



Al Burian writes the *Burn Collector* zine, now 13 issues strong, and operates mainly from Chicago.

How do I feel about him? Put yourself in my shoes: Miami, mid-February, crowded streets, troubled thoughts, and above all, a preternatural suspicion, a nagging certainty—you should not be here, not now. The wrong guy in the wrong place at the wrong time. Have you spent much time in Florida, generally? It's horrible. It's not America; it's some vestigial offshoot, but its own entity in the end, and an unpleasant entity to say the least. And then there's Miami, way down at the bottom—to get there, you'll travel fifteen hours, minimum, from the nearest point of possible interest (whatever that may be—Orlando? Jacksonville? These are not exactly locations you are thrilled to wake up in either), and the rub of it is, once you get there you haven't gotten anywhere, you are at the end of the earth, surrounded by water, en route to nothing, and so you have no alternative but to turn around and start crawling back up that cursed peninsula, hanging there like an appendix, useless.

I'm sorry. My travails are not the fault of Florida. Let's try this again. Here's my situation: on a rigged-up bandstand stage in Belmont park, crowded in awkwardly with the VIPs, shoulder to shoulder with the regional royalty. To my right, a Mr. Joseph Gill, owner of Florida Power and Light, follows some train of insipid banter which I've lost track of several minutes ago. “—in proportional percentage to a metropolitan area's energy needs, or wouldn't you agree, sir?” he says. I nod politely. His wife, her hair arranged in a hideous advertisement for electrocution, a billboard for the flagship product, sniffs the warm morning air, seeming as unmoved by her husband's conversational bludgeoning as I am. She is probably dreaming of moments from now, when a newspaper photo will capture that towering hairdo of hers poking up from the background like a strange cactus in a sea of important personages. These people are not like me. Their ideas of immortality are shallow and fleeting; a nice outfit, caught on the periphery of an important snapshot, forever frozen and embalmed as youthful, beautiful, eternal.

Faced with this fickle imagination of immortality, my mind instinctively recoils, draws into itself, to the imaginary vistas of true eternity. Statues and infrastructure, made from concrete and stone. Moments like this always lead me to my fallback fantasy, the ever-present pipe dream always in the back of my brain, the subway. Sweet subway, I can picture you even now! The legacy, an eternal monument, like an aqueduct. Motion and life. The emperor is gone, but his aqueducts live on. I close my eyes and it all swims before me, a map of my city on which I envision, or dare to dream, that the central line, running from the northeast lakefront to the southwest side, might be named for me: my imprint, my immortality. Times will change, dynasties will rise and crumble, but my name will not be forgotten. I will be remembered each and every time a passenger pays their nickel for a ride.

A beautiful reverie. I open my eyes and I'm back on the bandstand. The crowd is anxious. Soon the big man will arrive. Already, it is reported, he has docked and disembarked; stepping (well, probably being carried, but that's a much less noble image) from a millionaire's yacht onto dry land, into the waiting motorcade. He's on his way, or so I am told. Staring down the long avenue, there is still no glimpse of fanfare and hoopla on the horizon, and this makes me anxious, too.

“There it is,” says the pretty girl standing in front of me.

And, yes, now I see it too. In the distance, like a circus train, the cavalcade of cars. The crowd can't see it, yet, but from our elevated vantage we can just barely make out a grinning, waving figure, turning this way and that, reaching out to shake hands and pat the heads of small children.

The car is getting closer. Up on the bandstand, I seize the opening to attempt some small banter with the pretty girl. “To what do we owe the pleasure of sharing this stage with you, miss—”

She gives a practiced, professional giggle. “Margaret Kruiis,” she says. “I'm an actress. Down here from Newark. I'm performing in the new musical, *Hold Your Horses!* Perhaps you've heard of it?”



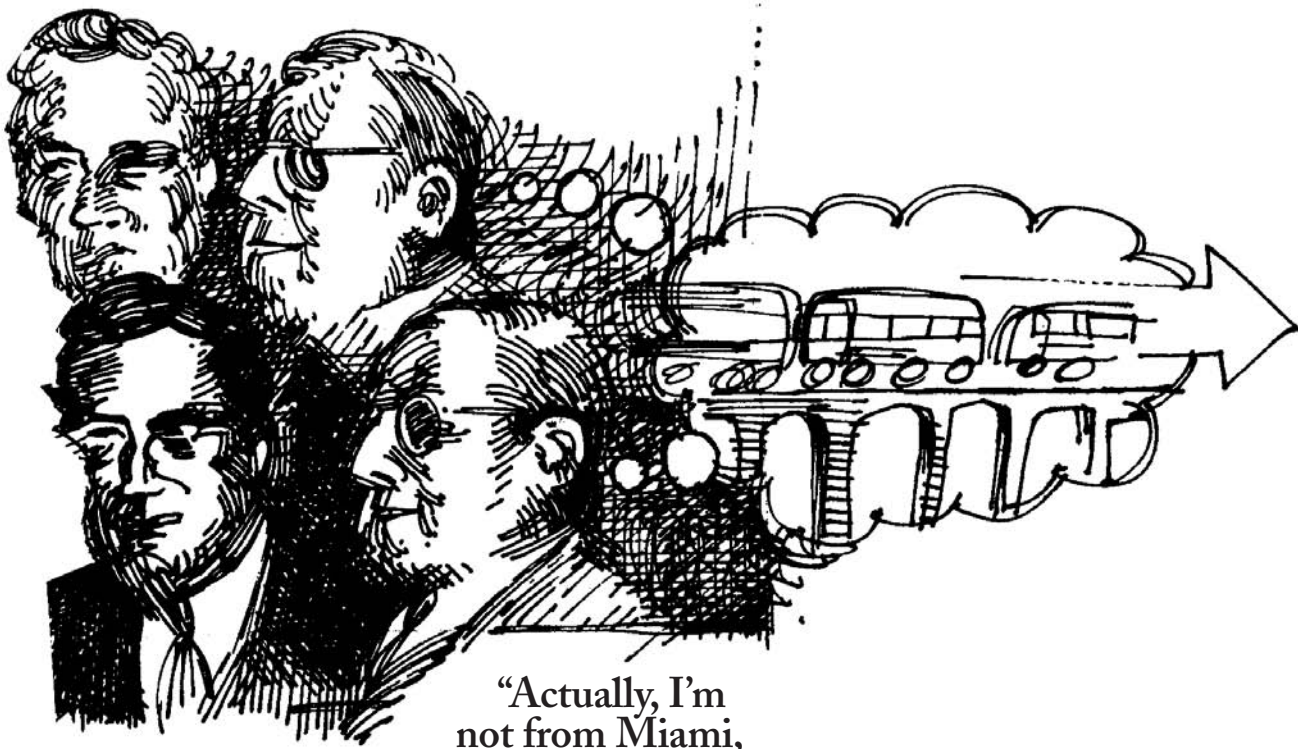
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**“Actually, I’m
not from Miami,
either,” I say. “I’m—”**

But I realize that it’s already too late. I’ve lost Margaret Kruis to glassy-eyed distraction. I lost her the moment I failed to display interest in her show. The awkwardness of this realization makes me hesitate, and my voice trails off into silence. I become aware, to my left, of my personal aide Jensen B. Dunnlaw, displaying his usual pencil-neck fidget, muttering and rechecking his already overchecked list of appointments. As if to accentuate the awkwardness of my silence, Jensen chooses this moment to interrupt, butting in as casually as if I hadn’t been speaking at all.

“Excuse me, sir,” he begins, thrusting the schedule in front of me.

“It hasn’t changed since the last time you rechecked it, unless you’ve changed it, Jenny,” I chide him quietly. “Besides, I’m—”

He shakes his head. “We have a scheduling conflict. The charity ball—”

“Wrong time,” I say. “Wrong place. We’ll discuss this later.”

Indeed, it is not the time. Now is the moment of truth; the car has arrived at the makeshift bandstand, and the man who will assume the mantle of the presidency has pulled himself up onto the trunk of the convertible. There is applause. His legs dangle in the seat. The show has begun.

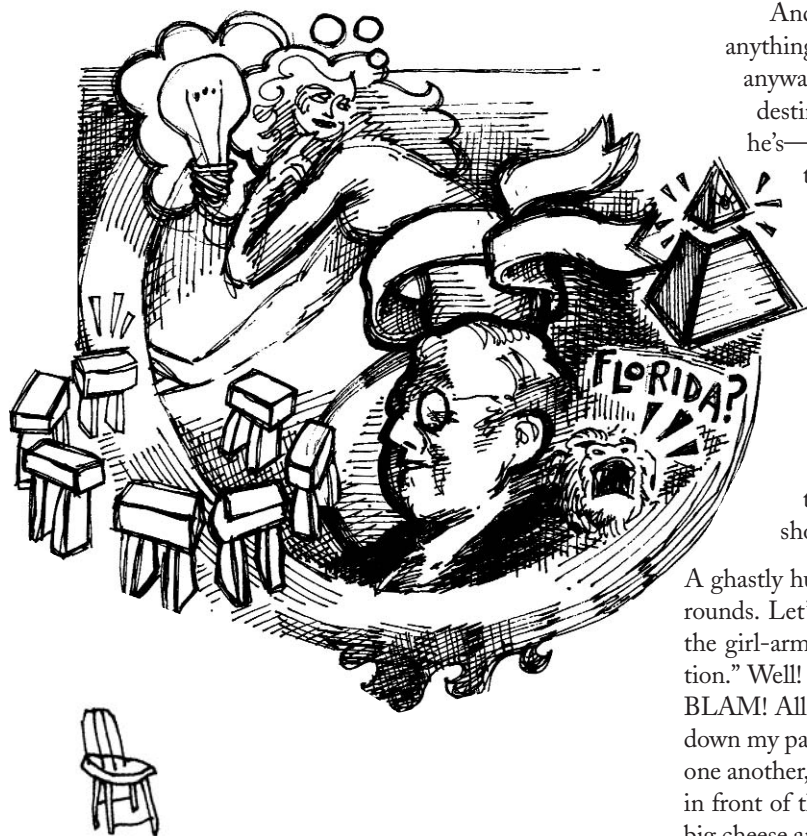
“My friends, I have had a wonderful twelve days fishing, it has been a wonderful rest,” he says. The crowd cheers. He does look rested, relaxed, and, considering that it is February, almost hideously tan. “The only fly in the ointment,” he chuckles, patting his stomach, “is that I’ve put on about ten pounds.” Scattered laughs. He goes in for his shameless crescendo. “What a beautiful city this is! How fortunate you are to live here! I do hope to spend some time here next winter. Many thanks. Thank you. Thank you very much.”

That’s all. The crowd cheers and surges forward. I’m whisked on the hands of the handlers, ushered to the front, over to the presidential limousine, where flashbulbs explode and I’m thrust into my rendezvous with destiny.

“Mr. President, may I present Anton Cermak—”

“Ah, yes. Mayor Cermak. How do you do...?”


“Ah, yes, I...” 🖐️



And then there is a scuffle, a light ripple in the crowd, not really anything, ordinarily hardly worth paying heed to, but turn your head anyway, why don't you, purely instinctually, with a martyr's sense of destiny, of meeting fate head on: the assassin is in plain sight, and he's—a midget? Is that a midget? No, just a tiny man, here to steal this moment of destiny, so small he's standing on a chair, and still straining to get a clear view over the crowd. He's lifting the gun, not like a trained killer but like a sissy, like a god-damn girl, holding it gingerly above his head like it's a kitten. I can see the killer's eyes, though, and they are fierce. Locked in a look of blazing hatred on the form of the president-elect, only his (the midget's) girl-arm aiming nowhere near the intended target, instead swaying over his head, bent all cockamammy and aimed in who knows what direction. BLAM! The anger in those eyes dissipates into the incompetence of those flailing limbs. Margaret Kruis, the showgirl from Newark, convulses and keels over in front of me.

A ghastly hush falls over the crowd. The assassin squeezes off a few more rounds. Let's revisit our earlier description of him, shall we? Specifically the girl-arm "bent all cockamammy and aimed in who knows what direction." Well! Wouldn't you know it! Bent all cockamammy in my direction! BLAM! All of a sudden, I've taken one to the gut! Blood starts streaming down my pants. Now people have begun screaming, diving over and under one another, attempting to avoid the bullet hail or else to throw themselves in front of the withered husk of the president-elect, to take a slug for the big cheese and accrue the glory that entails. What bravery! What heroism! BLAM! BLAM! You poor, dumb schmucks! Mrs. Joseph Gill holds her leg and blubbers. Mr. Joseph Gill, owner of Florida Power and Light, is yards away, sprinting for his life. Margaret Kruis's body is contorted on the ground. Obscene amounts of blood spew from her nose and mouth. I hold my side, dazed, looking at her. Her body seems to invite me to lay next to it. I'm warm. I'm cold. I slump to my knees.



Then comes the life flashing before the eyes. You would like it to be all sex, or at least heavily biased towards sexual events, but you'll be amazed, when your moment comes, to realize how little time you actually spent in the pursuit and consummation of such activity. This will be your first disappointment: a dispassionate understanding of how you actually filled your time. For the most part, your activities were boring and unpleasant. And you'll find you have no control over the places and objects that have made their indelible, final impression on you. They just come, unadorned and perhaps in many cases unwanted. The most vivid images are familiar tableaux, cramped homes and sterile offices, the rooms you inhabited one by one, in reverse order, as you slip backward through life, watching your accomplishments melt away. Back to Braidwood. I'm thirteen years old. And look who's here! Hello, Mr. Joseph Gill! Owner of Florida Power and Light! Ever been in a coal mine, Mr. Gill? Even back then, let me tell you, \$1.50 a day wasn't worth it. But don't worry yourself about that! Meet my father, Mr. Gill! He works here too! Czech, both of us, my father and I, even though I've been living in Illinois since I was three! Not like you, not like your beautiful wife. Do you see now, Mr. Gill? Do you see? 

But I knew, even then, that it was just a matter of time. No one suspected the great destiny which awaited little Antonin. It's 1931, the crazy panic of election, the taunts of my rival, Mayor Bill Thompson: "Tony, Tony, where's your pushcart at? Can you picture a world's fair mayor with a name like that?" My comeback dethroned him: "You don't like my name? Well, maybe I didn't come over on the Mayflower, but I got here as soon as I could!" People loved it. Two hundred thousand votes. So who's pushing the cart now, Big Bill? Ha! Ha ha ha! These hands, covered with grime and coal dust, I can see them in front of me, and now my life flashes forward again, wildly, these hands which would one day clasp the hands of a United States president, a man grateful to me, acknowledging me and my place in history, for I had won Chicago by two hundred thousand Czech votes and I had helped him win Chicago with those same immigrant votes. My moment, my importance. He thanked me. Anton Cermak, mayor! Anton Cermak, a name that won't be forgotten! Liberator and voice of the Czech people!

My life flashes back, forward, mostly back. At the precipice of an ignoble and tragically pointless death, back is a more comforting direction, for sure. So backward, backward until (and those who have looked death square in the face will all surely tell you, will all attest) there is that moment when it all sloughs away. Men of accomplishment, wielders of scepters, architects of their own grandiose sphinx-tombs, all face that final realization of their own inconsequential natures. Yes, all of those things which you've fought so hard to be remembered for are revealed, as the memories shed like dead skin into the shocking clarity of. . . It was those first three years, I now see, which mattered. Those first three years account for 99 percent of the sensory experiences that made life worth living. The discovery of color, sound, taste. The revelations that are gravity, size, distance. A sense of wonder, crushed slowly into dull acceptance of the great illusion. Bohemia! Oh, your naked folds. That I could hide my face within them one more time. Instead, we have come here, to suffer. We came here to die. Florida, I blame you, I really do, despite myself. As I recede, backward, into the womb, I don't know who else to blame.



Magic fingers, grasping, lift and pull me out. Someone is stuffing me into a vehicle. The pain in my side is terrible. I open my eyes to blinding sun, screams, a scuffling cacophony of bodies running to and fro. Then I pass out again. Oh sweet darkness. When I wake up I'm in a car, moving. Franklin Delano Roosevelt is in there with me. He is staring at my wound, unblinking, disgusted. When he realizes my eyes have opened and focused again, he is startled. "Oh!" he says. "Uh. . ."

I moan quietly. The seat is slick with blood. I search for the source, locate it within myself, and slip into unconsciousness again. When I come to the next time, Franklin Delano has gathered himself and is attempting to be conciliatory.

"There there," he says.

"Oh God," I whisper. "Oh God, God, God."

"It's going to be all right," Franklin Delano assures me. I find this reassuring, to be honest. Here he is. The President of the United States. It is awe-inspiring. But the wound, I have to admit, hurts, and my awe fades after a while, and when the President says, "Tony, keep quiet. Don't move, Tony," even though I haven't moved or said anything in four or five minutes, I realize he's just doing it so the journalists in the car can quote him on it. I become angry.

"Move?" I laugh bitterly. "I can't move. I've been shot."

"It's going to be all right," Franklin Delano repeats.

"For you," I moan.

"Pardon?"

"Maybe for you it's gonna be all right," I gurgle. "Not for me! Look at this! And that fucking little guy, that did this—God damn him! . . . Who the hell was he? And why me? Why me? He didn't give a fuck about me, he wanted you! You just got lucky that it was me and not you!"

"What—what did he say?" Franklin Delano mutters. "I didn't quite get that last part." He seems genuinely perplexed. Fair enough. He probably hasn't got the greatest hearing in the world, and my voice is not much more than a coarse hiss by now.

"He said that he was glad that it was him and not you," an aide clarifies.

"Ah!" The President nods gravely. "That's noble. Thank you, Anthony. I won't forget it."

I attempt an argument, but manage only a moribund wheeze. The aide gives me a glance which suggests that he is contemplating smothering me with a pillow. I give up on the whole sad scene and adjourn from consciousness yet again. What's the point? If this little pencil-neck wants to kill me in my sleep, so be it. It will save the Illinois taxpayer the burden of assuming my hospital costs.

No such luck. I live twenty more days. At the press conference and in the weeks to come they repeat my "I'm glad it was me instead of you" line many times. The crowd loves it so much that it eventually becomes the truth.



As I lay dying in the hospital I am consumed by one thought. “The midget!” I bark at the cronies shuffling by the bedside. “Who in the hell was he?”

“He wasn’t, actually, technically, a midget,” one of the cronies reminds me. “Short, to be sure. Five-foot-one, of Italian descent, an unemployed and disgruntled bricklayer from New Jersey.”

“Five-foot-one?” I bellow, mustering my waning strength. “Bullshit! I saw him! He was standing on a stool, craning his spindly body as high as he could, holding his weapon-wielding arm as far above his head as it would go! And he hit me—in the gut!”

“Err, ahhh . . .” the crony mutters.

“Do the math, boy!” I yell, pointing to my wound. “It’s not that hard! The assassin can’t have been more than three feet tall!”

It takes a few days for me to let go of the issue. When my rage toward midgetkind dissipates, a venomous hatred of Italians takes its place. I need someone to blame, some broad categorization that can explain it all, biologically.

But that doesn’t last long either. In the end, I cannot muster the hatred, I cannot give myself over to blind prejudice. Eventually I’m left with the man himself, the individual, and no clue as to his reasoning. I know only his name, which is something at least—something solid, tangible, an identity, connected to a birth certificate, school records. There is a path to be followed, leading to the outline of another human being, the flesh and blood figure of my assassin, Giuseppe Zangara. New Jerseyan by way of Ferruzano, Calabria, Italia: he has a past, a history, perhaps even a motive. Unraveling this is the first step toward chasing away Zangara the phantasm, the haunting apparition leering grotesquely from his stool, death incarnate in all its effete cowardice and slinking, treacherous fury.

The days pass. My private obsession is mirrored by the spectacle of the public’s morbid and insatiable curiosity. The papers scream the latest details, scandalous quotes, theories, and predictions. I learn everything and nothing from them about my shadowy reaper. One moment he is a lifelong zealot who began plotting this assassination at the age of 17, the next he is a directionless drifter, loitering in Miami because the weather was nice and he was out of work. He’d lost \$200 at the dog races hours before. What does it mean? Nothing. None of it gets me any closer to understanding him.

How do I feel about him? The truth is that the weeks in the hospital bed are slow and agonizing, the bullet has lodged itself in my intestines, nudged itself up against my spine. There is no way to remove it. The doctors mutter about monitoring the wound’s progress, keeping the inflammation in check, offering nothing, really, no practical solution, no distant hope, no indication that I will ever rise from this bed again. Their eyes are glazed as they tell me nothing in as many obscure words as possible, avoiding the subject with practiced and polished bedside manners. These last three weeks are very much like that split second of life flashing before the eyes, only slow, very slow, with time to pick apart every detail during endless hours of pain and increasing delirium. Within that glacial unfolding, is it any wonder that my mind would fixate on him, hold onto the question mark of him as if it were an anchor? In his cell, awaiting judgment, I know his thoughts must echo mine. Can he be facing anything but a similar blossoming of the awareness of his own end? Does Zangara, too, now see the great pattern of his own life and recognize in it the futility of all he’s done?

The more I think of our lives as parallel, as projectiles headed toward the same climactic target, the smaller and more pitiful my own role seems. What a flimsy moment that it could be so easily usurped, so easily stolen by a deranged nobody. A madman, stumbling onto the stage to disrupt a perfect theater piece with his violent tantrum. No Sic Semper Tyrannus for Cermak! Instead (the newspapers report), Zangara continues to act as belligerently insane as he did that day in the park, on his high chair. At his trial, he tells the judge, “Stomach like drunk man. No point living. Give me electric chair.” The reporters can’t get enough of it, reprinting his every incoherence with glee. He makes one outrageous statement after another, obviously relishing the attention, enjoying his eclipse of me.

Through it all, the exact background and character of this man, my nemesis, remain aggravatingly unclear. A few scattered medical records place him as a longtime New Jerseyite; other than that his only paper trail is his membership in the New Jersey bricklayers’ union, but even that association he disavows. “I don’t like no union, no communists, capitalists, socialists. I don’t like no peoples,” he states. One gets the sense he’d disavow the doctor visits, spit out his fillings, and return his elementary school report cards, if given the chance.

And he wants to die. He pleads for it constantly. The jury finds it difficult to ensure that justice is served, as they are horrified by his graphic descriptions of the fate he wishes bestowed upon him. The state, meanwhile, finds its hands are tied, as I am clinging inconveniently to life, and so no one (not even Margaret Kruis, the now-paralyzed showgirl from Newark) has been actually killed as of yet. Thus, Zangara cannot receive the electrocution he demands, cannot have his eyeballs deep-fried until they pop from the sockets, and so on. The judge gives him four terms of twenty years in prison instead, and he attempts to plea-bargain: “Twenty years! Don’t be stingy. Give me hundred.”

Yes, Zangara, your life looks bleak. Now, laid out before you, a backward path to oblivion. Your big moment in the spotlight, your historical importance, the punctuation mark on a lifetime of tedious mortarwork and endless, ulcerous pain. In his dementia, the aides explain to me, Zangara has come to blame his chronic intestinal illnesses directly on the federal government. "He has a deep-seated and long-standing resentment against the executive branch," the lead crony tells me. "His action was nothing personal against you or the city of Chicago. He was aiming for the President."

Nothing personal! Here is the man who would rob me of personhood itself. I can feel the infection spreading in my bowels, and I can see that the doctors are useless. I am a dead man, with a fever building towards its phlegm-rattle climax of death—only days left, maybe weeks. How can I not take it personally?

Zangara has no remorse, as far as my life is concerned. "You no find a king or president alone," he explains. "Lots of people stick around him. You got to take the chance to kill him." He doesn't even acknowledge any particular awareness of me, of who I am. In his euphoric fantasy state he may not even realize that he has failed, that the president lives, and all he has done is bring slow and agonizing death to a midwestern city official. The inattention only makes my fixation on him all the more keen. This man has trampled into the climactic moment of my life, and destroyed me, and he speaks of it as if it's a footnote, hardly worth mentioning! I am so unimportant to you, Zangara—but how important is your own life as it flashes slowly backward before your eyes?

Of course there are rumors. Perhaps it was not really FDR who was the assassin's target? Perhaps Anton Cermak is laying right where some unknown party wants him? I spend a good deal of my last remaining spittle refuting such innuendo. "A mob hit?" I laugh. "What mob? The Florida mob? Maybe. Not the Chicago mob, I'll tell you that much. I mean, you should have seen this kid! The way he held the gun! I'd hire your mother to take someone out before I'd hire him!" I get some laughs for this. In these last weeks, the cronies are a good crowd.

Then finally, again, there comes the point where it all no longer matters. It is a relief to me when, sometime in the third week, the infection becomes so acute that there is no mistaking me for a living creature anymore. It is clear, now, that I'm on my way. And Zangara, too, recedes in importance. The cronies assure me that he will pay, that justice will be served swiftly and mercilessly. It's too late. I don't care anymore.

Unrecognizable voices slur at me from the blurred mouths of shadowy shapes lingering above. I can no longer differentiate between the cronies. They could bring Zangara by for a visit, to apologize for his behavior, and I wouldn't know it was happening. As life recedes, the lesser details become glaring, and it becomes easy to let go of the information which you will never need, names there are no point in knowing, people who simply do not matter. Time is finite. There is a daily parade of visitors, well-wishers and ill-wishers, logistical advisors and leering, death-head vultures, flocking about the bed constantly. These people are nothing. I'm thinking only about my aqueducts now. In those few moments when the vultures can be shooed, I draw the logisticians in close, and whisper hoarse instructions. "There are plans . . . maps . . . diagrams . . . Find them . . . don't forget me . . . my aqueducts . . ." I'm lucid enough, still, to know that the words coming from my mouth make no sense. This frustrates me, and when the logisticians attempt to condescend with assurance, as if to a senile old man, I break down and weep. Then I'm the main course, a savory pudding of sour tears and poisoned blood, and the vultures flock back in, grinning.



Imagine you're me, a cold body in a box, late March of 1933, on a train back to Chicago to be put in the ground. It won't be long for you either, Zangara: in another twenty days they'll have found you guilty of my murder and your dreams of electrocution will be realized. You'll stride to the chair unassisted and indignant, and you'll strap yourself in. You'll bellow, "Pull-a de switch! Viva Italia! Good-bye to poor peoples of this world everywhere!" The poor people will receive no other memorial, they will go to the grave unremembered, they will become dust to be blown away on the wind like you, Zangara. As for me, my return puts the city in a sentimental mood. They rename 22nd Street after me. And the subway is built, eventually, and it has a Cermak line, shrimpier than I had envisioned, but it's there, at least. I won't be forgotten.



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