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RAINING BLOOD AND MONEY: Remembering the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire

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“I learned a new sound -- a more horrible sound than description can picture. It was the thud of a speeding, living body on a stone sidewalk. Thud – dead, thud- dead, thud – dead, thud – dead.” (William G. Shepherd, ‘Eyewitness at The Triangle’, Milwaukee Journal, 27th March, 1911.)

A girl jumps from the ninth floor of the Asch building. People on the sidewalk are screaming for her not to jump. But she has to jump. As she stands on the ledge, her back against the open window, the fire is burning the clothes off her back. She has her head bent forward so her hair doesn't catch alight as she waves a handkerchief at the crowd. The windows on the floor beneath her start to explode. Tongues of flame lick at her feet. So she jumps. It's a definite jump, as she bends her knees before she leaps over the edge. It's not a graceful jump. Her arms begin to flail as she struggles to stay upright. There are gasps from the crowd, a few screams. Some people turn away. Others are transfixed, watching her as she falls. Suddenly, her dress catches on hook jutting out of wall below and she is suspended in the air, mid-fall. But the ladders still can't reach her and so it is just a cruel pause in her inevitable death. She hangs there like a ragdoll until her dress burns itself free from her body and she resumes her fall. She lands on the pavement on the westward side of New York University building. Thud-dead.

Three girls clamber onto the same window sill from where the first girl jumped. They hold hands. They are standing in descending order of

height. The tallest one turns to the other two. She says, “One, two, three”, as they all bend their knees at the same time and jump over the edge, the two smallest staring into the tallest one’s eyes. They try to keep hold of one another’s hands, but they fall at different speeds. They hit the pavement in descending order of height. Thud-dead. Thud-dead. Thud-dead.

Groups of girls edge along the window sill. One group waits for the firemen to confidently spread their nets before they jump. They are on target as they fall, closing in on the middle of the net. Perhaps they will hit the net and spring up, like an acrobat. But the nets are torn from the firemen’s hands with the weight of the falling girls. The men try to signal to the girls to jump one at a time, but they cling to one another for comfort and come crashing down in threes and fours. The girls grouped on the ledge watch their friends strike the pavement. Perhaps they can hear them in their final moments. Perhaps they imagine they can hear them take their final breath. Or do they exhale with that final thud-dead?

When the firemen raise their ladders they only reach the sixth floor and the water shooting from the hoses only wets the seventh. The hose wagon, when it arrives, takes a while to be maneuvered into position. Initially it has to avoid crushing the pile of already mounting bodies. Three girls make a dive for the top rung of the ladder. All three miss and come tumbling down, head first. Their beautiful faces smash against the sidewalk. One of the girls hurtles into a street light before her broken body lands on a pile of others beneath her. A muted thud-dead.

It looks as if rags are being tossed from the building. It doesn’t take long to realise that these fabric remnants and bolts of cloth, are in fact young

immigrant workers throwing themselves out of the windows to escape the fire. A policeman and a fireman stretch out a horse's blanket and signal for one of the girls on the ledge to jump. She does but the blanket is rent in two with the weight of her body and she falls to her death, like all the others. Rip. Thud-dead.

Three men bravely make a human chain from one of the windows on the eighth floor to a window below, away from the flames. They balance precariously; a human ladder stretching to safety. A few women are able to climb across their backs to safety. Clutching at their clothes, sliding down the length of their bodies, it seems to be working. Until the men eventually lose their balance and tumble to the ground. They grapple and grab at the building as they fall. But they are falling too fast to get a hold of anything at all. In the end, they crash through the vault lights on the pavement into the basement and land face down. Another ten thud-deads and then the sound of water from the hoses rushing in on top of the bodies. More bodies land in the basement. The water douses the flames on the girls' skirts and bodices and washes away the blood, but it laps against the walls, thick with charred pieces of cloth, hair, skin and bones. Another girl stands on the ledge. She throws her purse, hat and coat down first, as if she will retrieve them later, and then she jumps. She, too, lands in the basement, on top of all the others. And more will land on top of her. The basement echoes a watery series of thud-deads.

A man appears at one of the windows. Behind his head is a halo of fire. He looks out in desperation. The choice is clear: be burnt alive or jump. He disappears for an instant only to return with a woman. He grabs her by the waist and lifts her out through the window. He doesn't place her on the window sill, instead, he positions her so that her legs dangle over

the ledge. She looks back at him and he drops her over the edge. She falls, flailing and kicking until she crumples on the pavement. Thud-dead. The man appears with a second woman. She kisses him on the forehead before he drops her from the ninth floor. She lands near the first girl, a pile of clothes and broken bones. Thud-dead. He returns with a third girl. He appears calm as he edges her out of the window. She hangs onto his arms for a second until she, like the two before her, are hurtling through space. Her skirt and petticoats billow around her; a sky dancer. Until, thud-dead. A trio of lifeless bodies on the sidewalk. The man returns, but something is different this time. The flames are closer but he doesn't want to let this girl go. His arms encircle her waist. She turns to him for strength. He looks at her, for the last time, smooths back her hair and kisses her. There is tenderness and desperation in their embrace. He lets her go. She falls from her Capulet balcony but there is no-one to catch her. Before she lands he springs onto window ledge. He jumps and his trouser legs fill with air. He is wearing tan coloured shoes. He has a hat on his head. His fiancé lands before him but he does land next to her. Their arms overlap; they look as if they are reaching for one another, even in death. The small diamond on her ring finger glints in the flames of the fire. She never knew the emotion of a white wedding dress or the strong arms of her husband in bed. Thud-dead. Thud-dead.

Doctors and interns make their way to each of the broken bodies. One girl is still burning. She looks like a candle as her hair is aflame. The doctor rips the remnants of her burning clothes from her body and puts out her flaming hair. Her limbs are still moving. She is given a pain-killer and placed on a stretcher and taken to the hospital. She dies before she gets there. A second girl is placed on a stretcher. Her dress is covered in blood and her head is split open. She is barely alive. An

onlooker says she is 'ninety nine percent dead'. She, too, dies only moments later. One hundred percent dead. They tag the bodies and cover them with tarpaulins.

Fifty-four men and women jump from the 8th, 9th and 10th floors that day. Two of the girls are found alive, hours after they fall, covered by other bodies. But they die, too. No-one survives that jump. Every thud results in a death.

Two men are still operating the elevators in the building. They are running their elevators up and down the building, cramming as many singed and burning women into the lift as they can. Every time they open the doors, women flood into the lift. They have to leave dozens behind. They move swiftly past the flames until the fire enters the elevator shaft and the lifts no longer function. It is partly because the metal is twisted by the fire but also because more than twenty women have jumped to their deaths and landed on the roof of the descending elevator. The weight of their bodies pushes the elevator down to the basement where it remains. It rains blood and money in the lift. The dead girls' coin purses open and their week's wages spill out. How many blouses did they have to make for that money; how many shirtwaists did they have to sew for \$6.00 a week; how many plans did they have for the weekend – the Nickelodeon, Coney Island, time with their families?

Firemen rush up the stairs. The Asch building is fire-proof on the outside but is a tinderbox on the inside. Nineteen bodies are melted against the locked door on the ninth floor. They try to peel the bodies off, layer by layer, but it is hard to tell where one body ends and the next begins. The dark secret at the heart of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company is Bluebeard's locked room. Locked doors kept the workers from taking

unauthorised breaks. Locked doors kept the workers from stealing. Locked doors kept the workers from escaping the fire. They are sealed in with their twisted sewing machines and the inferno. Groups of bodies huddle together like Pompeii's victims. Frozen in their final moments. Arms linked, they shield their melted faces from the flames. They die in these pow-wows; Jewish, Italian and German immigrant workers, dying in one another's arms.

Orange gives way to smoking black. Out of the same gaping windows through which dozens of men and women jumped to their deaths, firemen begin to lower the charred bodies of those entombed in the building, two and three at a time. Policemen use their horses' blankets and lay the corpses and burnt body parts out along Greene Street. A ghostly procession stretches down the street. Soon there are no blankets left and multiple bodies and burnt body parts share the one blanket. The corpses are waxen and black. Clothes are reduced to ashes, burnt deep into flesh. Some of the bodies are naked and their limbs have burnt away, leaving charcoal stumps. Some still have some flesh clinging to their bones, but they are unrecognisable. Many, only a few hours ago, had sat side by side at sewing machines and now they lie side by side in death. Dozens of engagement rings are scattered in the remains on the eighth and ninth floors. Eternal promises in those tiny bands of gold and coloured gems are swept into shoeboxes with other personal belongings and the scorched remnants of material. Some families will have to identify their daughters from these mini-coffins. For some families there is no body to bury; just ash. Ashes to ashes and dust to dust.

The bodies, body parts and belongings are taken to Bellevue Morgue. They are put into coffins, the lids left off, ready for families to identify

their children. Some are so disfigured that they have to be identified by personal jewellery items and even the buckles on their shoes. As they are identified, the lids are nailed down, ready for burial. There are so many bodies that they spill out onto the tin-roofed Charities pier, adjacent to the morgue. There are not enough coffins and more have to be ordered from Blackwell's Island.

146 people died in 18 minutes in the Triangle Shirtwaist fire. Someone probably threw a cigarette butt into the scrap bin, it ignited the fire and 129 women and 17 men asphyxiate, burn to death or die of internal injuries. In time, their families will learn that their children's lives are only worth \$75 a piece. The owners, Harris and Blanck are acquitted of locking the doors; a civil suit brought by twenty-three families results in the sum of 75 silver pieces for each of their daughter's lives.

It rains on the day of the public funeral procession. The final six unidentified bodies are buried at the Cemetery of the Evergreens in Brooklyn. The black umbrellas of the mourners stand out against the grey sky. More than 120,000 march, while 230,000 more gather in churches, synagogues and watch as the slow procession makes its way through the streets of the Lower East Side. There is nothing but the noise of the raindrops falling on the pavement; a reminder of the bodies hitting the pavement to escape the fire, only eleven days earlier. No-one speaks.

The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union and the Women's Trade Union League break the silence with their renewed fights for better working conditions and protective legislation. This time their words are substantiated with photographs in the newspaper of the bodies lining the pavement beneath the Asch building and tortured black corpses melted onto the locked door on the ninth floor. Union ranks swelled from 30,000

in 1909 to 250,000 in 1913. Now, no doors are to be locked during working hours, sprinkler systems must be installed if a company employs more than 25 people above the ground floor, and fire drills are mandatory for buildings lacking sprinkler systems.

Today, students look out through the same windows on the ninth floor where so many jumped to their deaths, a century ago. The Asch building is now the Brown Building of Science and belongs to New York University. The students, like the immigrant workers before them, have dreams about working hard, playing by the rules and getting ahead. But the smoking chimneys they can see from this vantage point, indicating the sweatshops that are still operating all over New York, belie this American Dream.