His Father's Namesake

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Seconds before slamming the door in his mother's face, Albert Parsons, Jr.'s blood boiled. Tears stung his eyes and he desperately wanted to shout at her, "You never want to hear what I have to say—you never even try to listen. If I have an idea that is my own, you always strike it down if it doesn't support what you think about the world! I am still your son even if I don't think like you!" But as he looked at her, the words lodged in his throat and he knew once again he would probably be unable to express how he really felt.

He found it very difficult to stand up to this woman, Lucy Parsons. She was a formidable figure: she and his father, Albert Parsons, had always been larger than life, and their ideals had towered over their lives. Albert Jr. and his sister Lulu had always come second—-even though their parents would never have admitted it.

After slamming the door, Albert breathed steadily and slowly to calm himself down. After his anger receded, he remembered the matter at hand. The month was April in the year 1898 and America had just declared war on Spain to protect and capitalize on its economic interest in Cuba. Albert Jr. was making a decision so many young men were making at the time: should he enlist to support his country? Albert Jr. knew his mother would look down with disdain and disbelief at such an act and would be rendered speechless, but only for a moment because she was never without words for very long. Albert Jr. was confident he would then hear her diatribe once again, admonishing him to carry the torch that she and her father and so many other anarchists had made their life's work, had even sacrificed their lives for:

"Is this how you choose to honor your father and his legacy? Is your goal in life to turn your back on him and all that he believed? How do you think he would feel if he knew his only son wanted to enlist in an army that symbolizes an oppressive and imperialistic government? From the moment he died, your goal in life should have been to carry the torch he worked so hard to light!"

Albert felt his cheeks flush with rage and anger at his parents. Suddenly the month of May twelve years ago flashed in his mind; a chain of events that forever changed his life started then. The events crystallized the politics of being a member of the Parsons family—what Albert Jr. wanted or needed would always seem to take a back seat to his parents' ideals and what they were willing to do to support them.

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On the 4th of May in 1886, as on so many other evenings, seven-year-old Albert Jr. and his sister Lucy had accompanied their parents out of the house for a meeting. The meeting assembled at 107 5th Avenue at their father's place of work. Albert Parsons was the editor of *The Alarm*, the English language version of a socialist German paper, *Arbeiter-Zeitung*. The group assembled had met before—they called themselves the American Group. Albert Jr. was pretty sure the opinions and feelings he would hear tonight were the same he had heard before.

He could recite some of his parents' political beliefs, even though he could not yet understand them: the best form of government is no government; even a socialist or communist government is inherently unfair because a few have political control over an oppressed majority; capitalism and the wage system exploit the worker; the only way for workers to get what they

deserve is by armed revolution; anarchy, when no hierarchy exists, is when individuals are truly in a democratic state.

Albert Jr. sat and watched the meeting. Tonight, however, he took more of an interest than usual. Before his father began to speak about how to organize the sewing women of the city, there was much talk among the assembled of a riot the day before at the McCormick Reaper Works. Union workers had been locked out since February and the factory had replaced them with non-union workers. A colleague of Parsons, August Spies, had been talking to yet another group of striking workers at a nearby factory. Some of the listeners broke away from Spies's talk and joined their fellow strikers at the McCormick plant to heckle the non-union replacements as they left the factory. The hecklers started to throw stones. Albert Jr.'s eyes widened as he heard what had happened next. Police showed up at the plant and used clubs and guns to quell the melee that had broken out. Two workers were killed.

Whenever his father spoke, Albert Jr. noticed the assembled would lean in toward him so they would not miss a word. Sometimes the meetings he attended with his parents were fun; some were even picnics and parades. But the tone at this meeting was very serious and solemn. He knew his parents were passionate about their work and that many people looked to his father for guidance. His parents' conversations with others about their beliefs were passionate, frequently long and featuring voices that rose in a crescendo. As a six-year-old, he was confused by this passion; it always took him aback. But he had not recognized until this incident at the McCormick factory that the passion could lead to violence. Suddenly he wanted to be home. He met his father's eyes and

tried to send the message that he wanted to run into his arms, sit on his lap, and hear a story in front of the fire. His father looked away and continued to address the meeting.

Albert Jr. took his small wooden train with him into a corner. Nearby he noticed two young men huddled together. One man held the other's arm as he spoke. He was flush with excitement. "Hans, I wanted you to come tonight to hear this very, very intelligent man, Albert Parsons, speak. Although I know that this meeting is about organizing the sewing women in the city who work too may hours for too little pay, it is ultimately about all the workers in this city and how we must organize."

"But, Peter, I have just got this job. It is my first job in America . . . "

Peter interrupted Hans. "Listen to me, this is all I know: My family came here to make a better life. When my family left Germany, we left behind a farm that we had lived off of for generations. We planted the grain; we harvested it. After the grain was ground, my grandmother and mother would make bread for us. Looking back now, I see it was a good way to live. What do I do now? I work in a factory owned by rich men. The factory makes a machine that can do more harvesting in one day than five or six men could! Here, listen to this."

The man took a folded piece of paper out of his pocket and began to read from it aloud. At the top it said, "To the Workmen." At the bottom was a picture enclosed in a circle of two hands holding one another's. Around the edge of the circle it said, "Central Labor Union of Chicago."

"Just listen to what this says," Peter began. "'It is in the nature of the case, that the manufacturers desire to procure labor as cheap as possible in order to sell more goods and make higher profits. Therefore they will in the future as

well as now do everything to increase the productive ability of the workers to the highest point so that they may benefit thereby.

'As one of the means to this end they have already introduced piecework. . . It is therefore necessary that we not only demand an eight-hour workday but also endeavor to abolish piecework.'"

Peter folded the paper up and spoke sternly to Hans. "This piecework is what you have been hired to do. You will screw one little part of the harvester to another little part. You will work twelve hours a day doing it. The more pieces in a machine, the more men they need to put the pieces together. The more men working, the less money each worker makes but the more harvesters we build! Who gets rich? Do you? No, the factory owners! Well, the way I am beginning to see it, the more harvesters we build, the less dignity we workers have. I didn't come to America to make somebody else rich. At these meetings they help workers to understand their plight and to organize them. They are helping others to see that by organizing we can be as powerful as these factory owners and their money! If we organize ourselves into a union, we can at least demand an eight-hour workday and maybe even higher wages. These men who own the factories worship the dollar, not God!"

Hans was taken aback at Peter's last statement. He had been nodding through Peter's tirade, but now spoke softly. "But Peter, I just got this job. I have to do this 'piecework' as you call it. I have a baby at home and another on the way. What happens if our protests fail and I lose my job? I know there is another man who would be willing to take my job for the wages I am going to make."

His friend replied, "Yes! That is exactly why we *all* have to stand . . . "

Suddenly Albert's eavesdropping was interrupted by his mother bustling him into his coat. He looked up at her and asked, "Are we going home?"

"No, we are going to another meeting. But it's not far from here and the walk will do you good. You're restless, I can tell. Help your sister with her coat, we've got to get moving," his mother said. Albert inwardly sighed.

As the Parsons herded their children out into the cool, May night, Albert longed to just have his father to himself. But he suddenly felt a surge of pride when he saw the two young men on whom he had eavesdropped. Albert Jr. reached for his father's hand and looked up at him with a new understanding. His father helped people try to make more money and work fewer hours. As they walked east and then north to reach Haymarket Square near the corner of Randolph and Desplaines, Albert Jr. listened and understood that this meeting would be a public protest about the riot at the McCormick plant the day before. When they arrived at the meeting, Albert Jr. recognized the man talking to the crowd as August Spies. When Spies saw his father, he motioned to him and then descended the wagon that functioned as his platform. Parsons and another speaker, Samuel Fielden, climbed up to address the large crowd.

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As his father began to speak, Albert Jr. recognized the words, although he was unable to understand them: "All forms of government, whether it be a governor, a dictator, an emperor, king, or president, are nothing else than an organized conspiracy of the propertied class to deprive the working class of their natural rights..."

Albert began wandering into the crowd and heard whispers that the mayor was present. He curiously scanned the crowd to find him. As far as he could remember, he had never seen Mayor Harrison at any other rallies. It was easy to locate him, though. Unlike other people who huddled in small groups, Mayor Harrison and his big beard and mustache stood out in the crowd. Many people nodded or shook their heads in response to Parsons's talk. But Mayor Harrison stood still, quietly gazing at the platform and then scanning the crowd. In his fingers he held a big, fat cigar. He lit the cigar; its tip glowed orange. A few minutes later Albert Jr. saw Mayor Harrison light his cigar again. Tension was palpable in the air, but Albert didn't have the vocabulary to put words to it. "Mother, why are policemen here? Why is the mayor here? Why does he keep lighting his cigar?"

"My oh my, Albert you do ask a lot of questions," his mother said. "The mayor and the policemen are here because they are finally taking notice of what the workers in this city have to say." Albert remembered with pride that his father wanted to help the workers. Then he saw his mother lean sideways and heard her whisper to one of the people who had followed them to the meeting, "I wonder if they think there is going to be trouble." This comment made him even more jittery.

Although he already knew the answer before asking, his small hand tugged at his mother's coat sleeve. "Can we go now?" he pleaded in a hushed voice.

"Albert, try to stand still. It's only right to listen to your father." Unable to stand still any longer, Albert Jr. looked around for something to do.

Albert's father's voice boomed over the crowd. "My experience in the Labor Party has also taught me that bribery, intimidation, duplicity, corruption, and bulldozing have grown out of the conditions which made the working people poor and the idlers rich and that consequently the ballot-box cannot be made an index to record the popular will until the existing, debasing, impoverishing, and enslaving industrial conditions were first altered. For these reasons I have turned my activities mainly toward an effort to reduce the hours of labor to at least a normal working day so that the wage-workers might hereby secure more leisure from mere drudge work!"

Two men nearby were having a very animated conversation. Albert Jr. inched away from his mother to eavesdrop. One man had a hat that was pulled down far so you could hardly see his face. "Didn't you get the notice?" he asked his companion.

"Sure I got the notice, but it doesn't say anything about that." Both men next pulled *Arbeiter-Zeitung* notices out of their pockets and unfolded them. Albert Jr. had seen countless notices like these before: they invited people to come and stand together and be heard as the voice of the oppressed workers. He moved closer to the men. He could see that the top half of their notices were in English, the lower half in German. The man with the hat pointed to a line of text on his notice. Albert Jr. stood on tiptoe to see what the man was pointing at. The line of text read, "Workingmen Arm Yourselves and Appear in Full Force!" The other man looked at the text and his eyes widened in astonishment. He pointed to his notice of the meeting and shrugged; there was no line of text with the same command. The man with the hat smiled at him

and touched the breast pocket of his coat. What was the man with the hat touching, Albert wondered? Instinctively he rushed back to be near his mother and sister and grabbed both their hands. He wished he could just leave and his wish was soon granted. His father descended from the platform and the Parsons family walked away into the night.

A few hours later Albert Jr. was asleep. A pounding at the door roused him. He heard hushed voices—he knew it was his parents talking, but there were other voices he couldn't identify. He lay still in bed, terrified, as he heard: "I really think it's best that you get out of town as fast as you can." "Go now before daybreak and before the police come." "We'll be in touch." He heard the front door slam shut. He got out of bed, but his feet instinctively did not move.

Finally he forced himself to walk into the room where his mother stood, alone. He looked around, "Where is Papa?"

"Why are you up? Your father has had to go away. You will see him soon."

"But, Mama, why didn't you wake me up? Why didn't Papa come and say goodbye?" he said through his sobs.

"We didn't want you to be upset. You know your father loves you. I didn't want to explain it to you tonight, but he just has to leave for awhile. There is a witch-hunt going on and your father is one of the people this corrupt city wants to put behind bars because he spoke at the Haymarket meeting. You'll just have to trust me that your father is better off not being here."

Albert Jr.'s heart ached trying to understand. His father wasn't a witch. All the next day, people came and went, talking about his father and about the events that happened at

Haymarket after the Parsons family had left the meeting.

Albert Jr. started to walk up the stairs, but as soon as his mother's gaze turned away from him, he tiptoed back down the stairs and stood outside the door of the room where his mother and others were convened. "Now tell me exactly what happened," Lucy demanded.

"Well, after you left, the crowd got smaller. I went up near the platform to listen to Fielden. I would say that by about 10:30 P.M., there were only a few hundred there. The mayor had left, too. But while Fielden was still talking, I heard people suddenly whispering and looking away from him. I turned around and almost jumped. I saw at least a couple hundred policemen walking toward the platform. They came south from Desplaines. They immediately approached the platform. Everyone in the crowd was quiet. You could have heard a pin drop. One captain demanded of Fielden, 'In the name of the people of the state of Illinois, end this meeting immediately and peaceably.' Now I have to say, he was not rude or gruff, but he did speak sternly as though he meant it. Fielden stopped talking and looked down at the captain and said, 'But Captain, we are peaceable.' Then the captain told him again to stop talking. This time he was a little sterner. Fielden said, 'All right, we will go.' Then he climbed off the wagon."

Another of the Parsons' colleagues now took over the story: "I was about 25 feet away. I saw Fielden talking to the captain and then I saw him get off the platform. But suddenly I heard this loud hiss overhead. I looked up and saw a bomb flying over my head. I ducked. It didn't land near me, but it landed near the policemen who were around the platform. The next thing I know I hear policemen screaming, 'Matthias was hit.' With the crowd getting kind of crazy, I was pushed closer

to the platform. I saw an officer writhing on the ground, blood gushing from his leg. Then it was just pandemonium. I have never seen anything like it. Crowds of people started running this way and that, huddling along side buildings for safety. Policemen and the crowd were firing willy-nilly. I got the feeling no one really knew whom they were shooting at or even why."

Albert Jr. heard his mother sigh and then say in a quiet voice, "It was right that you came here and we persuaded him to go. He'll be safer away from here."

Listening a little more, Albert Jr. learned that although the violence at Haymarket was over in a few minutes, seven police officers and at least four workers were dead. Albert Jr. went to bed but didn't sleep. He lay in bed petrified of any creak or moan he heard. Finally as dawn came, he had calmed himself by imagining his father's homecoming. Little did he know that the real tragedy for the Parsons family was just beginning.

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All Albert Jr. could remember about the subsequent trial and his father's time in jail was that he and his mother and sister could on occasion go to visit him in his jail cell. When no others were around, Albert Jr. was able to drink in the fatherly affection and love that he so longed for. In Albert Jr.'s now seven-year old mind, there was only right and wrong. As he nestled into his father's neck he asked him, "We left Haymarket before the riot. Why are you on trial for killing that man?"

His father stroked his son's hair and said, "Many people think I helped to incite the riot because I believe that the way things are now is unfair, and I am not afraid to stand up and say it.

Why do the people who do all the work in the factories make no money and toil in dangerous conditions while the people who own the factories have lots of money and are safe?" The explanation of the evils of capitalism did nothing to soothe Albert Jr. All he could understand was that his father might be hanged for the murder of a man named Officer Matthias Degan, whom Parsons had never even met. Through the eyes of Albert Jr., that was simply wrong.

The public, however, who had put Parsons and seven other anarchists on trial, saw nothing wrong in sentencing these defendants to the gallows. A paranoid public was afraid of the anarchist and socialist rhetoric that fueled workers' strikes and the Haymarket Affair. This paranoia had tainted the trial and its outcome. A thousand candidates for jurors were questioned and most admitted they were unable to presume the innocence of the anarchists on trial. As Albert Jr. grew into a young man, he understood that he had been correct when he was seven—the trial and his father's hanging were wrong, a horrible travesty of justice. Illinois Governor John Peter Altgeld verified this belief with his pardon of the accused in 1893.

Now twelve years later, Albert wanted and hoped to make his way in the world. Whom did he have to help him? While other young men had their fathers to guide them into their adult life, or fathers that would listen to and comment gently on their son's new and different opinions about the world, Albert only had the memories of a seven-year-old and his father's written words. He read them over and over again, searching for some answers, for love, for understanding, for guidance. But he could never find answers. The pride that he had once felt as a young boy had vanished. Upon reading his father's Pittsburgh Manifesto, he was always left with the same

uncertain feelings. Did his father really advocate violence as a way to change things? The manifesto stated: "Destruction of the existing class rule, by all means i.e., energetic, relentless, revolutionary and international action." What did this tell him to do? Rise up against the government only to be prosecuted and hanged? On the other hand, there was the letter his father had written to him and his sister before his hanging: "As I write this word I blot your names with a tear. We will never meet again. Oh my children, how deeply your Papa loves you. We show our love by living for our loved ones. We also prove our love by dying, when necessary, for them." At this point in the letter, Albert Jr. always stopped. He did not think he could ever understand how or why his father said he had died for *him*; if his father wanted to demonstrate his love, he should have stayed in hiding and then sent for his family. Instead his father willingly came out of hiding and turned himself in on the first day of the trial! Albert Jr. came to realize that the courtroom was just another soapbox for his father. Moments before he was hung, Parsons exclaimed, "Let the voice of the people be heard!" Albert Jr. came to understand that his father believed he was dying so the oppressed worker could have a voice. Albert Parsons might have believed that in being hanged he proved a point, but for Albert Jr. it only proved that his father's cause was more important than the son he left behind.

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When Albert had calmed down after slamming the door, he descended the stairs and approached his mother. He apologized. "I accept your apology," she said with little expression and no warmth.

With a very conciliatory tone, Albert Jr. stumbled looking for his next words. "It's just that . . . I don't know . . . I wish I could talk with my father. I have so many questions. I need to know what the right thing to do is."

Lucy Parsons's expression hardened: "I can tell you what your father would want you to do. He wrote his desires for you in the letter he wrote before his death. *You* have your father's name. He told you to 'preserve it and emulate it.' If you mean to indicate to me that you are still considering enlisting, I can heartily assure you that he, as well as I, would disapprove. Just think of our shame."

"Shame?" Albert yelled as his face flushed. He then continued: "How ashamed do you think I am to have a father who stood trial for murder? How ashamed do you think I am to have a mother who *encouraged* her husband to run away from the law when he had done nothing wrong! I used to think you and father helped people, but I am beginning to understand that your ideas were more important than your own children!"

Albert knew his next words would continue to sting, and much like his father talking to the assembled American Group in May 1898, he spoke his first statements softly and then built to a crescendo. "I think the United States is a great country and that capitalism is helping to make it greater all the time. In this country, I can do and be what I want. I can go to school and become a doctor or a politician, or I can stand on the corner and shine shoes! One thing I will never become is a socialist or anarchist or whatever your label of the day is!" Albert Jr.'s voice, which before he had repressed, exploded: "Your ideas *oppress me!* If the United States wants to go to war to protect its economic interests, then I stand behind its decision! It at least considers me an

adult and will accept me as a member of its armed forces." With that Albert Jr. turned on his heel and slammed the front door behind him.

Sources

Chicago History Museum, The Dramas of Haymarket online resource: www.chicagohistory.org/dramas/index.htm

Information about the Spanish-American War is from the Library of Congress web site: www.loc.gov/rr/hispanic.