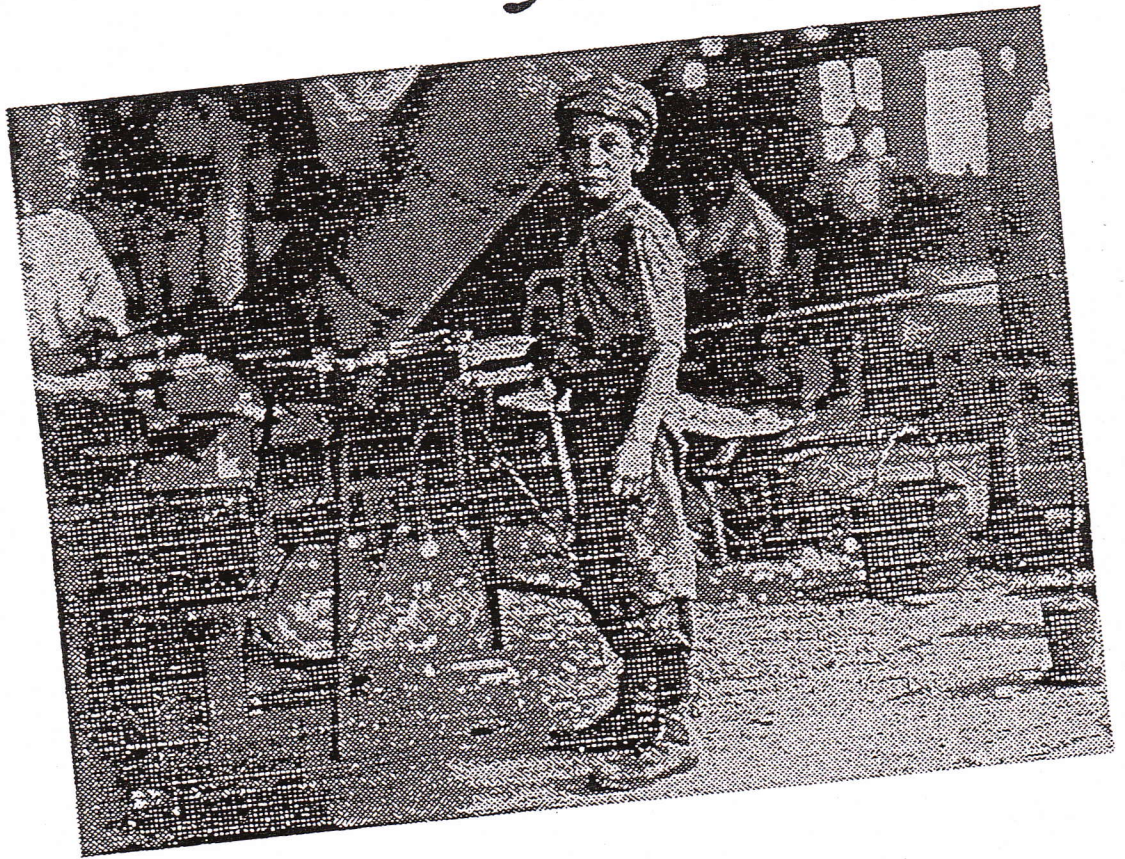


FLIGHT



- 1st gen -
- Jewish culture / soccer
- Ave. ...
Flight
- ghetto life

Stepping out of the river of humanity bustling down the streets of New York, I find myself in the silent other world of the Museum of Modern Art. I come here often when I am out on one of my walks, for there is little else for an old man to do in this city except walk to such places. When I was a boy I ran through the city. If there were any museums in New York they were in sections of the city an immigrant boy dared not explore. I traversed instead familiar avenues and alleyways, where I watched the passage of life from street corners. I was endlessly fascinated by the old men sitting in Central Park, sleepy eyed in the wrinkled newspapers of age. They seemed to be sculpted of grey marble on their benches, congregations of pigeons fluttering around them in pious worship. I was never one for sitting still, but I suppose one day I too will join these men, wrapped in the Times with a pigeon upon my arm.

In the museum I do not feel so restless. The intense heat of the inner city seems far away from the stillness of these vast corridors. I rest for a moment in the shadows, and then begin to walk in search of a new exhibition. "Photographs of Lewis Hine," I read, and then I step into the exhibit.

It is somewhat dark in here, and I am not truly interested in the work, so I pay little attention to the photographs. It is only by chance that I come across a particular photograph taken in 1910 of an immigrant family in a New York tenement apartment. There is something so familiar about the photograph that I am compelled to stare at it in fascination. As I look deeply into the eyes of each of the family members I see the grim determination, the hope, the sorrow which I remember so well from my own childhood. A sharp pain clutches my heart, and then spreads in overwhelming agony throughout my body. Mother, Father, Sisters, Brothers, the faces are so like those I remember from years long ago. All my memories of them, buried deeply in time and the confusion of life, engulf me in a torrent of emotion. I find myself again a boy, running...

"Mother!" A child wails in despair from an open window above me. There is always noise here. The city might sleep, but the tenements never do. Someone is crying, or coughing, or fighting, or dying, in a ceaseless chorus of human life. When I first came to this place I was a small boy. I could not yet see above my father's knee. Now I stand above his waist, but my bones are sharp like broken wood under pale gray skin. There is an excess of life in this place.

With all this life there must also be death, so we rot in filth and disease.

My father looks at the piece of the sky we can see from the muddy courtyard. We all look at that piece of sky. It stares back at us like an unsympathetic eye, and if it rains we sink even further into the mud of despair. We struggle, we fight, but yet we remain grounded in this decaying world of humanity.

The sky has haunted my father from the moment we came here. I know because I can see the rain and the clouds in his eyes when he wakes us in the dark morning to go to the factory. I know because at night I have seen him looking out the window at the stars and weeping silent tears in my mother's black hair. He says the sky has broken all its promises to him. In Russia he worked as a clerk in a well known bank, but the men he worked with became jealous of his success. They told long lies about "the bloodthirsty Jew" that reached the ears of the executive clerk. So he left his job at the bank, and we came to this new land of gilded promises. Here all men are equal, Jewish and Christian alike, for the boots of all men sink into the mud and filth that surround us. We are all struggling to touch the sky. At night I hear my father lamenting to my mother.

THEME

"In Russia," he says, "I had a name, a title, and the respect of my fellow men. In America I am an ant that must crawl on its belly if I wish to provide food for my family. I must struggle with thousands of other ants in a factory that stinks of sweat and grease. I must cower before the bosses if I wish to continue my drudgery. I must labor and toil from the early hours of morning to nightfall in the heat of burning furnaces, and all that I earn is used to feed the bellies of my starving children. There is nothing of my wages left after the rent is paid and the bread is bought. There is nothing with which we can escape this putrid, corroding, stinkhole. I slave in vain so that my children can live in a world of injustice."

My mother buries his head in her skirts, and speaks in words of soft comfort. She says, "All is be well. I am happier in America than I ever was in Russia."

I have seen her looking at the sky and thus I know that she lies to ease the pain of my father. She longs for the old land just as my father does. She has not learned to speak English. She says the words taste like sour milk and make her tongue feel thick. She clings to the Jewish women who know her language and her culture. With the other Jewish women in the factory she remembers the warmth of the old life. She longs for the past, but she knows that the future is in the sky of this new land.

As my father weeps for the sorrows of our life and and my mother laments the loss of her culture the chorus of human life continues into nightfall. Night is the darkest hour of our existence. We huddle together on the floor of the apartment like ragged alley dogs, mother, father, me, and my three sisters, exhausted after our day's labor. My mother and sisters work in a clothing factory, and my father and I work in a steel mill. There is no time for school, and even if we had time we are too tired and hungry to learn. My father wanted us all to have an education, "In America you can go to school for free!" he said. We must eat before we can know freedom. On their way back from cheder the other Jewish boys pass me in laughing packs. They wrestle and joke as if they are brothers. When they see me watching them from after they look at me with eyes filled with disdain. I am too poor and ragged to join their circle.

In the day I work the morning shift in the factory and in the afternoon I am set loose to search for rags and bottles to sell to the vending man. When I was scurrying across a busy street a gleaming black carriage almost crashed into me. It was so enormously large that I was at first terrified, but when I was safely out of reach of its massive wheels I saw this monster as a thing of immense beauty. I stood in the street, utterly transfixed by its lustrous shine and flowing curves. "Only angels could be inside such a thing of beauty," I thought. As I gaped at the carriage in wonder, my eyes as big as pale moons, one of the windows rolled open. A delicately gloved hand emerged, and a bright coin was tossed in my direction. I heard a pealing female laugh from inside the carriage, and then a snapping male voice.

"Why do you bother?" He said. "Look at that dirty little street urchin, lazy good for nothing is what he is. If these people weren't so thick headed and sluggish they might actually attain some kind of decent lifestyle. He's going to take that quarter you just tossed at him and use it to buy cigarettes and candy. I'll bet my newest racehorse on it."

The carriage glided off with the stealth of a garden snake. I was left with the shiny coin in my grimy palm and a splatter of mud, bewildered by the words I had just heard. "Lazy?" I knew the meaning of the word, but it held no place in my world. Surely I could not work as many hours as my father. I am not allowed near the heavy machinery, but I am kept running errands throughout the factory for hours upon hours. I did not understand the words of these dark angels.

I continued on my scavenging route and soon forgot the incident in the mad scramble through people and automobiles. A veritable treasure ground for bottle seekers like myself is a junk yard across the street from the Triangle Shirt Waist Factory, where my mother and sisters

Episode 2

work. As I approached my plunder field I noticed that the once fluidly moving crowd of pedestrians and vendors coming to a stop. I could sense the anxiety that hung over their heads like a thick black thunder cloud. I could not see above the heads of the river of humanity which surrounded me, but when I looked up at the sky I saw thick black tentacles of smoke curling around the edges of the winter sun. The anxious silence of the milling crowd was suddenly broken by an ear piercing scream. The crowd, which had once been still in watchful expectation, exploded into chaos.

Panic seemed to rise from the pavement and take over the men and women surrounding me. The force of the crowd pushed me in helpless confusion until I found myself face to face with an ultimate vision of horror. Thick black smoke was pouring out of the barred windows of the Triangle Factory. Screams of agony and terror pierced over the fervor of the crowd. I looked up to see young girls and women clawing at the unyielding windows in frantic hysteria. Some of the women managed to make their way onto the fire escape, but as more and more workers poured onto its fragile structure it slowly detached from the building. The crowd gasped in silent horror as steel beams and soft bodies came crashing down to the pavement. In the ravaged doorway that was left behind appeared the tiny faces of four women. As they wailed to the heavens for mercy I knew at once that these women were my mother and three sisters.

I tried to shout out to them, but my voice was drowned in the thunder of the crowd. They teetered on the ledge of the building, the flames blazing behind them in hungry rage and a deathly drop to the street before them. Even from so far away I could see the fright filled eyes of my sisters. Below them a group of men scurried back and forth with a giant net. I watched in wide eyed terror as my mother took my sisters in her arms and gently threw them one by one into the nets below. She seemed paralyzed as she watched them plummet away from her. Though the flames were roaring with increasing intensity behind her, she would not move from the ledge. She stood in a perfect sphere of silence as all the world around her screamed and crumbled into chaos. The flames were so close the hem of her skirt caught fire. She turned around to see her skirts smoking fiercely. She leapt from the building in terror. Her tattered work dress flared around her as she plunged towards the ground. I pushed my way through the crowd, crawling most of the way, to find my mother and sisters. I searched for them frantically until I came within fifty meters of the building. There I saw that the safety nets were torn. My mother and sisters lay on the ground like wounded red birds. My head spun, and I fell to the bitter pavement.

It is cold in the museum. The red birds of my childhood fade into the black and white of a photograph taken many years ago. That world of poverty and misery I knew so well has also shadowed into black and white. In my world of today the corroding tenement building seems like a dark nightmare. My own children have no concept of the lives Jewish immigrants lived in the Lower East Side nearly a century ago. My son is a teacher in an elementary school and my daughter works in an expensive department store. There are no martyred birds, fallen from a flaming sky that burn eternally in their dreams. The red birds will become stone like me, when I sit on my bench in Central Park amidst the pigeons. The chorus of human life will continue and the immortal statues of stone will lift the pigeons to the open sky and set them free.

Chapter
12.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC ESSAY

The inspiration of this story was Henry Roth's Call It Sleep, the story of a Jewish immigrant boy growing up in early twentieth century New York. This book was extremely useful in providing an understanding of the period, however my story took a different course than the story portrayed in the novel. In writing this piece I used three groups of sources; sources biased towards the needs of the laborer over industrialism, sources biased towards the benefits of industrialism over the individual needs of the laborer, and several objective sources which took both of these perspectives into consideration. I found all three of these groups of sources useful in the writing of my story.

I had no difficulty finding sources in which the laborer triumphed over the industrial system. Milton Meltzer's Bread and Roses, Lewis Hine's Kids at Work, Alan Trachtenberg's The Incorporation of America, and Bonnie Mitelman's article "Rose Schneiderman and the Triangle Fire" were all helpful in understanding the position of the worker. Bread and Roses and the Incorporation of America were helpful only to a certain degree, as the intent of these works is to show the process of unionization and not the lifestyle of the workers. The most helpful element in these works were the actual incentives towards collective organization. These incentives are portrayed by the narrator's description of his lifestyle in my own story.

Sources biased towards industrialism over labor included The Factories by Leonard Everett Fisher. Although this work took the interests and hardships of laborers into consideration, above all it stressed the importance of industrialism in contributing to the economic growth of the American economy which in turn encouraged a higher standard of living. This work was helpful in allowing me to see beyond the immediate poverty of early industrial factory workers, and into the future.

Objective sources such as Page Smith's The Rise of Industrial America, Nancy Levinson's Turn of the Century, and Thomas Bailey's The American Pageant were useful in understanding the balance between labor and industrialism. Without the laborer industrialism could not occur, and without industrialism the laborer could not advance and institute social reform movements to improve his standard of living. The narrator of my story is exposed to the hardships of labor, but

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he does realize later in life that it is because of his sacrifices and the deaths of his mother and sisters that his children can reap the benefits of the American Dream.

In the words of historian Bruce Catton,

What we shall some day become will grow inexorably out of what today we are; and what we are now, in its turn, comes out of what earlier Americans were-out of what they did and thought and dreamed and hoped for, out of their trials and aspirations, out of their shining victories and their dark tragic defeats.

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